

Bill and Dani

By Kate Simon

The bald eagle circled over the lake before it landed in the hundred foot fir. Bill Wolfe clicked off a series a shots before the giant bird disappeared inside the branches. This trip up Wayfair mountain had been very successful. His editor at Craft Travel Magazine wanted a fall and winter pictorial of the Pennsylvania mountains. It had gotten a lot colder in the last hour and it was starting to flurry. It was time to call it a day. He hated being in the cold but it beat sitting at home. Retirement left a lot to be desired. There were only so many improvements he could make on his house or plants he could trim.

He was parked in a small valley surrounded by the Pocono mountain range. He noticed some dark clouds moving in over the far edge of the mountain and it looked like a good time to get back down the mountain to the small lodge where he was staying. He loaded his camera equipment in the trunk and jumped into his rented sedan. Then he noticed the roof light didn't go on.

"No, no, no," he said. He turned the key and all he got was a click. He was eighteen hundred feet up a mountain and the nearest service station was a hell of climb back down. He picked up his cell phone. No signal bars.

Just as he started looking for things to make the hike a little easier, it began to snow. We weren't talking light and fluffy "Oh, isn't it pretty" snow. In just the few minutes he'd been in the car the darkness had moved over the mountain and settled over the lake, bringing with it a full on blizzard.

"Fuck!"

Dani Colton looked at the storm blowing in off Wayfair and knew it was going to be a bad one. She put her fingers to her lips and let out a high pitched whistle.

“Rocket! Let’s go!” A tall, tan and black German Shepard ran toward her. “Come on, boy. It’s getting nasty.”

She followed Rocket into her cabin and locked the door. Not that she had a problem with neighbors. As far as she knew she was the only one crazy enough to live this high up the mountain. Her contractor certainly thought she was crazy. It took weeks for the crews to get the equipment and materials up the mountain and then build her home. This wasn’t some one room nomad’s cabin. This was two thousand square feet of comfortable solitude. She had designed the home for her needs. Since she hadn’t planned for any company, she had one large bedroom. That left plenty of room for a living room dining room area, a big comfortable kitchen and an extra large pantry. Once she stocked up, she didn’t need to leave her home for weeks, or months. That was the way she liked it.

Dani wasn’t a Philistine. She also had cable, internet and cell service. That had taken some doing. She’d worked a deal with the local county officials. She agreed to keep an eye out for trouble on the lake and they ran the cables high enough on the fire tower for her to get a signal.

The weatherman had said the snow wouldn’t be too bad but she could tell from the sky he was wrong. She’d run Rocket as long as she could to burn off some energy. She knew they’d be house bound for a few days.

After dinner, she curled up on the couch with Rocket at the latest episode of American Pickers. She was all set when the radio went off.

“Dani, you on?” called Sheriff Pickett. Damn. He wouldn’t be calling if it wasn’t bad.

“Yeah, Charlie. I’m here. What’s going on?”

“We’ve got a civilian lost on Wayfair. He was a photographer on assignment. He told Esther at the hotel that he would be back before dinner. That was before the weather hit.”

“No chance he was driving a four wheel drive, vaguely appropriate vehicle?”

“He’d rented a sedan at the Philly Airport.”

“How long has he been out there?”

“At least six hours.”

“Shit, so this could be a recovery.”

“Could be.”

“Okay, I’ll get my gear and I’ll call you when I find him.”

“If you find him.”

“If he was smart enough to stay with his car, I’ll find him and call you back in an hour or so.”

“If he wasn’t?”

“Then I’ll find him when it melts. Probably a week or so.”

“Okay. Thanks Dani. You be careful.”

“I always am.” Dani put down the mike and looked at Rocket. “Well...fuck.”

Dani had the sled hooked to her ATV. The first aid kit was secured in a side compartment. Rocket was geared up and secured to the sled. He was used to traveling with her and often found the stray hikers or boaters before she did. They'd been riding for about thirty minutes when she saw the edge of the lake. The wind had taken the three feet of snow that had fallen and made drifts twice as large. She almost missed the mound parked the edge of what normally served as a parking lot for boaters.

She maneuvered the ATV next to the mound and unhooked Rocket. "Okay, boy. Let's see if this guy was smart enough to stay put." She grabbed the collapsible shovel from a side compartment. She assembled the shovel and began digging at what would approximate window height. After a few minutes she saw the figure of a man covered with a coat, a blanket and what looked like everything he could find in his trunk. She banged on the window but he didn't move. It may be a recovery after all.

"Alright, Rocket, let's get this guy out of here." It took twenty minutes of shoveling to open the door. She grabbed her first aid kit and jumped inside the car. She pulled the blanket from his face and her heart skipped. He had a chiseled jaw and cleft chin. He was also an unpleasant shade of blue. She couldn't find a pulse. She grabbed the stethoscope from the case and pulled opened his coat and shirt. Her heart skipped again. His chest was very well defined and he had some interesting ink. She shook her head and listened to his heart. Just barely over the wind she picked up a faint heart beat. "Yes!" she shouted.

Rocket joined her with a loud bark. She knew the only thing she could do for this guy was get him back to the cabin as quick as she could. She closed up his shirt and coat and dragged him over the ATV on to the sled. Sweat dripped from her forehead as she secured a safety belt around his waist. "Rocket, up." Rocket knew this was the command to lay on top of the man. His extra weight would help keep the sled steady and Rocket's body heat would help. She secured Rocket to the sled and took a last look inside the car. She spotted the man's camera bag and figured if he made it, he'd want it. She shoved it into her saddlebag next to the shovel and revved the engine. Now if she could just get this guy back in time.

The thirty minute ride turned into nearly an hour thanks to the snow and wind. She pulled the sled as close to the house as possible and opened the front door. Rocket darted in the house and laid down on the couch. She couldn't blame him. Fortunately her gas heat kept the house at a comfortable sixty eight degrees. She had a fireplace but rarely used it.

She dragged the sled through the front door thanks to the snow but she wasn't going to be able to move him much farther. He was about one hundred and ninety pounds of nearly dead weight and she had to warm him up fast.

She started a fire in the fireplace and grabbed every comforter and blanket she had from the bedroom. She laid a few blankets down and then sighed at the inevitable. She had to warm this guy up quick and it wasn't going to happen through all that insulation. She began to strip off the strangers clothes and toss them in the corner of the room. She couldn't help but admire the man's well defined chest and arms.

"Woof." Rocket commented.

"Hey, I'm old, not dead," replied Dani. This guy wasn't dead either and she was going to do her best to keep him that way.

"Woof." Rocket said as he jumped off the couch and sat next to the radio. Sometimes that dog was flat out scary smart. She grabbed the mike. "Yo, Charlie. You there?"

"Yeah, I'm here, Dani. Did you find him? Is he alive?"

"Yes, and barely. How soon can you get someone up here? This guy needs a hospital."

"Dani, it could be days. Maybe longer."

"Shit. Okay. I'll do my best to keep him alive until then. What's his name?"

"Bill. Bill Wolfe out of Atlanta."

"Okay, let me get back to it."

"Are you okay up there?"

“Yeah, you know me. If the power goes out I have plenty of gas for the generator.”

“Okay, Dani. Keep in touch.”

“Will do.” She stripped off the rest of his clothes and rolled him closer to the fire. “Damn,” she whispered. She looked over at Rocket who was giving her a questioning look. “Hey, don’t judge me fur ball. Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve seen an ass that fine?”

Bill. He had a name. He was also still blue. “Aw crap.” She started stripping off her clothes. She threw her wet clothes on top of his in the corner and laid down next to him. She pulled the rest of the blankets over both of them and wrapped her arm around his waist. The fastest way to raise his body temperature was skin to skin contact. She wouldn’t mind doing a few days in purgatory for enjoying it.

Bill's head was swimming. He was warm and covered in thick blankets. He moved and felt someone next to him. An arm was wrapped around his waist, a female arm. Okay, this dream was getting good. He reached his hand down and felt some warm, soft skin. His hand curved down over a very fine, tight ass. He heard a very feminine murmur and he risked opening his eyes. Laying next to him was a woman in her late forties. She had pale skin and jet black hair. He had a vague thought of a middle aged Snow White. Her eyes flickered open. Her dark brown eyes took a minute to focus on him and then she smiled.

"Well, someone's awake."

"Hello..."

The woman smiled and rubbed his bristled cheek. "Oh, don't tell me you don't remember last night, baby?"

"I...I..."

The woman laughed. "Sorry, I couldn't resist. I'm just messing with you." She leaned up on her elbow and extended her other hand. "Dani Colton. I pulled you out of your car and brought you here."

"Woof." Bill was suddenly aware of the largest German Shepard he'd ever seen.

"Sorry. Rocket and I brought you here."

"Thank you, Dani." He turned toward the dog who'd moved closer to him. "And thank you, Rocket."

"I wouldn't move too fast around him. While you were unconscious you weren't a threat but he's not really fond of humans."

"Good to know," he said. "I do appreciate your assistance, Rocket."

The dog walked closer and Dani tensed. "Rocket, behave." The dog leaned toward him and sniffed. Then licked Bill's face. "What the hell?" said Dani. Rocket then laid down on top of Bill and continued to lick him.

"Yeah, he's a real beast," Bill laughed as he pet the dog's long neck.

“That’s the position he took on the sled. I secured you to the sled and then Rocket laid on top of you and I strapped him to you to help keep you warm while I drove you back.”

“Thank you, Rocket. That was very good of you,” he said.

“I had something to do with it too,” said Dani.

Bill smiled. “Thank you, Dani.”

“You’re welcome. I notice you didn’t ask about being naked.”

“I assume skin to skin contact was the fastest way to raise my core temperature.”

“You assume correctly,” she replied. Bill thought she looked a bit disappointed.

“How long have I been here?”

“About six hours. Which means I have to get Rocket outside and then we all need to eat something.” Bill was surprised when she pushed back the covers and walked naked to the pile of clothes in the corner. He couldn’t help but smile as she bent over to pick up the clothes. She did have a very nice ass. But his heart skipped when he saw several long scars on her back. “I’ll throw this stuff in the wash and I have some sweats that should fit you. You’ll have to go commando until your stuff is dry. I’m afraid men’s underwear is something I don’t stock.”

“I don’t mind if you don’t”

Dani smiled. “I’ll manage.”

Dani came back in from shoveling a path for Rocket on the back porch. It was usually protected from the worst of the storms but this one was for the record books. She shoveled a three foot path off the edge of the porch and the most shielded side of the house. It would give Rocket a chance to relieve himself without having to go chest deep in the snow to do it.

She brushed off the dog and her clothes and saw a Bill standing in the kitchen in her biggest sweats. They were still a few inches short on his legs and he'd pushed the sleeves up to his elbows. He still looked cute as hell. "Down girl," she thought.

"What were you doing?"

"Shoveling a path for Rocket?"

"I'd have done that for you."

"I'm sure you would, southern gentleman that you are, but I would like to remind you less than seven hours ago you were very nearly dead."

Bill smiled. "Good point. And how do you know I'm southern? I don't have that heavy an accent."

"The sheriff. Esther at the hotel reported you missing. Bill Wolfe, photographer from Atlanta."

"I'll have to thank her when I get back there. Any idea how long before the roads are cleared?"

Dani smiled. "Road, singular. And unless there's a medical emergency and they chopper us out we'll be here for days. Since it hasn't stopped snowing yet I'd say you will be the guest of Chez Colton for at least a week."

"What? I can't be out of touch that long."

Dani pulled a tray of ziti out of the fridge and reached for some plates. "Have to call your wife?"

"No wife, editor. He gets crazy if I miss a deadline." He sat down at the table and sighed. "Aw, damn. Ten g's worth of equipment is frozen crap."

Dani reached down beside the counter and pulled out his camera bag. “Is this what you’re crying over?”

“My equipment!” he smiled as he opened the bag.

“I figured you’d want it.”

“Thank you so much.” He pulled out his camera and opened a screen. “Oh thank God. It’s fine.”

“What is so important about those pictures?”

“This is my job. If I lose these I lose the entire commission. Of course if I can’t get them to my editor I’m still screwed.” Dani smiled and wrote down a code on a piece of paper. “What’s this?”

“I assume your equipment has a Wi-Fi connection. That’s the code.”

“You have Wi-Fi up here?”

Dani affected a Hillbilly accent. “And cable and cell phones and indoor plumbing too. We’s all kinda’ fancy up here in Wayfair.”

He laughed. “Okay. I had that coming. Is your cell phone still working?”

She picked up her phone and handed it to him. “Help yourself.”

“Thank you.” He picked up the phone and walked into the living room.

Dani pulled out some frozen garlic knots out of the freezer and set them in the oven. She dished out the ziti and nuked two servings. She was pouring some ice tea when Bill came back into the kitchen.

“Thank you,” he said as he handed her back the phone. He sat down at the table and plugged the code into his camera set up. He hit a button and sat back and sighed. “Dani, you just saved my ass.”

“That makes twice,” she smiled.

He reached for her hand and smiled. "Yes it does. Thank you." Dani's tried to hide her blush. Bill Wolfe's crystal blue eyes were having an affect on her like she hadn't felt in a very long time and would prefer to avoid. She set the warmed rolls on the table and the two plates of ziti.

"Smells great," he said.

"Thanks, but before you eat you don't have any weird food allergies do you? I only have so much medical supplies."

"No allergies," he said as he took a big bite of his ziti. "Ummm, delicious."

"You haven't eaten since breakfast so I guessing anything would taste good."

"No, this is really good. Great sausage."

"It's not sausage."

"What do you mean it, not sausage? It tastes like sausage."

"I'm vegetarian. That's soy, wheat and spices put together to taste like sausage." She stared at him for the response she was used to. When she'd fed Charlie some he acted like she'd fed him Rocket's dog food. He smiled and took a bite.

"Well, can't say I've ever had it before but it's delicious."

"I'm glad you like it." She pushed the basket toward him. "Have a roll."

"I didn't realize how hungry I was."

"I'm not surprised. You used up most of your energy trying to stay alive."

"How long was I out there?"

"The snow started about one p.m. and I got to you around five and it took about an hour to get back here."

"You live an hour from the lake?"

“Actually I live about a mile from the lake but with the snow and the wind it took about thirty minutes to get to you. By the I got you out of the car the snow and wind had really picked up. It took about an hour to get you back here.”

Bill stopped eating and looked at her. “You could have been lost out there looking for me.”

Dani smiled and took a sip of her ice tea. “No. I knew what I was doing. And I had Rocket.” The dog looked up from his bed in the kitchen at the mention of his name. “Yes, baby. You took good care of me.”

He took her hand and kissed it. “Thank you, Dani.”

“You’re welcome,” she whispered.

They finished dinner and put the dishes away. “How do you manage up here by yourself?”

“I designed this house to accommodate my needs. I have a large pantry that I keep well stocked. I have a good generator and plenty of gas in the barn.”

“How do you manage alone?”

Dani hung up the dish towel and smiled. “I manage just fine. Come on it’s been a long day. Let’s get to bed.”

Bill followed her into what was obviously the only bedroom in the house. “This is your room. I can sleep on the couch.”

She kicked off her shoes and pulled back the covers. “Don’t be ridiculous. We’ve already seen each other naked. This is the only bed in the house. Now get in bed and get some rest.”

Dani climbed in bed and pulled the covers over herself. She waited for Bill to get in the other side and pull the covers over himself before she turned off the lights.

“By the way,” she whispered. “Nice ink.” She heard a soft chuckle.

“Thanks.”

Bill heard murmuring from Dani then whimpering from Rocket. The dog nosed him awake. "What is it, boy?"

Rocket nudged him and looked over at Dani. She was perspiring and tossing back and forth. He gently touched her shoulder. "Dani, wake up. You're having a nightmare. She gasped and thrashed and Rocket whimpered. "Dani, sweetheart, wake up." He pulled her close and stopped her from thrashing. She started to push at him. "Dani, Dani, it's okay. Wake up."

"Huh?"

"You were having a nightmare."

"Oh. Sorry."

"You don't have to apologize. Rocket woke me."

"That's his job. He couldn't get to me so he woke you." She reached over Bill and pet Rocket's neck. "I'm fine, baby. I promise." The dog whimpered and she gave his muzzle a kiss. "I promise baby. I'm fine. Go to bed." Rocket looked at her like he didn't quite believe her but he curled up in his bed and looked at her.

She laid down and pulled the covers over her shoulder. "I'm sorry, Bill."

"His job?"

"Don't"

"Dani, talk to me."

Dani, flipped over on her back. "I don't need your pity."

"It's not pity. I'm just trying to be a friend."

"We're not friends. You're some guy I pulled out of a car. When the snow melts you'll be gone." Bill could see Dani's eyes tearing in the moonlight. He brushed his hand over her cheek.

"Dani, yes, you saved me. But this isn't gratitude. This is me giving a damn what is going on with my fellow human."

“I’m sorry. I’m just a little jumpy. Let’s just get some sleep.” Bill pulled his sweatshirt off and tossed it aside. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Last night you slept okay. Maybe this will help.” He laid back and pulled her close.

She leaned into him and touched the crab tattoo on his chest. “When did you get this?”

“That was one of my first. It was a drunken mistake I got it after I broke the record for eating crab legs in my home town.”

“Oh, ick. Spare me the details.” He smiled as she shuttered. “What about the dragon? It’s beautiful.”

“That was done by an artist in LA. It took me a while to get an appointment with him.”

“It was worth it. It’s beautiful. I really like the eagle on your back.” She said as curled against his chest and closed her eyes. “It’s like it’s protecting you,” she whispered as she closed her eyes.

Bill brushed a piece of hair off her cheek. He couldn’t resist placing a kiss on her forehead. He wondered what the hell happened to her and if it had something to do with the scars on her back.

Bill was sure whatever demons were haunting Dani had a tight grip on her. His being here seemed to make them worse. So, a man caused the scars. Those scars he'd seen weren't just surgical. They were surgically repaired knife wounds. He'd seen enough in his early days to know what has looking at.

He'd let Dani sleep and he'd let Rocket run this morning and the dog was asleep on his kitchen bed. He seemed have a bed in every room. Bill invaded Dani's larder and most restaurants would be jealous. She had enough supplies for months, but not surprisingly the only meat was in Rocket's food. He was making some coffee and he was ready to start the omelets Dani came into the kitchen.

"What's going on?"

"Breakfast. You up for omelets?"

"Sounds great. Let me get Rocket out."

"He's already been out. I tossed his ball for a bit but he seemed more interested in his bed and a post breakfast nap."

"Oh. Thank you. That was nice of you."

"Least I could do. Do you have any chives for the eggs?"

"Top shelf to your left."

As he reached up and found the bottle in the back of the shelf he heard a gasp. "If you don't like chives, I can skip them."

"No." She walked toward him and lifted the edge of his sweatshirt. She touched a fresh bruise on his back and he flinched. "That didn't happen on the sled. Did Rocket do that?"

He set down the bottle and looked at her. "No," he said quietly.

Dani pulled her hands back like she'd been burned. "Oh God. Bill, I'm so sorry."

"Don't worry about it. It's not a big deal."

“Yes it is.” Dani began to pace the kitchen and Rocket took up a position by her side. Bill took her by the shoulders and forced her to stop and look at him.

“Dani, I’m okay. It’s a little bruise and I’m a big boy.”

“I can’t. I can’t,” she said as she darted out of the kitchen.

Bill went after her and caught up with her staring out the picture window in the living room. He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. “Tell me what happened.”

“You know what happened. Now you know why I sleep alone.”

“Bullshit. I know PTSD when I see it.”

“What the hell do you know about anything?” She tried to pull away and he held her close.

“I know knife wounds when I see them.” He held Dani tight but she didn’t fight him. She just stood there looking at the snow.

“I haven’t trusted anyone in twelve years. Why should I trust you?”

He turned her around to face him. “Because you saved me and now I owe you my life. Because after all these years you know who to trust.” He smiled and pulled out his wallet. “And before I retired and took up photography being trustworthy was my job.” He showed her his ID.

Dani took the wallet from him. “William R. Wolfe, Major General, United States Marines, Retired.” She closed the wallet and managed a small smile. “Major General?”

“Yes.”

“Then you should have been smart enough not to rent that piece of shit sedan to climb a mountain.”

Bill laughed. “Noted.”

“You said something about coffee. We’re both going to need it.”

“Let’s go sit down.”

He poured her a coffee and she sat down at the opposite end of the table. He poured himself a mug and put in two sugars. She put two sugars and cream. She took a sip and stared at Rocket who'd walked over and put his head on her lap.

"I'm okay, baby. I promise," she said.

He watched as she petted her dog, waiting for her to tell her story in her time. She took another sip. "My name was Carolyn Van Husen." Bill stopped mid sip. "You know the story."

"Just what I saw on the news."

"Richard was going to be the next governor of California and I was to be his first lady. We met in college and everything was fine at first. I was an up and coming writer and he was a talented prosecutor. As his career progressed he got more and more controlling. The first time he broke my arm..."

"First time?"

"He pushed me down the stairs. By the time he's gotten me to the hospital he'd convinced me it was an accident."

"The second time, I just went along with it."

"Second?" he asked, gripping his mug a bit tighter.

"After that he didn't risk it. He learned how not to leave visible marks."

"How long did this go on?"

"Five years."

"What?"

Dani gave him a sad smile. "Your next question is why didn't I just leave? He cut me off from everyone. He took my car, decided I needed a driver. I was never allowed out alone. I never had any money. Most of the time I was either avoiding making Richard angry or recovering when I failed."

Bill reached out for her hand. "My God."

“Finally I found my chance. There was a dinner for the Governor and Richard and I had to be there. I made sure I was dressed perfectly and did everything exactly the way he wanted. We were talking to Governor and his wife and I feigned having to go to the ladies room. I could see how angry he was but he couldn’t say anything except, “Don’t be long.” I went into the ladies room and found a maid. I didn’t have any money but I offered her my engagement ring and wedding band for her uniform. They were worth fifty thousand at least. Richard always like to put on a good show. She thought I was crazy but she could see was desperate. While she helped me change she could see the bruises on my body. She put on my gown and then walked me to an employee’s lounge. She grabbed her coat and walked me out the back door. She took me down the street to the local precinct where her son was a sergeant. They got me to a hospital and got me treatment.” She paused and wiped the tears from her eyes. “Do you know what she did before they put me in the ambulance? She gave me back my jewelry. She said I would need it and to keep it safe.”

She pet Rocket and took another breath. “The maid made sure her son stayed with me and protected me. When they did the x-rays they saw all the damage. Multiple breaks on my arms, fractured skull and a few fresh fractured ribs. The sergeant made sure they checked me in under a phony name so Richard couldn’t find me. I swore out a complaint and I don’t know how he managed it but he got an arrest warrant. He came back and told me the story later. By the time they got back to the hotel security was looking for me. He was arrested for aggravated felony assault right in front of the press. His career was over in a camera flash.”

Bill got up and sat next to her. He took her hand. “You don’t have to say any more if you don’t want to.”

“It’s okay.” She gave him a surprising smile. “It turned out I did have some friends left. People who looked out for me. Stood guard. Moved me to places where I could recover in peace. I filed for divorce. I didn’t want anything I just wanted out.”

“Did you have to testify?”

“No. Even his forensic people could see the long term damage. He decided to plead no contest. Richard thought he’d get a slap on the wrist.”

“I remember he got eight years,” Bill said.

“I packed up and moved to New York City. I took back my maiden name, Weston, and started writing again. I was doing well, too. I had friends again. I was writing. I had a life.”

He took her hand and held it tight. “Tell me.”

“I was going home. It wasn’t all that late at night. I never saw it coming. I was hit on the back of the head. He dragged me into an alley and started stabbing me. I never saw his face but he whispered, “Richard says hello. I woke three weeks later in intensive care with two punctured lungs and another damn fractured skull. I had no ID. Whether the attacker took it or someone else, I realized it was my chance.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s smashed my face into the ground so I was swollen. No one recognized me. It was my chance to get away for good. I contacted the one person I trusted, my editor. I told him not to come look for me. I would continue to send him manuscripts so long as no one knew I was still alive. I set up accounts, got a new name and I built this place and started writing again.” Dani took a deep sip of her coffee. “That’s brings you up to speed, General.”

Bill stood and pulled her to her feet. He pulled her into a tight hug and kissed the top of her head.

“What are you doing?”

“I’ve commanded troops all over the world,” he whispered. “And I’ve never known anyone more brave than you.” He brushed her cheek with his hand. “Now I do believe I promised you an omelet.”

Dani sipped her coffee as Bill did the rest of the dishes. “What’s your story, General?”

“What do you mean? And I’m retired so you can call me Bill.”

“What brings you to my little corner of the world?”

“I had an assignment. Fall and early winter in the Pocono mountains.”

“Really?”

He placed his hand to his chest and feigned aghast. “You doubt the word of a Marine?” He set down the towel and grabbed his camera case. He opened his tablet and booted it up. He opened some files and turned it toward Dani. She recognized her mountain, the lake, the rock formation at far end of the lake.

“Wow, these are great.” She pointed to a file labeled Bali. “May I?”

“Go on,” he smiled.

She opened the file and gasped. “Oh my God! These are amazing.”

“It’s even more beautiful in person.”

“Why would you ever leave?”

“It was an assignment. I finished and moved on to the next one. Have you ever been there?”

“No. I’ve never really been anywhere..”

“You should go sometime.”

“Maybe someday.”

“What did you do before?”

“Before what?”

“Before photography. In the Marines. You’re a Major General which means you’re a pretty big deal.”

“Was a big deal. I retired five years ago. A lot of it I can’t talk about but I was in charge of making sure the right things landed in the right places.

“Logistic specialist.”

“Exactly,” he said with a raised eye brow.

“I do a lot of research for my stories. The search history on my computer can be pretty frightening.” She tucked her hand under her chin and stared at him.

“Did you ever marry?”

“Briefly. Jenny hated the travel.”

“Didn’t she know that’s what Marine’s do?”

“She thought she’d be in one place and I would come home to her. As my career advanced the assignments got longer, two years, three years. After five years she was done.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. It more than...Christ...it’s been thirty two years.”

“Wait, how long? How old are you?”

“I’m fifty nine.”

Dani gasped. “ Damn, Seriously?”

“What?”

“You forget. I’ve seen you out of uniform, General.” She smiled. “I feel like I should salute.”

Bill tried to hide his blush. Dani’s heart fluttered and she felt like she hadn’t felt in years. Maybe in forever.

They walked into the living room while Rocket curled up in a bed by the fireplace.

“Does he have a bed in every room?”

“Of course.”

Bill looked at Dani’s extensive library “So you told me you write. What do you write?” He looked at several shelves with four different authors but they were the same publisher. Most had the similar stylized covers and fonts. Many of the authors and titles he recognized. He turned toward her and smiled. “These are all you?” Dani smiled and nodded. “Nora Hargrove, Chloe Everett, Richard Markham, Jonathan Forsythe? You’re Jonathan Forsythe?” Dani grinned and sipped her coffee. “I’ve read all of Markham and Forsythe.”

“Thank you. I’m glad you enjoy them.”

He sat down next to her smiling. “Markham is all dark detective and Forsythe is international intrigue. I’m stunned.”

“I take it you haven’t read any of my female personas.” He blushed a bit and shook his head. She was beginning to think his blush and his lopsided grin was very sexy. She tried to remind herself as soon as the road was clear he’d be gone.

“I don’t read a lot of ...”

“Chick lit?”

“You said it. I didn’t.”

“Nora Hargrove about a female police detective. Chloe Everett is my romance novel persona.”

“Romance novels?” he asked with a touch of his nose to hide another blush.

“I didn’t realize tough Marines blushed so easily”

“I do not blush.”

Dani laughed and leaned in close. “Fire. Engine. Red.”

“Woof!”

“Saved by the bark,” said Dani. “He probably wants to run.” She stood and reached for her coat on the coat rack. “I won’t be long.”

Bill stood and grabbed Rocket’s ball. “I’ll come too. Some fresh air will do me good.”

“Think the cold will cover your blush, General?”

“I do not blush.”

Dani laughed as she tossed him his coat.

Bill watched as Dani tossed the bright red ball to Rocket and he retrieved it. The wind had blown enough of the snow aside to give Rocket an area big enough stretch his legs and not be chest deep. He jumped and chased the ball, each time returning it to Dani.

She really was remarkable. He'd heard about what her ex had done to her but he had no idea the depth of the damage. Now she was hiding out under an assumed name on this mountain. She'd found a way to survive. She threw the ball and this time, when Rocket retrieved it he dropped it at Bill's feet.

"What the hell? Are you sneaking him treats?"

Bill laughed. "I swear, it's all him. He tossed the ball and Rocket took off after it. "I see how he earned his name." As he watched Rocket search for the ball he got nailed in the head with a snowball. He turned to see Dani smiling. "Oh no, you didn't." He bent over and grabbed some snow. She managed to launch another snowball that hit him in the chest. "Good arm for a civilian." He launched a shot and hit her in the chest. She tried to get another shot off before he caught her by the arms and pushed her into a snow bank. He froze when he saw the sudden panic in her eyes. "Dani, I'm sorry. I would never hurt you," he whispered. "You have to know that."

"He's supposed to be mine."

"What?"

"Rocket is supposed to be mine."

"Dani, I think he trusts me. He knew right away I was no threat to you. But I also have no doubt that if I did threaten you, he would rip me to shreds."

"Do you think so?" she smiled

"Absolutely and you don't have to smile about it," he laughed. "Sweetheart I know you've been through more than I can imagine. You don't have to worry about me."

"Do you promise?" she whispered.

"I swear and a Marine never breaks their word."

Dani smiled. "I've heard that."

"Let me help you up. It's freezing." He pushed himself up but she threaded her arms around his neck. She pulled him close and gave him a soft kiss. He smiled but let her take the lead. She kissed him again, deeper this time. Rocket took the moment to drop his ball on Bill and barked. "Great timing," he laughed. He picked up the ball and tossed it on the porch. "Let's take this inside. I think I spotted some hot chocolate in the pantry."

"Sounds good," she smiled. He took her hand and helped her to her feet.

They walked into the kitchen and hung up their coats. Dani grabbed a towel and brushed off Rocket's back and feet. "Ready for a treat, boy?"

"Woof!"

Dani pulled a large milk bone from a jar on the counter. "Let's show the General what we've got. Rocket, down." The dog quickly laid at her feet. "Up" He stood quickly. She twirled her finger and Rocket did a three sixty turn. "Good boy." She handed him the treat and he ran off into the living room.

"Very impressive."

"He's a smart boy."

Bill moved closer and touched her still red cheek. "He has a smart owner. You're still cold. Let's get that hot chocolate." He walked into the pantry while Dani plugged into the electric kettle. "Most restaurants would be envious of your set up."

"I only go down the mountain once a month. Less if the weather's bad. This way I don't have to worry about running out of anything. The people in town think I'm that crazy mountain woman." She spooned out the chocolate and pour the boiled water. She stirred the powder and handed Bill his mug. He set it down and took her hand.

"You are many things, Dani, talented, fascinating, independent, beautiful, but crazy? Definitely not."

She stared at him like he was speaking a different language. She handed him his mug. "Here, your chocolate will get cold." She stirred her mug and took a sip. "Umm. Good. I'm particular about my chocolate."

"Dani, I'm not trying to push but I meant what I said."

She looked down at the chocolate. "I'm not used to hearing those things."

He took the mug from her hand. "You should be. I understand about changing your name. I understand why you're here on the mountain. But you are a brilliant woman. I've read your work. I've not only read it, I can't put it down."

"Really?"

"Really. You've got to tell me whether Delano survived the crash in the last Markham book. I bet a buddy he did because he's too good a villain to die off."

"What did you bet him?"

"Fifty bucks?"

"Fifty bucks!"

"Hell yeah. My training partner at the gym thinks you're going to retire Caine in the next book. I think the old coot is nuts."

Dani started to laugh. "Well I am very gratified to hear the two of you are so invested."

"Well?"

"Well what?" she smiled as she sipped her cocoa.

"Come on, give. Does Delano survive?"

She smiled and set down her mug and smiled. "He owes you fifty bucks."

"Ha! I knew it! That's great."

"The latest edition is going to be released next month, in time for Christmas."

Bill's eyes went wide. "Do you have a copy here?"

“Were you the type of kid who snuck a peak at his Christmas presents?”

“Absolutely. So, do you?”

“Of course. I’ll let you read it. We’ll probably be stuck here for a few more days. You’re bound to get bored.”

Bill set his mug down. “Dani. I can honestly say I’ve never been less bored with anyone in my life.”

“Well, that whole dying thing is a bit unusual,”

He touched her cheek and forced her to look at her. “Dani Colton, you listen to me. I won’t push anything on you. You have my word on that. You are a beautiful, exciting woman. I’m also very attracted to you.” He tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. He leaned in slowly, looking for some hesitation. He gave her the lightest of kisses. “And just to be clear, this is not gratitude for saving my life. This is not me being a book groupie. Can someone my age even be a groupie?” Dani giggled. “I’m being honest with you. I always will be.”

“Woof!” They looked over to see Rocket sitting directly in front of them.

Dani glanced at her watch. “It’s time for his dinner. He’s very finicky that way.” She stood and walked into kitchen. Rocket gave her a side glance.

“Mood killer.”

Bill could have sworn the damn dog was laughing.

They had a quiet dinner over some fake chicken alfredo. Dani believed Bill's claim to enjoy it when he asked for seconds. They split a nice bottle of wine and Bill talked about some of his non-classified adventures including a particularly enthusiastic bachelor party where he wound up in the middle of Saigon with his underwear on his head.

They finished off their wine in the living room as Bill emailed his editor and Dani tried to focus on her latest book. She was finding it impossible not to put elements of Bill in her character. Maybe she'd be better off editing.

"Well, my editor is pleased with the photos I sent him."

"That's good. Does he have another assignment for you?"

"He wants me to do a Christmas shoot."

"So where are you going?"

"I told him I'd think about it. I'm freelance. I don't have to take the job." He set down his wine. "I do believe you said you had the latest Markham."

"Fine." She opened a cabinet and pulled out a hardcover of the latest Markham book. She smiled and handed him the book. She couldn't help but grin when he looked like a kid at Christmas.

"Do you mind if I start?"

"No, go ahead. I have some work to do."

"Great!" He took the book and stretched out on the couch and propped the book up on his knees.

Dani laughed and grabbed the bottle of wine. "Well you might as well go for the full effect." She refilled his wine glass and then tucked an afghan around his legs.

"Are you tucking me in?" he asked.

“Not yet,” she said with a wink. Damn that lopsided grin. Dani got into some heavy editing of her latest romance novel. It was the story of a female executive assistant and the new executive who turns her world upside down. She looked over her shoulder when she heard Bill laugh at something was he was reading. She heard a few shits and finally heard him close the book.

“Wow Dani, that was terrific. The way you brought Delano back was awesome. Nick is gonna be so pissed!”

“Nick?”

“My training partner. He’s going to love the story but he’s going to hate paying up.”

“Well I’m glad my efforts will have made you some money, but I think it’s time for bed.”

He got a cute smile. “Excuse me?”

“Bill it’s nearly three a.m.”

“What?”

“You weren’t kidding when you said you couldn’t put it down.”

“I really couldn’t. You didn’t have to stay up with me.”

“That’s okay. I got a lot of work done on my next Chloe Everett book. Rocket, however packed it in a couple of hours ago. I say we do the same.”

“Sounds like an excellent idea.”

They walked into the bedroom and Bill looked around for Rocket. “Where’s the beast.”

“Apparently he’s decided to sleep next to the heating grate in the kitchen.”

“Isn’t that odd?” asked Bill.

“A lot of odd things have been happening since you arrived,” she smiled and before she closed door on the master bath. She looked in the mirror and gave herself a pep talk.

“You can trust him.” She washed up and changed into a little short set and tank top. It wasn’t like she had a supply of negligees. She’d placed the set in there while he was engrossed in her book. He would leave soon and she knew that. But it had been so long and well...it was Bill. The only thing she was certain of was if she stopped now she’d regret it forever. She came out of the bathroom and saw Bill had pulled down the covers. He’d pulled off his sweatshirt and turned to go into the bathroom. He stood still obviously not quite sure what she was about.

“Ah, I’ll just be a minute,” he said.

Dani climbed into bed and nervously waited for him to come back. When he did he tried to climb into bed but she stopped him. “You were right last night. I slept better when you took your shirt off.” She had to laugh. “Good Lord, that sounds like the worst pick up line in the history of pick up lines.”

“I would be happy to comply to your request,” he smiled. He pulled off his shirt and got into the bed and she curled up against his warm skin. “Dani,” he said quietly. “Did you want that to be a pick up line?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

He rolled over top of her, stroked her cheek and gave her the softest of kisses. “Are you sure?”

“I trust you.”

“I’m glad of that but you didn’t answer the question. Are you sure?”

“I’m as sure as I can be. But I am sure I’ve been watching you since I first saw you in the car.” She stroked his face. “Your jaw, your chin. I wondered what color your eyes were. I had to open your shirt to check for a heartbeat and well, Oh God, I sound gross, lusting after a half frozen man.”

“Lusting?” he asked with that damn lopsided smile.

Dani started talking quickly. "Then I brought you back here and I had to take off your clothes and I mean, come on. All that great ink and your..." she realized she was talking too quickly.

"My what?" he said with a smile.

"Oh for God's sake, your ass. You have an incredible ass."

"Why, thank you. I think yours is pretty adorable."

"You do?"

"God yes. You are a very beautiful woman," he said as he gave her another soft kiss.

She turned her face. "You saw my scars."

He turned her to face him. "I saw your strength." He gave her another kiss, deeper and passionate. He pulled back and asked "Dani, has it been a long time?"

"Since Richard."

"Show me what you need and promise me you'll tell me if something is too much or hurts you." He kissed her. "I never want to hurt you."

"I promise," she smiled as she pulled him in for a deep kiss. She was determined not to let the past steal this moment from her. Bill started kissing her neck and nipping at her skin. His warm hands ran up under her shirt and cupped her breasts. He took his time peeling first the t-shirt then the shorts from her body.

"So beautiful," he whispered. He ran kisses up and down her body. He followed her moans as a map to her pleasure. He teased the inside of her thighs with his tongue until he finally took her in his mouth. She truly lost herself in the moment.

She pulled her to him and kissed him with a passion she'd never felt before. "Bill, I need you." He slipped off his sweats and boxers and raised himself over her. He restrained himself taking great care. He rested his head on her forehead. "You're so beautiful," he whispered. He waited for Dani. She started moving under him and he matched her pace. She felt things she'd never felt. Passionate. Sexy. Worthy.

Dani couldn't help smiling as she put the coffee on and started scrambling some eggs. Last night had been beyond her imaginings. She'd been writing romance novels for years but the only time she'd had a night like that was in her imagination.

"Do I smell coffee?"

She turned to see Bill standing in the doorway. "You do, General. Help yourself. I'm making some scrambled eggs."

"First things first," he said as he slipped his arm around her waist and kissed her neck. "Good morning," he whispered.

"Good morning," she smiled.

"Last night was wonderful," he said.

"It was," she smiled. She turned off the flame under the eggs and took a breath. "I want to ask you something."

"Of course, sweetheart. Ask me anything."

"For me, last night was wonderful, but for you..." She closed her eyes and he saw unshed tears.

"Dani, what is it?"

"Was I enough?" she whispered.

"Enough? I don't understand?"

"I've never been enough. He said I was a cold fish."

"He? Your ex?" She nodded as the tear slid down her cheek. "Oh Dani, baby, look at me." He smiled and gave her a quick kiss. "First, anything your ex ever said is a load of crap." She managed a little smile. Besides being beautiful and smart you are very sexy. You let yourself go with me. You trusted me completely and you gave to me completely." He leaned in and whispered "And that thing you did where you flexed your muscles when I was still inside you. Oh my God, woman that was amazing. All but made me lose my mind."

She looked at him with a big smile. "You liked that? I read about it."

He took her face in his hands. "Ummm, I do love a well read woman." He gave her a deep kiss.

She smiled and whispered, "You're coffee will get cold."

He took her hand and kissed it. "You have a microwave." He took her by the hand and led her back to the bedroom.

Bill and Dani were curled up together on the couch while Rocket was asleep in front of the fire. They each were reading different tablets when they heard the radio beeped. “Yo, Dani, you on?”

She got up and went to the radio. She picked up the mic. “Yeah, Charlie. I’m on.”

“Good news. The town has been cleared. We’ll get to your road tomorrow. You can finally get rid of your houseguest.”

Dani looked at Bill tucked under the afghan on her couch. “I’m sure Mr. Wolfe is anxious to get back to his life.”

“We should have you dug out by noon and we’ll send a tow truck to the lake for his car.”

“Thanks, Charlie.” She sat the mic back down and took a breath. “Well, you’ll be able to get back to Atlanta.”

Bill stood and took her hand. “Do you want me to go?”

She faked a smile. “We knew the snow would melt and you would go. That’s how it has to be.”

“Does it?”

“You have a life to go back to.”

“Dani, have you ever been to Fiji?”

She shook her head. He didn’t seem to be paying attention to her. “What?”

He led her back to the couch and sat down. He opened up his tablet and showed her some pictures of beach cottages next to blue green water. “It’s beautiful. Christmas in a cottage on the beach. I know Christmas is a few weeks away but I did some research and even though Rocket is a licensed therapy dog, he would still need to go through some tests before he gets cleared.”

“Rocket?”

“Well, we couldn’t leave him behind.”

She took his hand and smiled. “You’ve already done the research? You really are remarkable.”

“So agree to come with me.”

“I can’t go. I can’t leave here.”

“What are you talking about? Of course you can leave.”

“I can’t. Richard got out of prison three years ago. If he finds me, he’ll finish me.”

“The world thinks your dead.”

“Not everyone. Since they never had a body some say I just disappeared. Richard gave an interview that said that proved how unstable I am. That I lied about the abuse.”

“So you’re going to stay here by yourself? Hiding on this mountain. What if he did find you? It took days for the sheriff to get to us. You’d be defenseless.”

“Not defenseless.” She stood and her followed her to a what Bill had thought was a clothes closet. When she opened the door and flipped on the light he gasped. He’d seen armories that weren’t as well stocked. “I won’t be defenseless again.”

“Then let me stay.”

She tried to hide the hitch in her voice. “You have a life to get back to and I have books to get back to.”

“Dani, I can do my work from anywhere. I can fly in and out.”

“Bill, I know the kind of man you are. You’d turn down jobs just to stay and watch me.” She touched his cheek and smiled. “You’d done too much with your life to end up a guard dog.”

“Woof!”

Bill pet the dog’s neck. “Look, will talk about this later. In the mean time Rocket wants his walk.”

Bill threw the ball for Rocket and he chased and retrieved it. He looked into the kitchen window and watched as Dani moved about, starting dinner. There were details he had to clean up. Get the car back to the airport, settle up with the hotel and thank Esther for sending the search party. But the absolute last thing he wanted to do was leave Dani.

He wanted Dani apart of his life. He was certain of it. The last few days with her had been fantastic. Fun, exciting, passionate, life altering. He'd spend the years since his divorce focused on work. It was satisfying, rewarding and necessary. He didn't regret it. But romantic relationships had been few and far between. It's hard to meet someone of your own rank to date when you're a general. His work left little time to meet civilians.

He would stay in the area if she didn't want him to stay with her. He could take jobs as he wanted but the truth was he didn't have to take a job. He had his pension. He only worked to keep busy.

Rocket sat at is feet. Bill realized he had a bigger problem. He had to convince Dani he wasn't trying to control her life the way Van Husen had.

“I hope you like your chili spicy,” said Dani

“I spent a lot of time stationed in Texas so the spicier the better.” He could tell the way she was moving back and forth and she was nervous. So could Rocket. He was moving back and forth with her. He stopped her and took her hand. “Dani, sweetheart, come here, please. Sit down.” She sat and took a breath he could tell she was waiting for a shoe to drop. For him to say goodbye. “Dani, tomorrow, they will dig us out and I need to arrange for the car to get back to the rental service. I also need to thank Esther for noticing I was gone and sending out a search crew.”

Dani smiled, “You mean me.”

He laughed. “Exactly. If she hadn’t noticed I was missing I’d be dead.” He was surprised to see Dani’s eyes tear. “But I’m not. I’m fine. So maybe I can find a florist.”

“Chocolates.”

“Excuse me?”

“Esther is known for her passion for chocolate.”

“Chocolate it is. But then I’m going to find a place to stay, locally.”

“What?”

“Dani. I want to be a part of your life. If that means I can see you once a month or once a week or every day, I still want to be a part of your life. But all of it will be on your terms. I’ll take assignments, but when I come back, I’ll come back here. How ever you want us to be, that’s how it will be.” She looked at him like she couldn’t understand what he was saying. “There is only one exception. One thing you can’t control.” He saw her freeze. “No matter where I am, whether I’m assignment halfway around the world or whether I’m sitting right here next to you, I will always want to keep you safe. I will always care.”

“Bill...I don’t...I never expected...”

“Look, I know I’m asking a lot. Let’s have our dinner and relax. There is no time frame on you and me.”

Dani looked at Bill as he played with Rocket in the snow. It all seemed perfectly natural. They'd had a wonderful night together, tender and passionate. Bill was willing to let Dani take the lead, even in bed. She'd never felt so comfortable with anyone, not since longer than she could remember. She felt normal.

Dani yelled out the back door. "Hey, come in for breakfast before I have to defrost you again."

Bill gave her a dazzling smile. "Is that a promise?"

"Get in here you two."

They came in the kitchen and Bill dried off Rocket. "I'm going to get into some dry clothes."

"Take Rocket with you. He's still soaking wet. There's a stack of his towels in the bottom of the bathroom closet."

"He has his own towels?" She looked at him and put her hands on her hips. "Of course he does," he said. "Come on fur ball. Let's get dried off before we both get in trouble."

Dani pattered around the kitchen smiling, marveling at how wonderful she felt. How normal.

"Hello Carolyn."

Dani froze at the mention of her old name. She hadn't even heard the door open. She didn't have to turn around to know who was there. "Hello Richard." She turned and realized if he hadn't spoken she wouldn't have recognized him. He was paunchy and balding. Time and prison and not been kind to the formerly handsome Richard Van Husen. He was also holding a gun.

"It took me a while but I knew I'd find you."

She fought to stay calm. She didn't want to give him the satisfaction of being afraid. He liked it when she was afraid. She started to edge toward the sink. Most of guns were in the bedroom closet but she had one hidden in each room. She had a small revolver in

the drawer by the sink. The problem was, she was on the other side of the room. “It took you three years to get to me in New York.”

He waved the gun dismissively. “Incompetent contractor. If you want something done right, do it yourself. Just as well. I plan on enjoying myself.”

She had to keep him talking until she could get to the gun. He loved to talk. “How did you find me? I went to a lot of trouble to fly under the radar.”

“You know the only thing to do in prison beside trying not to get killed. Read. I got a job in the library and I read everything. Do you know who’s the most popular authors in prisons, at least with those that actually read, Forsythe and Markham. I kept reading them and something just kept tickling at the back of my mind. Then I realized what it was. The locations of the stories. They were all places we’d been. And the author photos on the back, they never changed. It finally hit me. “You’re Forsythe and Markham.” He looked around the house. “Did pretty well for yourself by the looks of it.” She edged closer to the sink while he looked around her kitchen. “I’ve been watching you and I know that old man is here with his dog. You get them out here.”

“Richard leave them alone. This is between you and me.”

“Not anymore.”

Bill heard Van Husen's voice through the open bedroom door. He was able to get to the armory closet since it was just inside the bedroom. He opened the door and reached for a 9mm, the gun with which he was most familiar. He checked it and it was loaded. Of course it was. He looked at Rocket and quietly said "Sit." The dog obeyed but tilted his head obviously hearing Van Husen's voice. Bill recognized the low growl and he wasn't going to be able to stop Rocket from protecting Dani. It was his job. It was his life. Then Van Husen called out to him.

"Come out here, old man or I'll shoot her now."

"Don't do anything stupid, Van Husen," Bill replied as he walked out of the bedroom with the gun tucked behind his back. As soon as he got through the bedroom door Rocket launched himself past Bill and aimed for Van Husen. He was aware of Dani grabbing a gun from a kitchen drawer as Rocket bit into the man's leg. He screamed and got off one shot before Bill put three shots in his chest. Van Husen fell back like a domino as his head made a sickening thud on the floor. He checked for a pulse and found none. He turned and saw Dani, pale and shaking, still holding the gun. He walked to her and took the gun from her hand and folded her into his arms. "You're okay. You're okay," he whispered.

Rocket whimpered and she realized Van Husen's shot had connected. He was sitting on the floor and panting.

"Rocket!" Dani screamed.

Bill looked at the dog's wound and it didn't look too bad. He wasn't bleeding heavily. It looked like he'd gotten hit near his right hip. "Is there a vet in town?"

"Yes."

"You call Charlie on the radio and tell him we're coming in. Tell him to have the vet ready for surgery. I'll get some blankets to wrap him."

Dani glanced down at her ex-husband. "What about him?"

"Fuck him. He's dead."

Bill drove Dani's truck down the hill as fast as he dared. Dani sat in the back seat with Rocket, petting and whispering to him. She directed him to the vet's office and Charlie's police cruiser was already in the vet's parking lot. Bill threw the truck into park and ran around the side of the truck to help carry Rocket. The vet opened the door and led them to an examining room. The vet was tall and burly. He looked like he'd be more comfortable as a lumberjack.

"John, you have to help him."

"Dani, I've got this. You two go talk to Charlie while I take care of Rocket. I need to get an X-ray."

She nodded and Bill took her by the hand. He was worried about her. She hadn't said much except to Rocket since the shooting. "Sweetheart, let's sit down." She sat down on the plastic chair and he put his arm around her. Charlie gave the move a glance but pulled out his note pad.

"Okay, can you tell me what happened? How did Rocket get shot?"

"It was her ex-husband," said Bill.

"Van Husen?" asked Charlie

Dani's head snapped up. "You know?"

"Yeah, pretty much everyone around here knows. With all those weapons you have registered we figured you still had reason to be afraid."

"What?"

"Dani, don't worry. We kept your secret. We tried to keep an eye on strangers to make sure no one was looking for you. It must have been the snow. Everyone was so busy digging out, no one noticed him."

"You did that for me?" she said in a strangled voice.

"Sure. We're big on respect around here, especially for women. Nobody deserves what you went through."

Dani managed a whispered “Thank you.”

“You’re going to need to tell me what happened.”

“Bill and Rocket had been outside. They were in the bedroom getting dried off. I didn’t even hear him come in. He walked in the kitchen.” She paused and leaned against Bill. He hadn’t heard this part. “He said the only thing to do in prison was read. He figured out I was Forsthye and Markham.”

“The authors?” asked Charlie.

“And a couple more,” Bill said with a smile.

“Wow. Okay, was he armed?”

“Yes. He said he was glad the contractor didn’t succeed. He wanted to finish me off.”

“What contractor?”

“The one who attacked me in New York. He only managed to puncture my lungs and mess up my face. That’s when I changed my name and moved here.”

“Okay. Tell me about the shooting.”

“I shot him,” said Bill. “I heard him from the other room. Dani had shown me where the weapons were. I’m ex-military and I was most comfortable with the 9mm. He knew I was there. He must have been watching for a while.” Dani shivered and Bill tightened his hug. “He called me to come out. I tried to keep Rocket behind me but there was no way he’d let Dani be threatened. I came out of the bedroom and Rocket charged him. Rocket bit him and he fired at the dog. I fired and took him down.”

“I assumed you confirmed he was dead since you didn’t ask for medical assistance.”

“Yes. We left everything the way it was. We needed to get Rocket here.”

“You can’t arrest him. He was defending me,” said Dani.

Charlie closed his book. "I'm not going to arrest him but I would like you to stay around until we clear all this up."

"Of course," said Bill. "We'll stay at the hotel."

"I'll take my deputy and the coroner up and we'll do what we have to do. There will have to be an inquest but from what I'm hearing I don't think we're going to have any issues. Van Husen was a convicted felon in California and would have no legal business being in Pennsylvania."

The vet walked out into the waiting room with a smile on his face. "Rocket's going to be just fine."

Dani jumped to her feet and threw her arms around him. "Really? He's okay?"

"I'm going to have to operate to take out the bullet but it's not near any vital structures or bones. He's going to need to take it easy but he's going to be fine."

She began to weep and Bill took her into his arms. "He's going to be fine, baby." He looked over at Charlie. "Dani needs to rest. I'd like to get her to the hotel."

"Sure thing, General," said Charlie. Bill was startled. "Esther saw your ID when you registered."

Bill smiled. "Of course she did. That reminds me. Where can I get some chocolates? I owe her a debt for noticing I was missing. If she hadn't I'd be dead. Dani says she prefers chocolates."

"I know what she likes. I'll have the store bring it over to the hotel. What room?"

"If she still has me in the same one, room ten."

"You get Dani settled and I'll be in touch."

"Thank you, Sheriff."

"John, can I see Rocket before you operate on him?"

“Sure.” John led them back to the operating room where Rocket was hooked up to IV’s. He wagged his tail but didn’t raise his head. “I’ve given him some preliminary meds before the surgery.”

Dani put her face on Rocket’s muzzle. “Thank you for defending me, baby. Dr. John is going to fix you up and I’ll be back when you wake up.” She kissed the dog’s muzzle and he managed to give her a lick.

“I’ll call you when the surgery’s over. He’ll be here overnight but he won’t be alone. My techs and I will take shifts.”

“You don’t normally do that,” she said.

“Heroes don’t get normal treatment.”

“Thank you, John,” she whispered.

Bill was worried Dani was going into shock. She was shivering despite the fact that the room was comfortable. "Sweetheart, why don't you get in a hot shower. I saw some sweatshirts in the lobby. I'm afraid my t-shirts and boxers will be a little big on you." He handed her one of the door room keys and took the other. "I'll lock the door behind me."

"I'll be okay."

He gave her a quick kiss on the nose. "Yeah, you will." He locked the door behind him and walked down the hall toward the lobby. A deputy was walking toward him with a plastic bag. "Esther's candy?"

"Yeah. These are her favorites. You owe me twenty bucks."

Bill pulled out his wallet and handed him a twenty. "Thanks...?"

"Frank."

"Thanks Frank. I assume Charlie's on his way up to Dani's."

"Yeah, he wants to wrap this up as fast as we can. Everyone likes Dani."

"Really? She thinks you all think she's a crazy mountain woman. You know, a hermit."

"Nah, we all knew what had happened to her. You've got to be some kind of woman to survive something like that."

"Nobody said anything to her."

"We figured she needed her privacy."

Bill extended his hand. "Thanks, Frank." Frank didn't release his hand and gave him a stern look.

"General or not, she saved your ass from freezing to death. You be good to her or you'll have to answer to Wayfair."

Bill smiled. "Semper Fi?"

"Master Sergeant."

“Don’t worry, Master Sergeant. I will take very good care of her.”

Frank nodded, “Charlie said to remind you to not go anywhere until they were finished.”

“We’ll either be here or at the vet’s office with Rocket.” Frank nodded and walked out the side door. He approached the lobby desk and found the smiling Esther chatting up the UPS man. Esther signed the tablet and turned her attention to him. He handed her the box of chocolate. “A little thank you for sending Dani to come look for me. You saved my life.”

“Nah, I just noticed you’d missed dinner. But thanks for the candy. How’s Dani?”

“She obviously had a very big shock. I was wondering if you could find some extra blankets for her.” He pointed behind the counter. “And I’ll take a couple of those sweatshirts and the pants too.”

“Sure thing. I’ll get them together. I imagine you aren’t going to want to go out for dinner. How about I place an order for you and get it delivered. I’ll text you when it arrives in case she falls asleep.”

“I wouldn’t mind a burger and fries but Dani’s vegetarian.”

“Oh, we have a great vegan place in town. I’ll hook you up.”

“You can get me something from there too. Thanks Esther. I want to get back to her now.” Esther grabbed his hand.

“You didn’t know her before all this, did you?”

“No.”

“Are you serious about her?”

“Yes I am.”

She held on to his hand and looked into his eyes. She looked him up and down. “Okay then. I’ll bring the blankets and the sweats in a few minutes and I’ll text you when the food comes.”

“Thank you, Esther, for everything.”

Bill knocked before letting himself back into hotel room. The water was still running in the shower and he knocked on the door. “Dani, can I come in?”

He heard a quiet “Yes.”

He walked into the bathroom and could see Dani curled on the floor of the tub, the water running over her. Her hands were buried in her face and she was crying. He kicked off his shoes and socks and turned the water off. He grabbed a towel and wrapped it around her. “Come on, baby. Let me get you dry.”

“I’m cold,” she whispered.

He picked her up and set her on the bed. He towel dried her hair and started rubbing the towel on her shoulders. The knock at the door made her jump. “It’s okay, sweetheart. It’s Esther.” He opened the door just enough to take a stack of blankets and sweat suits from Esther. “Thank you.”

“No problem. Your dinner will be here in about thirty minutes.”

“Thanks, Esther.”

He set the blankets on the bed and knelt down and slid the pants up her legs and slid the sweatshirt over her head. “Is that better?”

“I’m still cold,” she whispered.

He pulled back the covers and tucked her in. Then he covered her with two more blankets. She was pale and he was wondering if he should call for a paramedic. “Baby, can I get in here with you?”

“Please.”

He pulled back the other side of the bed and pulled off his shirt and jeans and got into the bed. He pulled her close and she curled up against his bare chest. “Are you going to get into trouble because of me?”

“No sweetheart. It’s a clear case of self defense.”

“But he wasn’t after you, he was after me.”

“He wouldn’t have let me walk away. Really, baby, I don’t want you to worry. Charlie seemed to think everything was going to be a formality.”

“Why did you do it?”

“What?”

“Why did you shoot him. I had a gun. I was prepared to kill him.”

Bill hugged her tighter and kissed the top of her head. “No you weren’t. Carrying that with you is a burden you don’t deserve. You suffered enough at his hands.

She looked in his eyes since the first time since they came down the mountain. “Now you have to carry that, what you did.”

“Sweetheart. He wouldn’t have stopped until he killed you. I won’t lose any sleep over him.”

“I guess now we’re even,” she said.

Bill cupped her cheek with his hand. “That’s not why I did it.”

“Then why?” she asked.

He smiled, “You know why.” He gave her a small kiss. He held her tight while Dani cuddled into him.

Another knock on the door startled them both awake.

“It’s Esther. I’ve got your dinner. You didn’t answer my text and I didn’t want it to get cold.” He got of bed and tossed on his t shirt. He opened door and reached for his wallet. “Oh, don’t bother. Cassie heard what happened. It on the house.”

“That’s so nice. Thank you.” He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled out two sandwiches and a bag of brownies. “Wow, this is a lot of food. This looks like a Rueben. I’m not sure what this is.”

Dani sat up and took a quick look at the sandwich in Bill’s hand. “Yeah, it’s a vegan Rueben. I think you’ll like it.” She looked at the wrap. “Oh, this is my favorite. It’s a wrap with vegan chicken and bacon.” Bill grabbed a couple of sodas from the mini fridge.

“Okay, let’s eat,” she smiled.

She was running but she didn't know where to go. No one would help her. She knew she was looking for someone but she wasn't sure who. She tried to scream for help but she couldn't speak. Everyone was staring at her when she felt hands on her arms. The hands held her tight. She fought as hard as she could. She heard a voice, someone calling her name. Her name but not her name.

"Dani, wake up, Dani, sweetheart, wake up now."

She gasped and opened her eyes. It was Bill. He looked worried, but not afraid.

"Dani, baby, you were dreaming. You're okay. You're safe. It's all over."

"No it's not. It's will never be over," she cried. She tried to pull away from but he held her close. "Don't you understand?" I'm always going to be like this. I'm always going to messed up like this."

He lifted her chin and looked into her eyes. "You are not messed up. You were hurt but you're strong."

"I'm a mess."

"You made a life for yourself when most people would have folded. You're the strongest person I've ever known. You've been through what no one should have to endure. He's not a threat anymore. It's been a god awful day but you'll get through this."

"How can you be sure?"

"I have faith in you. You saved my ass when I was near death. You are an amazing woman."

"This is what it's going to be, Bill. Me, nightmares, needing a service dog."

"Dani, sweetheart, we're not going to figure out our lives at three a.m. Let's try and get some rest and then we'll go see Rocket." He held her close and gave her a soft kiss. "Try and get some sleep."

She managed a small smile. "Our lives?"

He gave her a hug and closed his eyes. "Yeah. Our lives."

It was six a.m. and Dani tried to move quietly around the bathroom. Despite her eyes, puffy from crying, she managed a smile. Bill held her close all night and she got a couple of hours of uninterrupted sleep. She opened the bathroom door to see Bill wiping the sleep from his eyes.

“Good morning,” he smiled.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“I’m used to getting up early.” He pushed the sheet back and sat up. Dani looked him and grinned. “What?” he asked.

She walked over and sat at the edge of the bed. She rubbed her hand up his muscled, tattooed chest. “Damn, dude. You do make my heart race.” She looked at him and laughed. “How twisted am I? Despite the last twenty four hours, I look at you and I’m horny.”

He smiled and pulled her in for a deep kiss. “Then I’m just as twisted because I feel the same way.”

“Oh yeah,” she laughed.

“Oh yeah. All that dark hair and pale skin.” He nipped at her neck. “You’re look like you just stepped out of a Renaissance painting.” She pulled back and stared at him. “What?”

“What a nice thing to say.”

“Something you need to remember about me, Dani. I never say anything I don’t mean.” He gave her a quick kiss and pushed back the covers. “Now I need to hit the head and then I say we go see Rocket and get some breakfast.”

“Sounds good.”

He got out of the bed and turned, catching Dani admiring his ass. He gave her a quick kiss. “And then I say we work out our mutual horniness.”

Dani laughed. “Whatever you say, General.”

Dani stood outside the vet clinic and reached for Bill's hand. "Do you think he's okay?" she whispered.

"I think if there had been a problem they would have called us. Come on, let's go see him." Bill rang the bell and John came to the door, unlocked it and let them in.

"John, I didn't expect you to be here this early," said Dani.

"I figured you'd be here about now."

"How did he make out with the surgery?" asked Bill.

"He did great. He's still pretty sleepy but it's okay to go back to see him. He's going to need to take it easy for awhile, which will be a challenge considering his energy level. I'm going to want to keep him under observation today. You can come back for him about five." He led them back to a big cage where they saw Rocket in a large cage. There was a large bandage covering his hip and an IV in his paw. He lifted his head and banged his tail against the floor of the cage. John opened the cage door and Dani pushed her head inside, covering Rocket's muzzle with kisses.

"Hey baby, Mama's here and I'm okay. Thank you for being so brave," she whispered.

"Hey buddy," said Bill. "You were a good boy." Rocket reached up and licked his hand. "Let's let him get some rest."

"You'll call us if you need us. We won't be going far," said Dani.

"I promise," said John as he walked them out into the lobby. "Don't worry. He's where he needs to be right now."

Dani looked at Bill and smiled. "John are you familiar with tests that are needed to get a dog approved international travel, specifically Fiji?"

"Not specifically Fiji, but I have done some other travel documents for other clients. I'll have Gaby get on it when she comes in."

Dani gave John a hug. "Thank you."

Bill shook his hand. "Thanks, doctor."

Dani got in the passenger side and buckled herself in. Bill got into the driver's side and looked at her and smiled. "What?" she asked.

"Fiji?" he smiled.

"I thought it couldn't hurt to find out what's involved."

They sat down at their table at the Wayfair Diner, a old fashion silver trailer diner. A pretty young waitress named Kyra she was familiar with but rarely spoke to, came to their table carrying a pot of coffee. She flipped the mugs over and poured her a cup. "Hey Ma'am. How are you? So sorry about what happened." She looked at Bill. "General, coffee?"

"Yes, please."

"I'll give you a few minutes to decide," she said as she walked behind the counter and back into the kitchen.

"How does everyone know?" asked Dani.

"I guess the way she knew to call me General. You've lived here a while. You know how a small town talks."

"Do you think one of them told Richard where I was?"

"No, I don't. They all seem to be very protective of you."

"How is that all possible? I don't know most of these people."

"Well, they certainly know you." Bill opened the menu and looked it up and down. "The omelets look good."

Dani looked at him and smiled. "I recommend the steak and eggs."

"Excuse me?"

"Babe, as soon as I said steak I could hear your stomach growl. You don't have to stop eating meat because I don't."

Kyra came back at to the table with her pad ready. "Your usual?" she asked Dani.

"Yes, please and the General will have the steak and eggs."

"Sure thing," she smiled.

They laughed and ate and Bill told her a story about being getting into some mischief when he was a kid. Bill had a younger brother, Rich, and they were the bad boys of Marietta Georgia. At least as much as two eight year olds could be. Rich was now a musician and Dani was surprised she knew the band.

“Do you have any brothers and sisters?” he asked.

“No. Only child. My parents disowned me when I divorced Richard. They told me I was exaggerating.” She made air quotes with her fingers. “People like us don’t do that.”

“Jesus,” he whispered as he reached for her hand.

Dani froze when she saw Charlie come into the diner. He nodded to Kyra and then stood at their table. He indicated next to Bill.

“May I?” he asked. Bill nodded and Charlie sat down next to him. “We’ve finished up at your house. The coroner said the evidence bears out what you’ve told us. We found his car up a fire trail not far from your house. It looks like he got there just before the snow hit and he couldn’t get out.”

“He’d been watching us?” she gasped.

“For a little while it seems. There’s still the autopsy but the coroner said she doesn’t expect to find any surprises. Dani, as far as I’m concerned the case is closed.”

Dani closed her eyes and took a breath. “Thanks, Charlie.”

Charlie smiled. “Oh, I’m not doing you any favors here. If I thought either of you had done anything wrong I’d have hauled your ass to jail. But you didn’t. Van Husen had clear intent. He was an armed convicted felon. It was self defense. Hey, speaking of which how’s Rocket doing?” Charlie looked at Bill. “Bugger doesn’t care for me.”

“He’s going to be fine. We get to pick him up tonight.”

“That’s good news. Well, I need to get going. You’ll be able to get back into your house in a day or two. We have to wait for the autopsy and then I’d suggest get a clean team in to take care of the kitchen.”

“Do you have a recommendation?” asked Bill.

He pulled out his wallet and pulled out card. "This is a local company. They're good."

"Thanks, Sheriff."

He stood and nodded. "Don't go thinking I get a cut from them."

Bill smiled. "I wouldn't dream of it."

Dani watched as Charlie left. "I want to get out of here."

Bill nodded toward Kyra and left money on the table. He took Dani by the hand and led her out to the truck.

"It's really over," she whispered.

"Yes, it is."

They got back to the hotel and Bill hung up their coats. Dani sat on the edge of the bed and looked up at him. "It's going to all come out again."

Bill sat down next to her and put a comforting hand on her leg. "Probably."

"Carolyn Van Husen kills husband."

"You didn't kill him and he wasn't your husband any more."

"The news won't see it that way. Do you think I should change my name?"

Bill was startled. "What do you mean, again?"

"No, go back to my real name. Carolyn Weston. Richard really is gone. Should I go back to being Carolyn?"

He took her hand in his. "This is your decision but if you want my opinion, no. You aren't that person anymore. You're Dani, a strong, beautiful, talented woman. You've been Dani for almost ten years. I don't see a reason to go back. I think Dani is your real name now."

Dani smiled and pulled him into a deep kiss. She brushed his cheek with her hand. She pulled him over on top of her. "Show me what you want."

"Sweetheart, are you sure?" She answered by reaching her hand between them and stroking him through his jeans. "I'll take that as a yes." He smiled and pushed the sweatshirt over her head as he kicked off his own shoes. He stood long enough to strip out of his clothes. He enjoyed Dani's smile as each item hit the floor. He stripped off her clothes and sat back for a moment and admired her beautiful ivory skin against her dark hair.

"What are you grinning about?" she asked.

"I just had the thought of a very sexy Snow White."

Dani looked him up and down and smiled. "Well, you sure as hell are no dwarf."

Bill roared with laughter then took possession of her mouth.

Bill checked in with Esther before he and Dani left to pick up Rocket. “Hey Esther, I wanted to talk to you.”

“Sure thing, General.”

“I’m retired. You can call me Bill.”

She looked at him and smiled. “No, I don’t think so. What can I do for you?”

“You know Dani’s dog was shot by her ex-husband.”

“Yeah. How’s he doing?”

“Good. We’re actually going to pick him up. The problem is we can’t go back to Dani’s for a few days. Do you think the owners would let us keep him in our room. He’s very well trained.”

“Hell yeah he can stay.”

“Are you sure?”

“I own this place. So, yeah, I’m sure.”

Bill sighed. “Thank you. It will be a great relief to Dani and I.”

“He’s a support dog, isn’t he?”

He smiled. “Boy, there are no mysteries in this town. Yes, he is.”

“You keep his bathroom trips to the back lot and we have no problem.”

“Are you able to extend my reservation?”

“This isn’t exactly the busy season so we’re good.”

Bill extended his hand. “Thank you so much, for everything.” He went back to their room and shook Dani’s shoulder. “Hey sleepyhead, wake up.”

Dani rolled over and smiled. “Hey. What time is it?”

“Nearly five.”

She sat bolt upright. “What. How long have I been asleep?”

“At least four hours.”

“Four hours?” She looked stunned.

He sat down next to her on the bed and gave her a kiss. “Well, we were kind of busy.”

“No, you don’t understand. I didn’t wake up. No nightmares.”

“That’s great, sweetheart.”

“That’s just one time of course, but...well...it’s a good sign, don’t you think?”

“It’s a very good sign.” He gave her another quick kiss. “Somebody is waiting for us.”

“Rocket!” She pushed back the covers and started picking her underwear off the floor. “We need to go get him.”

“Calm down, baby. I’ve already called and checked on him. He’s fine and sleeping. I told them you managed to get some sleep and they said they are there until eight so to take our time.” She stopped and looked at him as he picked up her sweatshirt and handed it to her.

“You already checked on him?”

“Sure.” He bent over and picked up her jeans. “Oh, did you know Esther owns this place? She said Rocket could stay with us as long as we walked him in the back lot. She said it’s the slow season so we can stay as long as we need.” He looked at her and was surprised to see unshed tears. “What is it, sweetheart?”

She smiled. “Nothing. Let’s go get my boy.”

They stopped at the local market and got food and supplies for Rocket and picked up some takeout Chinese for dinner. They dropped everything off at the hotel and then drove to the vet's. Bill thought he hadn't seen Dani ever smile this bright.

"Come on, let's go. He's waiting." She jumped out of the car.

He took her hand and stopped her in her tracks. "Slow your roll there for a second."

"What? "He's waiting for me. He probably thinks I abandoned him."

"I highly doubt that but you need to remember what John said. You need to keep him calm for a few days. If you fly in there all fired up you'll get him fired up."

Dani stopped and smiled. "You're right." She gave him a sly look. "Don't you ever get tired of being right?"

"I wasn't right about renting that damn sedan."

"That's for sure," she laughed.

Bill noticed Dani was restraining herself when she wanted to bolt back to the cages and find her boy. The receptionist paged John and he met them in the lobby. "Hi. Your boy is doing fine. He has a cone on that he hates but he needs to leave it on until the stitches come out. Oh and Gaby got the information for the tests. We took most of the samples we need during surgery so it shouldn't take too long." Dani looked at Bill like she was ready to explode. "Doc, we need to get her back to him so why don't you give me the care instructions."

John smiled and handed him the papers. "Let me go get him." John came back a few minutes later with Rocket who leapt on Dani and covered her with kisses.

"Oh my baby, I missed you so much." Rocket noticed Bill was sitting there and gave him a kiss too.

"How's it going boy?" asked Bill as he rubbed his shoulder.

"I've got to get going but if you have any issues give me a call."

Dani stood and gave John a tight hug. "Thank you for everything."

"You're very welcome. You have a very brave boy there."

She smiled a maternal smile. "I know." They took him out of the exam room and Dani walked up to the counter and reached for her wallet.

"Oh, the bill's been paid," said Gaby

"What?"

Gaby smiled at Bill. "The General paid it over the phone when he called to check in on Rocket."

"Oh, did he?" Dani looked at him and her smile told him they were going to have an argument in the car.

Bill closed the door of Dani's truck and literally buckled himself for what was coming next. He waited until Dani had Rocket secured in the backseat and she was buckled in. "Okay, let me have it."

"First of all I don't know that I'm crazy about some sweet young thing making cow eyes at you and calling you, General."

"What?" This was not what he was expecting.

"But that's a discussion for another time. You can't just pay for everything. That surgery had to cost thousands. I can take care of myself, you know. I do very well as a writer."

This is what he was expecting. "I'm know you can. But Rocket saved my life too. I owe him. Also John did the surgery for cost. He said it would be good for his practice that he operated on a hero." He could see she wasn't buying what he was trying to sell. "But you're right, it was expensive. How about we split the cost?" He saw her shoulders sag and he knew he'd won.

"Fine. Let's go. I want to get Rocket settled in his new bed."

Bill started the car and pulled out of the lot. "Cow eyes?" he laughed.

Dani looked out at the blue green water and thought about the last few weeks. It had been a been a media feeding frenzy. Bill, Rocket and the snow had only deterred the reporters for so long. The only positive side effect of hitting the news was when her multiple pen names becoming public knowledge had shot her sales through the roof. It was an easy decision to spend the holidays in Fiji, especially after John rushed the tests. Bill was sitting on the deck chair and sipping a frozen drink. She took a breath and walked out on the deck of their cabin.

Bill smiled. "Hey there, cutie."

"How many of those have you had?"

"Just this one." He set down the drink and pulled her down in his lap. He gave her a kiss. "Where's the fur ball?"

"Fast asleep. You wore him out running on the beach." She slipped her arms around his neck. "There's something I want to talk to you about."

He sat a little straighter. "Okay."

"About us. You said everything about us would be have been on my terms and you've kept your word." She took a breath and tried to fight back tears.

"Sweetheart, what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I just write better than I speak and I want to say this right. All my life all I've ever wanted was to be someone's first thought. I am with you."

He gave her cheek a soft kiss. "Yes you are."

"You've shown me how to trust again." She started to get nervous and talk fast. "Everything about us has been on my terms but this going to have to be what both of us want. If you don't want this it's okay."

"Dani, sweetheart, what is it?"

"Major General William R. Wolfe, will you marry me?"

Bill's stunned looked terrified her until he broke into a wide smile. "Hell, yeah I'll marry you!" He gave her deep kiss.

When they finally came up for air Dani smiled and asked, "What's the R. stand for? If it's something weird like Robespierre the deal's off."

"It's Robert. My middle name is Robert."

Dani smiled. "Solid. A very good name." She held out her hand to shake. "Okay, General, you've got a deal."

Bill shook her hand and shook it. "Deal." He stood up, picked her up in his arms and carried her back into their cabin.

"Don't wake Rocket," said Dani.

He gave her a lopsided smile. "I wouldn't dream of it."