

HOME FRONT HEROINES

MORE THAN
MEETS
THE EYE

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

by Carrie Daws

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-947539-08-2

eISBN: 978-1-947539-07-5

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Cover design by Jarmal Wilcox

Page Layout by Hailey Radabaugh

IMMEASURABLE WORKS

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We're not giving up. How could we! Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us, on the inside, where God is making new life, not a day goes by without his unfolding grace. These hard times are small potatoes compared to the coming good times, the lavish celebration prepared for us. There's far more here than meets the eye. The things we see now are here today, gone tomorrow. But the things we can't see now will last forever.

—2 Corinthians 4:16–18, The Message

PROLOGUE

SEPTEMBER 2001, ANCHORAGE, ALASKA

“YOU TWO NEED TO SEE THIS.”

Lori Braxton’s brain struggled to process the blunt interruption to her sleep. She and her husband, Jonathan, a senior airman in the United States Air Force, had gone to bed late in a friend’s spare bedroom. Yesterday had been spent cleaning the house on Elmendorf Air Force Base that they’d called home for the last seventeen months. Everything they owned was either on a ship heading for their new duty station at Malmstrom Air Force Base, Montana, or packed tightly in a small flatbed trailer her husband had added plywood walls and a roof to just two weeks prior. They were ready to sign out of housing, sign off the base, and head to the lower forty-eight.

Her friend appeared at their door again, but not as quietly as before. “Come on. It’s important.”

This time the urgency slammed into Lori’s brain. “What time is it?” she mumbled, rubbing her eyes.

Her husband, Jonathan, shifted beside her. “It’s 6:13.”

Groaning, she stood up and shook out her pajama pants, unfolding the bottom cuff of one leg. Cautiously she stepped over four-year-old Kay sleeping peacefully on the floor through the disturbance. After covering two-year-old Charlie with his blanket, Lori ran her hands through her medium-length, hickory brown hair. Wondering what was

up, she walked across the small upstairs landing to her friend's bedroom. The light from the television assaulted her eyes, the sound just barely loud enough to hear.

Lori yawned. "What's so important at six o'clock in the morning?"

"Pastor called," her friend said without taking her eyes off the TV. "Friends in Virginia woke him with the news, and he knew we'd want to know."

Strange was an understatement for this behavior. The hour alone was enough to cause concern for her normally late-sleeping friend, but the lack of eye contact and the drone of news on the television peaked Lori's interest. She stepped farther into the room, turning so she could see the screen. A lone skyscraper dominated the landscape, dark smoke billowing out from its top, lighter gray smoke rising from the ground.

Lori knelt on the floor near the television. "What is that?"

"New York City," her friend replied. "Two planes flew into the World Trade Center."

Lori struggled to process what she was seeing. "World Trade Center? But aren't there two skyscrapers?"

Her friend barely moved her head from side to side. "Not any more."

Jonathan appeared in the doorway, his closely trimmed dark hair still disheveled from sleep. "What's going on?"

"The first tower fell just as I turned on the TV," her friend said.

Jonathan walked over to stand behind Lori. "You said planes did that? Like kamikazes?"

“Like United Airlines passenger planes,” came the quiet reply.

Lori shook her head in disbelief. The rest of America had likely been glued to the news reports for hours while they had peacefully slept, unaware of the chaos happening on the east coast. Two planes full of people going about their normal lives had been taken over and forced into two buildings full of people going about their normal lives. “God help us,” she whispered.

“There’s more,” their friend said.

Lori met her eyes, not sure she wanted to hear it. “A third plane hit the Pentagon. The Federal Aviation Administration has grounded all flights.”

Lori gasped. “All flights? Nationwide?”

Her friend nodded. “All fifty states. And someone on the news right before I woke you suggested they might close the borders until they get a better handle on this thing.”

Lori’s mind swirled. They were supposed to drive out in three days, crossing the border into Canada and then again into Montana. Would Canada let them in? And if they did, would the United States allow them re-entry? And if they were trapped here, what would they do with all their household goods in crates on a ship headed to Seattle?

Jonathan touched her shoulder. “Come on, get the kids up. We’ve got to get to the base. The Shirt knows we’re signing out of housing today, but he doesn’t know how to reach us here.”

Lori’s mind raced. The Shirt was charged with keeping up with all his troops and dealing with any personnel issues. Surely, he would be one of the first to know if their

orders to move had been canceled.

“I’ve got to check in,” Jonathan continued. “It’s probably too soon after the attacks, but I have to see if they know what’s going to happen with me.”

Lori took a deep breath before standing. Military installations around the world would be on high alert, but civilian casualties took security to a new level. Their whole world, the life Americans had known, had just changed forever.

CHAPTER ONE

OCTOBER 2001, GREAT FALLS, MONTANA

THIRTY-SIX DAYS. SIX THOUSAND two hundred miles. When they'd left Alaska on September fourteenth, no one in Jonathan's chain of command knew if they'd be able to cross into Canada or if they'd be able to cross back into the United States. Truthfully, no one knew much of anything other than al-Qaeda had successfully launched an attack on American soil, thousands had died, and PCS orders moving military families from one place to another had not been halted.

So, with orders and original birth certificates in hand, Jonathan and Lori had said goodbye to friends and headed north out of Anchorage on the Glenn Highway. Thankfully, crossing both borders had been simpler than they expected, and they'd visited family in Kentucky and Ohio before heading back west to sign in at Malmstrom Air Force Base near Great Falls, Montana.

“Boxes 154, 162, and 78.”

Lori flipped through the pages of inventory the packers in Alaska had handed her. “Got it,” she said and checked off the three box numbers per the mover's instructions. She watched him push the loaded dolly over to the corner of her new living room and add them to the pile already waiting for her.

A second man came through the front door hauling a

plastic toddler bed with a small pink and blue house for the headboard. “First room on the right,” she called out while scanning the list for the bed.

The first man was quickly through the door again with another load of boxes. “These are all labeled toys. Numbers 64, 67, 72, and...”

Lori waited as he checked the box over for a number. He finally shrugged and set it off to the side. “If you’ll open it up to see what’s in there, we’ll leave it for last to see what’s missing from the checklist.”

“Okay,” said Lori, checking the three numbers off. She grabbed the knife from her pocket. “The rest of those go in the basement.”

Lori crouched down and sliced open the tape just as the second mover walked through the door.

“Here are 197, 198, and 203. Looks like crib pieces.”

Lori checked the numbers off her list, calling out, “First room on the left.” She turned her attention back to the box just before Kay surprised her by jumping onto her back.

“Momma! He, that mover man guy, he brought us our toys!”

Lori shifted slightly, catching her balance before Kay knocked them both over on the floor. “Kay, honey, where’s your brother?”

“He’s waiting downstairs, Momma. I told him to wait. I told him I’d come ask you to open our toys for us.”

Lori gently grabbed Kay’s arm, pulling her to stand beside her so she could look in her daughter’s eyes. Lori’s biggest problem with this house was the painted wooden stairs that ended on a solid concrete floor. Visions of her children sprawled and bleeding haunted her. “Didn’t I tell

you that I needed you to stay with your brother? To keep him safe, away from the stairs and out of the men's way?"

Kay nodded before pushing her straight, dark blonde hair out of her eyes. "But our toys will help us stay safe. They will," she said, her eyes wide and earnest. "We'll keep them over in the corner with the blanket you put down for us."

"Here's 274 and 249."

Lori picked up her checklist and marked the two boxes. "Got them," she called out. Turning her attention back to Kay, she smiled at her young daughter. "I can't come downstairs right now and open the boxes for you, but I just found something that will help you and Charlie have some fun."

"You did?" Kay's expression was a mix of hope and excitement. She clasped her hands together under her chin. "What is it? What did you find?"

Lori opened the lid of the unmarked box wider so Kay could see. It held one of their prized sets of building blocks along with a few of their smaller stuffed animals. Kay whooped in excitement.

"Go on," Lori said. "Take the animals and tell your brother that I'll bring the blocks down as soon as I mark off this next load of boxes the movers are bringing in for us."

WHEN THEY'D FIRST SIGNED on base, choosing their house had been an easy decision, but now Lori had her doubts. Not that she thought a different decision would have been more realistic.

The housing officer had presented them with two choices for enlisted housing: an older unit which was slated for remodel within the next three years, or a newer unit that came with a waiting list. In other words, plan to most likely move within three years or find an apartment off base for nine-months and then definitely move. But, this being their fourth move in three years, it wasn't like moving was unfamiliar. Considering they still owned a house in Ohio that wouldn't sell, Jonathan and Lori were in agreement that they needed cheap housing fast. The older unit fit the bill, even if it wasn't the best house for their family.

"Now before I can hand you the keys," the lodging counselor had said when they'd signed to accept the house, "you have to sign this waiver. Tests confirm the house has lead paint, but as long as it doesn't chip and the kids don't eat it, you'll be fine."

Now, as Lori watched her kids playing around the boxes spread across the basement, she looked for painted surfaces around them. Kay was old enough that eating paint shouldn't be a problem, but with an active two-year-old and a third baby on the way, she'd asked for more specifics. Specifics the counselor didn't have to give her.

"I'm sorry," she'd said. "All the information I have is that it is in the basement, and it has been painted over, probably multiple times by now."

"But the basement is unfinished?" said Jonathan.

"Yes. The walls are concrete block that has been sealed, and it's a cement floor. The ceiling is open to the subfloor from the main level. Your washer and dryer hookups are down there, and I believe your water heater. But otherwise it's just open space most people use for storage."

Jonathan had looked at Lori for confirmation, and she appreciated that he didn't sign without her consent. She'd acquiesced, nodding her head and feeling trapped in a maze of bad choices between unknown dangers to her children and apartment rents they couldn't afford. *God, please protect my children*, she had prayed then and was praying again now as she stood among the giggling children and rows of boxes.

"Momma!" yelled Kay excitedly from behind her. "What's in this box?"

Lori sighed from exhaustion. Yesterday after the packers had finished unloading their crates, she'd managed to find sheets for their beds and a blanket for her and Jonathan to share. The kids had used the blankets they'd carried with them on the drive to Montana. Today she was hoping to get the kitchen in some semblance of order, but she had to get Kay and Charlie settled with a few more toys before they would let her focus elsewhere. The excitement of belongings they hadn't seen in two months was getting the better of all of them.

The support poles were the only possible source of lead paint in the basement, so surely she wasn't making a mistake allowing the kids to set up a play area down here. She nibbled on her lip as she considered her alternatives. With the possibility of Jonathan working shift work, she needed a place for the kids to play away from his sleeping area, but the small ranch house with bare wood floors echoed every sound. They couldn't afford to go buy multiple large area rugs to stifle the sound, so the basement seemed logical.

"Momma! This one!" yelled Kay again.

“Sorry, sweetie.” Lori walked over, pulling a knife from her pocket. “It says *toys*. How about we open it to see what treasure lies inside, huh?”

“Yes!” yelled Kay, jumping in her excitement. “Come on, Charlie. Momma’s gonna open a box for us.”

JONATHAN BRAXTON SCRIBBLED his signature at the bottom of the post deployment health assessment, trying not to think too much about his health concerns. He tried to convince himself that he was just stressed. His ever-increasing battle with insomnia weighed heavily on his mind, but he couldn’t figure out how it could be related to his time in Saudi, even though it had started after his first deployment there in the spring of 2000. He’d worked mostly nights both times he was assigned to Prince Sultan Air Base, but he’d returned stateside from the second trip over three months ago and had been on either day shift or leave. Switching his sleep schedule back to a normal routine shouldn’t be the problem.

Moving on to the next page of the forms the young airman had handed him, he filled in the basic information for his initial PRP assessment. A doctor would have to sign off on it, but the Personnel Reliability Program now controlled his future as much as the Department of Defense did. Following his instructions, he read through the printed official directive governing his career, or at least the next three years of it.

“In accordance with Presidential Policy Directive 35 and DoDD 3150.02, nuclear weapon systems require

special consideration because of their political and military importance, their destructive power, and the potential consequences of an accident or unauthorized act. Assured nuclear weapons safety, security, and control remain of paramount importance.”

Jonathan skimmed down a little, already convinced of his duty to the United States and the importance of protecting its nuclear program.

“Only certified personnel will be assigned to U.S. nuclear weapons. Certification is based on informed decisions concerning an individual’s reliability as determined through comprehensive screening and continuing evaluation. Disqualification or decertification of nuclear weapons personnel reliability assurance eligibility is neither a punitive measure nor the basis for disciplinary action. The failure of an individual to be qualified or certified does not necessarily reflect unfavorably on the individual’s suitability for assignment to other, non-nuclear duties.”

The page went on outlining the criteria that Jonathan had already met before accepting the assignment, this appointment today being near the end of the stringent checklist. Medical evaluation, personnel file review, and a personal interview were all that stood between him and his new duties protecting America’s nuclear assets.

Which circled him right back to his concerns with his post deployment assessment. Stress could remove his eligibility. As could insomnia and every medication used to treat sleeping problems. And what exactly was he, a member of the Security Forces assigned to a base whose entire mission centered on the security of nuclear missiles,

supposed to do if he couldn't be around those weapons?

No, he had to pass his assessments. When the doctor walked in, he would downplay his insomnia.

CHARLIE LAY AGAINST THE STARK white flat sheet covering the stiff bed at the base emergency clinic. He was perking up a little but was still too calm for Lori's comfort. This was not the best introduction to the base medical community, but Charlie's growing lethargy throughout the morning caused her great concern. He'd finished breathing in the liquid albuterol they'd added to his oxygen mask twenty-two minutes earlier, so she'd been watching for the medic who had just entered their little cubby.

"Let's take a look again, buddy," the airman said. He fastened the small instrument around Charlie's left index finger to measure his oxygen saturation level and waited patiently, watching the numbers flip between ninety-three and ninety-four. "Well, that's a bit better than the eighty-nine we saw when you first got here."

"Yes," said Lori, still trying to learn what these numbers meant for her son.

The medic listened to Charlie's chest for a minute. "Okay. Can you roll over for me, buddy? Onto your belly?"

Lori stood to help Charlie turn over, and the medic straightened out the shirt across his back. He cupped his hands slightly then began gently striking Charlie on his upper back, almost like he was using Charlie for a drum. "This can help break up the congestion inside his lungs," he explained, "and sometimes it will encourage the younger

ones like your son to start coughing. Coughing is good. It can break up the congestion and help open all the airways in the lungs.”

Lori nodded her head like she fully understood, but she didn't. How did congestion get into Charlie's lungs? And how did she keep it out?

“Mrs. Braxton?” The man in green scrubs who had just come around the curtain looked up from the chart in his hand. “I'm Doctor Warren. How's your son doing now?”

“He's better,” Lori offered, glancing at the medic who was still tapping on Charlie's back.

“His O2 is up to ninety-four,” the medic offered as Charlie coughed a couple of times.

“Good. Let's get him sitting up.”

Charlie coughed a few more times as the medic lifted him back into a sitting position on the bed.

“Those are good, productive coughs,” said Dr. Warren. “Exactly what we want to hear.” He applied his stethoscope to Charlie's chest for a moment before looking back at Lori. “You said he had pneumonia?”

Lori nodded. “Yes. About six months ago.”

“Was he hospitalized?”

“No. My husband was deployed, and I was home alone with both our children. I had to take him in to see the doctor every day, and she kept us on a strict medicine schedule for two weeks, but she allowed us to stay at home so I didn't have to find care for our daughter.”

“I see. And he made a full recovery?”

“Yes. We haven't had any trouble all summer.”

“Good.” Dr. Warren made some notes on the chart. “Well, you can expect that this winter will present some

challenges for you. Charlie's lungs are weak from the pneumonia, so he may have several episodes like this, especially with the cooler weather and all the colds that naturally circulate this time of year. I'm prescribing some albuterol for you to take home with you. Whenever you hear him wheezing—that rattled breathing like when you first came in—then just give him a dose at home and call his pediatrician. Do you have any questions for me?"

"So this is entirely related to his pneumonia? It couldn't be anything else?"

"Anything else? Like what?"

Lori rubbed Charlie's head. "Well, we had to sign a lead paint waiver when we signed into our house."

"Ah, yes. You're in the older housing inside the Second Street gate?"

Lori nodded, hoping the doctor would offer something to ease her mind.

"Your son's condition is definitely not related to lead poisoning. Lead doesn't affect the lungs or cause any breathing complications. For that you'll want to be watching for headaches, stomach cramps, irritability, trouble sleeping, those kinds of things."

"Okay." Lori was relieved but still overwhelmed as she thought through the doctor's words. Wheezing? Several episodes this winter? Albuterol to take home? She didn't really understand what the doctor expected of her as it related to Charlie's breathing, but she couldn't formulate a coherent thought to begin asking questions.

"No other questions, then?" Dr. Warren seemed to take her silence as understanding, and he looked back toward the medic. "Make sure the release orders have them follow

up with their doctor.”

“Yes, sir.” The medic turned back toward Charlie. “Well, young man, let’s get you out of here for tonight.”

Release orders. That sounded good. Maybe this wasn’t as bad as she’d first thought. Of course, tomorrow she’d have to figure out how to make an appointment with whoever the new doctor was going to be.

LORI HAD TROUBLE KEEPING her gaze off the clock. It was almost time for Jonathan to be home, and shortly after dinner, friends Reese and Joy Morgan would be arriving. She was anxious to see them, but even more excited to see Socks, the husky mix that Jonathan and Lori had adopted from the animal shelter on Charlie’s first birthday.

Joy was active duty with just two years left until retirement. They’d wanted to stay in Anchorage where they had all been stationed together, but the Air Force wouldn’t extend their time at Elmendorf AFB that long. So, they’d moved to Ellsworth AFB, South Dakota, a month before Jonathan and Lori had started for Montana. As they’d been able to get into housing quickly, they’d kept Socks while Jonathan processed into Malmstrom and got assigned housing.

Befriending Joy had been a considerable step outside of Lori’s comfort zone. She and Jonathan had needed money to help cover the mortgage of the house in Ohio, so she’d signed up to do home day care on base. At the time, Joy had been in her last weeks of pregnancy with their third child, so Lori approached her one Sunday morning at

church.

“I’m wondering if you’ll be looking for a day care for your baby.”

“Well,” said Joy, struggling to get up out of a folding chair placed neatly in rows in their Sunday school classroom, “Reese and I have talked about it some and were considering it. My mom lives with us, but she has some health issues and probably shouldn’t be lifting the baby.”

Lori tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “Well, I’m going through the classes required by the base to open a home day care. Would you consider letting me take care of—do you know if the baby is a boy or a girl?”

Joy’s eyes lit up. Lori was always amazed how the woman exuded happiness when she smiled. Peace too. Joy just had a calming presence that made it seem like stress just rolled off of her without leaving any residue.

“We’re having another girl,” said Joy. “I’ll have to talk to Reese, of course, but you keeping her during the day might work out really well.”

And it had. For the fourteen remaining months Reese and Joy had been stationed at Elmendorf, baby Emily had become a large part of Lori’s home and Charlie’s best friend. Now, they were eight hours apart on the map but still a huge part of each other’s lives.

Lori sighed deeply and turned from looking out the kitchen window. Neither watching the clock nor the driveway would bring her friends to her front door a moment sooner.

To try to pass the time, she went downstairs to survey where Joy and her family would sleep. Kay and Charlie

were off in the far corner with their toys, running around in bare feet as usual, oblivious to the cold concrete floor. Was that good for Charlie's breathing? Should she insist he wear socks? At least he was acting more normal today, and the kids had a rug underneath most of the play area.

The trip across the Rockies had been hard with two little ones, an active dog, and a fully-loaded trailer dragging down their gas mileage, but when the Finance Office had calculated what the Air Force owed Jonathan for completing a partial DITY—or Do-It-Yourself—move, it had been worth every penny. Between that pay and a good sale, they'd been able to buy a living room set and three small area rugs, all set up in time for their first guests' arrival. Not quite everything they needed for the house, but it was more than she'd hoped for. Why couldn't someone at least demand standard-sized windows for military housing so the curtains would fit from one installation to the next?

Lori straightened the blanket covering their only air mattress, already blown up and sitting on the rug by the couches for Reese and Joy. Clearly one or both of her kids had crawled across it once or twice. Joy's two older kids could each have a couch to sleep on, which only left little Emily, who would most likely want to sleep with Kay and Charlie.

A door slammed upstairs, and Lori heard heavy footsteps. "Daddy's home," she called to the kids. They rushed for the stairs, and she followed behind, watching for signs that one of them was tripping or falling. She didn't know if she'd ever shake her imaginations of blood-covered concrete that tensed her muscles every time her babies decided to go up or down the painted wood steps,

and for the hundredth time she considered moving the play area upstairs.

Charlie managed the final stair on his hands and knees before standing to rush to where Kay clung to Jonathan's leg. Jonathan scooped Charlie up in a bear hug, snuggling in to nibble on his neck. Lori leaned against the doorframe, soaking in the kids' giggles and Jonathan's smiles. How she loved these moments!

Jonathan shifted Charlie onto his hip before looking at his wife. "I got my assignment today."

He'd prepared her for this at the beginning of the week. Once he finished in processing and the final PRP evaluations, he'd find out where his primary duties would be. Lori hesitated, watching Jonathan's guarded look.

"Okay." Lori closed the basement door, sealing the chill from the October evening downstairs before turning back to him.

"I'll be working with the missile teams."

Lori breathed in slowly and released it just as slowly. Every assignment meant new terminology, but something in Jonathan's demeanor warned her that she wasn't going to like this. She'd been hoping for a law enforcement assignment, which would keep him on base and close. This sounded more ominous, like it wouldn't be family-friendly. "Missile teams. What does that mean?"

Jonathan tapped the top of Kay's head. "Honey, let go please." As she obeyed, Jonathan put Charlie down on the floor, and the kids ran off to the room they shared. "It's a ten-day rotation: five days in the field, five days home. The first three days home will be regular office hours, then we'll have one day at the commander's discretion and one

day off.”

Lori struggled to process the information. “What does five days in the field mean? Are you living out there?”

“Yeah. The closest sites are forty-five minutes away, but others are a couple of hours. Some are even farther, but the guys assigned to them hop on a helicopter for the trip out.”

“So five days gone, then five days home, and only one or two days of rest in between every eight or nine-day work week.”

“Right. I probably won’t know if I’m working days or nights in the field until we’re headed out, but all the hours on base will be day shift.”

“So they expect some of you to shift your sleep every five days?” This didn’t sound good. Jonathan was already having problems sleeping since his last deployment out of Alaska to Prince Sultan in Saudi. Actually, if she were completely honest, she’d noticed some problems after the first deployment, but she didn’t like to think about it. No sense borrowing trouble, as she’d heard one of the older ladies in her family say. They certainly didn’t need more trouble than they already had.

“Maybe. But not necessarily all the time. I could be assigned a lot of day shifts.”

Lori caught herself chewing on her lip. Concerns flooded her mind, but what could she do? She was just the lowly wife. A dependent. An inconvenient attachment to the man in uniform. Jonathan’s commander would not care about her thoughts unless Jonathan became a risk to himself or others. And she’d learned at Elmendorf that speaking up to anyone he worked with, anyone in his chain

of command, only brought trouble down on him.

She took a deep breath. “Okay. When is your first rotation?”

“I go out Tuesday.”

Tuesday. Reality slammed into her, and she steeled herself not to visibly react in a negative way. In four days he would be gone from the home more than he was in the home. Lori took a deep breath, doing her best to slowly release it. She could do this, or God wouldn't have moved them here. Right?

CHAPTER TWO

NOVEMBER 2001

LORI STRETCHED HER NECK and rotated her shoulders to relieve the tightness. Sitting in her new gliding rocking chair by the large windows that covered one full wall in her living room, she looked at the sparsely furnished room. The newly purchased glider was what she'd wanted ever since she'd found out that she was pregnant with Kay. The room also boasted a recliner given to them by Joy on her and Reese's way back West because it wouldn't fit in their new home on Ellsworth. Beyond the recliner and between two chairs sat a small table for holding coffee cups, a desk for the family computer, and a dining table with four chairs. Designed for a full living and dining room set, the room with its limited furniture was left with a lot of open space, and Lori wondered again if she'd made a mistake putting the couches downstairs with the television. Of course, this arrangement would give her a little quiet time to read while the kids played wildly downstairs.

Lori sighed and looked at the book in her lap. She knew reading would get her mind off what her family lacked, but even when she tried to read, her brain wouldn't focus on the words. She alternated between fretting about Jonathan's work schedule and listening for sounds of Joy's arrival. The kids were bathed and ready for bed in their one-piece, footed jammies, currently sitting together on Kay's bed

looking at books while waiting for Emily to come through the door, and Jonathan was downstairs relaxing in front of the television. This is what she wanted, right? A quiet sitting area for reading, away from the TV? Or would that merely create more distance between her and her husband? His trouble getting enough sleep at night was affecting other areas of their lives.

Finally, Lori heard a car door shut. She jumped up to look out the kitchen window and saw Joy's dark head ducking inside the side door of the silver minivan. "They're here!" she said, barely loud enough for her own ears to interpret.

Her heart raced like she hadn't seen them in months, even though they'd stopped in South Dakota when they'd traveled back from Ohio two weeks ago. She opened the basement door and yelled over the sound of the television in the basement, "Jonathan! They're here!"

The kids came running. Lori met them at the front door, which was already standing open. She picked up Charlie so he could see through the glass on the screen door. Kay stood on tiptoes, able to peek just over the edge of the aluminum frame where the glass started.

Reese walked up the driveway, his tall, lanky form making Emily look so little in his arms. He whispered in her ear and pointed toward the front door. She turned to see and squirmed to get free. Socks sniffed around the front yard until Emily started running. Her ears pricked up, and then she raced Emily to the door, pulling eight-year-old Zach, who was holding onto the leash, across the yard. Lori laughed, shaking her head at all the time she'd wasted in obedience-training classes with that dog. Socks was never

going to heel.

Lori opened the door and let the excitement burst through. Zach released Socks into the house, and she paced between investigating her new surroundings and sniffing each member of her family. Six-year-old Sarah began a monologue of how interminably long the trip lasted, her dark brown hair bouncing along with the recitation. Kay led Emily down the hall to her room, and Charlie vacillated between hugging Socks and checking out what Emily was doing. It was mildly controlled chaos, and Lori relaxed into it. People she loved filled her home. The stress of sleeping problems, work schedules, and pregnancy emotions faded to the background.

“Whew!” said Joy, slumping through the door and leaning against the entry wall. “That is a monotonous drive!” Her arms overflowed with coats and a couple of Walmart plastic bags.

Lori smiled, remembering their trip just a couple of weeks earlier.

“Yes, it is.” Jonathan closed the basement door behind him.

Lori took the coats from Joy and put them in a pile by the closet, opening the door to begin hanging them up.

Joy held up the bags. “Where do you want me to put these wet diapers?”

“Kitchen trash right over there is fine.” Lori hung up two of the coats before realizing she would need at least one more hanger.

“We couldn’t even find a good place to stop to change Emily,” said Reese. “I finally just pulled over on the side of the road.”

Jonathan nodded. “Yeah, once you leave Rapid City, there’s not much along the way except for Billings.”

“And that one Wendy’s, Dad,” Zach called out from his slouched position in the old recliner without looking up from his hand-held game device.

“Yeah,” said Reese, “about forty-five minutes outside of town here.”

“Lots of ranch land.” Joy went to work on the remaining coats while Lori grabbed two hangers from the bedroom that was slowly becoming the nursery.

Joy haphazardly wrapped a coat around the hanger, adjusting it slightly. “So are the missile sites on the ranches?”

The coat slid off, landing in a pile on the ground. Lori giggled and took the hanger. “Let me do that. This isn’t your strong suit.” Joy smiled her appreciation.

Jonathan leaned back against the wall separating the kitchen and dining area. “The government leases the land from the ranchers. I’ve heard a couple of horror stories about trying to run a war exercise and cows getting in the way.”

Reese laughed. “Adds some unpredictability to it.”

“Can we go see a missile site?” Zach asked.

“You drove by a couple on your way here,” said Jonathan. “There’s not much to them above ground. It’s basically just a chain link fence in the middle of a field.”

“Can we go in one?”

Zach looked hopefully at Jonathan. Joy ruffled the hair on top of his head. “Afraid not, son. Those would be classified areas, and last I checked, you don’t have clearance.”

“I don’t have clearance to see any of the cool stuff,” Zach muttered.

Reese chuckled. “Come on. You have clearance to see the inside of our van, and it has a lot of unclassified material that needs brought inside.”

“I’ll help,” said Jonathan.

Zach dragged his feet as he trudged behind the men. “Isn’t that exciting? Woo-hoo. I get authorized to handle the...” The rest of his monologue got cut off by the screen door slamming shut behind him.

Lori raised her eyebrows, looking at Joy. “Got some attitude going on there?”

Joy rolled her eyes. “Yeah. The last week has been interesting. But I’ve noticed it gets worse when he’s hungry, so do you mind if I make him a sandwich?”

“Of course not. How about snacks all around? I know it’s a little late for food, but I don’t expect the three little ones will be calming down anytime soon.”

THE SUN SHONE BRIGHTLY Saturday morning, and the temperature hovered around forty degrees. Lori and Joy corralled the kids into vehicles, Emily hopping in with Charlie while Kay chose to sit beside Sarah. The men got in the drivers’ seats, and Reese followed Jonathan on the short drive off base to the Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center on the banks of the Missouri River. They explored the exhibits, marveling at the life-sized model of men heaving a loaded canoe up the falls, giggling as the kids struggled together to pull a rope that was connected to the same

weight as the historical men had pulled on the original expedition in the early 1800s. Even with Lori and Joy adding their muscle, the rope barely budged.

Before heading back to Jonathan and Lori's for lunch, everyone bundled up in coats and walked a short distance on the River's Edge Trail. None of the falls were in sight from the Center, but the short bluffs were beautiful and the water current gentle. Lori couldn't wait to see the area come alive in the spring.

Joy and Lori sat down on a couple of boulders as Reese and Jonathan helped the kids look for good skipping rocks in a small gravel area at the end of the pathway.

"I can certainly tell why Montana is called Big Sky Country."

Lori followed Joy's line of sight up the Missouri. "Yeah. I can't quite decide why, but the sky just seems to overpower everything. At times it can be this incredible blue, almost like blue Jell-O. And even when it's full of clouds, there's just..." Lori faltered, not having the vocabulary for what her eyes had seen in their short time here. "It's just massive."

The wind blew a lock of Joy's hair into her face, and she swept it back. "I feel very small."

"You don't see this in Rapid City?"

"No, not like this." Joy took a deep breath. "Maybe since it borders on the badlands. Or maybe because you feel more like you're in a city. I don't know exactly. It's just...not like this."

"Yeah, even when we were driving through Kansas and Nebraska, the sky stretched out with the plains for as far as I could see. Or years ago, when we drove through west

Texas and everything just stretched before us.” Lori shook her head. “It just looks different here. I’ve never experienced anything quite like this anywhere else we’ve been.”

“It’s like a glimpse into how big God is.”

“Hmmm,” said Lori. “Now there’s a thought.”

“What? How big God is?”

Lori hesitated. Joy was the closest thing to a best friend she’d had in years, yet she couldn’t quite share the fears trapped inside her. Something held her back, wouldn’t quite let her be honest with Joy. Lori wasn’t sure she was being completely honest with herself. Too many things threatened the delicate hold she had on life. No, Lori wasn’t ready to answer Joy’s question.

“So how do you like your new squadron?”

Thankfully, Joy went along with the change in topic.

“It’s going well so far. I’ve been assigned to one of the supply warehouses for the B-1s, and I got a couple of young troops assigned to me.”

“So you’re babysitting while handing out airplane parts all day?”

Joy nodded as she shifted on the rock. “Pretty much. It’s not that much different from all the deployment gear I handled at Elmendorf.”

“Any chance of deployment for you?”

“Not really. They could always send me to keep track of parts overseas, but they’re more likely to let me stay put. We’ve got several young, single airmen anxious to get into the action in Afghanistan. As long as they keep volunteering, I can stay out of the rotations.”

“You’re so close to retirement now...” Joy had

deployed several times in her eighteen years with the Air Force and found herself in danger more than once. War wasn't the only threat to military members on foreign soils.

“Yeah. I'd go, of course, if they asked me to, but Emily is so young. I'd really like to stay put with Reese and the kids.”

Lori watched the five kids as they played with their dads, thinking of all her friend would miss if she deployed. When they'd first arrived at Malmstrom, they had driven past an outdoor air park with a small collection of old airplanes. On prominent display near the front was a Minuteman Missile. Jonathan's job here was to protect missiles just like that one—with his life if necessary. And she was grateful for it. Many friends were heading off to war while others, like Joy, were on an increased operations tempo to support those going. But manpower at nuke bases was kept steady, and the assignment meant Jonathan would be stateside.

As Lori listened to Joy talk, she was thankful for the assignment at a nuke base and the hunks of metal buried deep all over Montana. A five-and-five rotation to the field wasn't so bad, considering the alternatives.

REESE AND JOY RETURNED home, and Jonathan started rotating out into the field. He worked days his first rotation, twelve hour shifts from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Lori was hopeful that would be normal, but his second rotation was nights. They only had one car, so posting days meant getting the kids up at 4:15 in the morning to drop Jonathan

off at the squadron in time to get his gun and be ready for Guard Mount, the briefing they received before they went out to their assignments. These were the days Lori tried to get the kids to go back to bed when they got home, or at least to take naps after an early lunch.

The days passed quickly, and Lori paid attention to the news that affected so many they knew. NATO's Standing Naval Force in the Mediterranean was working to prevent movement of weapons of mass destruction, and the Northern Alliance fighters had just taken Kabul on November 14. With four more journalists ambushed and killed just a few days after that, many around the world were on high alert and sacrificing their upcoming Thanksgiving holiday for the greater good.

But not the Braxton family. It was business as usual on Malmstrom, and unlike last year, Jonathan would be home for Thanksgiving this year. Lori had sacrificed in other purchases for herself and the kids while Jonathan was out in the field so she could purchase a small turkey and a few potatoes for their holiday dinner in two days. It wasn't much, but it was better than the Christmas when she and the kids sat at home alone and ate cheap, frozen pizza.

Knowing Jonathan would be exhausted from working overnight until six this morning and then staying up to pack his bag and wait for his ride back to the base, Lori made sure their bedroom was neat and ready for him to nap if he wanted to do so. She debated whether or not to put the kids down for a short rest. When Jonathan had called his first night out, he'd said he was at Sierra. All she knew for sure was that meant he was located at one of the closer sites. Depending on when his relief left Guard Mount, he could

be home anywhere between noon and 3:00 pm. Which perfectly spanned Charlie's naptime. Kay would be fine as she'd been weaning off naps for several months, but Charlie did not handle interrupted sleep well. No, it was better to deal with a tired Charlie, possibly putting him to bed earlier than usual if necessary, than trying to deal with a short-tempered Charlie because he'd been yanked out of bed before he was ready. Lori opted to let them play.

The clock ticked on. She kept doing little things around the house, dusting the bookshelf and straightening up Kay's room. But when she finished mopping the kitchen and saw the clock read two o'clock, she was frustrated. Charlie could have gotten in a good nap. She looked at Socks lying on the floor in the living room. "How am I supposed to schedule anything if I never know when he's going to call?" The dog huffed at Lori and rolled onto her side.

Charlie walked in holding his cup up. Lori took it from him. "Do you want something to drink?"

He nodded. "Milk?"

She picked him up, and he snuggled against her, his head on her shoulder and his arms tucked between their bodies. She rubbed his back, savoring the rare moment of stillness in her boy.

"Kay, do you want a snack?"

She heard a commotion of toys falling to the ground before Kay burst out of her room and came running. "Yes!" The child slid the last few feet across the wood floor, throwing her arms around Lori to stop herself.

Lori laughed at her and reached down to push Kay's bangs out of her eyes. "Okay, let's find something to eat."

Charlie lifted his head and repeated his question.

“Milk?”

She walked into the kitchen just as the phone rang. Lori sat Charlie down so she could answer it and pour his milk at the same time.

“Hello?”

“Hey,” said Jonathan. He sounded exhausted. “We just got back to the base. I still need to turn my gun in, but I should be ready to go in about twenty minutes.”

“Okay. We’ll be there.”

She hung up the phone and looked at the kids. “We’ve got to pick a snack for the car so we can go get Daddy.”

Kay jumped up with her hands raised above her head. “Yay! Daddy!”

Charlie tried to mimic her, jumping up and down a couple times. “Daddy!” But his attention soon returned to his initial request. “Milk?”

Lori screwed the lid on his sippy cup and handed it to him. Bending down to his level, she said, “Yes, milk. And now shoes so we can go get Daddy.”

Kay was running for her shoes before Lori straightened, the snack totally forgotten. No matter how irritable Jonathan became due to his little bits of sleep, his baby girl loved him deeply. Lori wondered how long that would continue if Jonathan’s sleeping, and thereby his attitude, didn’t improve.

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