

## What's a Bullet between Brothers?

[This is a somewhat unconventional story that deals with nudity in an unexpected way. I suppose I wrote it to show that some of our perceptions can be misleading. Of course, love also plays a big part, as well as betrayals of it, but this story also underlines how, sometimes, adversity can clarify a person's view of faith in God ... and interpersonal relationships.]

### 1.

*New York City, Midtown East ...*

The bullet passed through his chest and Shawn fell to the floor of the convenience store. *I thought it would hurt a lot more. It felt like someone punched me.* As he looked up at the fluorescent fixture in the ceiling he felt a warm wetness spread under him. *Is that my blood?*

Just then, he heard a loud boom and the sound of something heavy hitting the floor. A second later, an Asian face hovered over him.

"You stay with me!" the man ordered, in heavily accented Korean. "You no die here!"

Shawn's eyes fluttered, making the Asian man's movement look like a stroboscopic Eadweard Muybridge filmstrip.

"You stay!" the man yelled, slapping Shawn on the cheek.

*Hey, stop doing that!*

His eyelids felt as heavy as manhole covers and his eyes slowly closed.

### 2.

*Kandahar Province, Afghanistan ...*

Scott "Conk" Conklin flew awake from a deep sleep into almost instant awareness. His heart pounding, he gripped his 9mm Beretta and sat on his cot in the dark, listening for the slightest sound. Other than the soft snoring of his platoon mates, nothing seemed amiss.

*So ... why did I wake up?*

All at once, a name popped into his head. Shawn! In that second, he noticed a sharp pain in his chest. *Am I having a heart attack? I'm too young for that, aren't I?*

He made a mental note to call home later that morning and inquire into the health of his identical twin.

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Though Scott got the nickname Conk for obvious reasons, his fellow soldiers also called him "Nature Boy." He had earned it due to his penchant for getting naked whenever the situation allowed it and, most of the time, when they occupied a relatively secure billet, he'd hang around his area naked, keeping his clothes near him at all times should the situation demand he "gear up." He'd sunbathe on the flat roof, lounge on his bunk to read and generally enjoy the freedom of being without clothing, especially the heavy, stifling gear he had to wear most of the time.

His unit had only two women, so his nakedness didn't usually cause a problem. On occasion, the guys got a kick out of bringing any female soldier in the area over, ostensibly to meet him. They gave up on it, however, when, contrary to the expected reaction, Scott calmly shook hands with them and invited them to sunbathe with him.

Occasionally, one took him up on it.

### 3.

*New York, Columbia Presbyterian Hospital ...*

Shawn rose slowly from the drug-induced haze of his recent existence and wondered how he could be walking toward himself. Gradually, he realized his twin, Scott stood next to his bed.

“Hi, bro,” Scott said, smiling.

“Hi, yourself,” he croaked. “How...?”

“The Army granted me a compassionate leave. It seems they’re soft on identical twins.”

“How’s this for ironic? You’re over in a war zone and I catch a bullet. Go figure.”

Scott looked at Shawn’s heavily bandaged chest. “How bad?”

“The morning after the surgery, the doc told me the punk used a really hot load in a .357 magnum. It passed right through my chest, between the ribs, can you believe it? It nicked the aorta and I lost a lot of blood, but the EMTs got there in time and I made it. As it turned out, a top rank heart surgeon happened to be in the hospital that day. Lucky me, huh?”

“You know I don’t believe in luck. Did they catch the guy?”

“Yeah, it was easy. I distracted the robber long enough for the Korean storeowner to get his shotgun. He wasted the guy. Then he made it his business to harass me into not dying.”

“Good. Save the city the cost of a trial. I’m also glad he harassed you.”

“Wow, cold. You’re pretty brutal for a bible-thumper.”

Scott sighed at his brother’s usual sarcasm. “Comes from being in a war zone, I guess. Not too many bleeding hearts over there. The bleeding tends to be more fatal.”

“You’ll forever be a mystery to me, Scott.”

“Forever’s a little extreme, don’t you think? Are you still with Wendy?”

“Yeah, living in sin as usual.”

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Wendy existed as an irritant to Scott. More than a simple personality clash, Wendy had been his sweetheart years ago, right out of high school. Both had come to Jesus at a Luis Palau Crusade in the city near their small suburb, had dated and sought a path to marriage. Things went okay for a year or so, but, unfortunately, Shawn lured her away.

The twin brothers had clashed repeatedly over what Shawn saw as Scott’s religious hysteria. Shawn, being the jock of the two, proved irresistible to Wendy. Before long, she threw Scott over and began dating Shawn. In weeks, she moved in with him. Years passed and they stayed together, but they never married.

Wendy’s rejection wounded Scott deeply. In a rash moment, he enlisted in the Army. Though his initial reason for enlisting had been rash, nonetheless, Scott found his center. He worked hard in basic and came out with top scores. His drill instructor encouraged him to put in for OCS, Officer Candidate School and he graduated with top scores and brand-new “butter bars,” the brass bars of a Second Lieutenant.

Over the next four years, he graduated jump school, earned his First Lieutenant’s silver bars and served his first tour of duty in Iraq. Not satisfied with that, he signed up for flight school and graduated first in his class, both academically and in flying ability. During his second tour of duty, again in Iraq, he earned his “railroad tracks,” the doubled, silver bars of Captain, flying Blackhawk helicopters. He “re-upped,” did a third tour, this time in Afghanistan and earned the gold insignia of a major.

In spite of his accomplishments and fast rise, or maybe because of them, the rift between him and his brother widened. Shawn may have been a jock in school, but he quit sports after college, where he earned a bachelors' degree in mathematics and then a masters' degree. He took an associate position at a college in the city and taught there while he worked on his PhD.

Time marched on.

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*New York, Columbia Presbyterian Hospital coffee shop ...*

"You have no idea how surprised I was when I saw you," Wendy said.

"Surely, you knew I was flying in from Afghanistan," Scott replied.

"Yeah, I knew, but ... seeing you standing there in your uniform ... well, you look good."

"So do you."

"Thanks for the flattery, but I'm twenty pounds overweight and I smoke and drink too much."

"You still teaching?"

"No, I'm in administration now. Vice principle."

Tired of talking around what troubled him, Scott decided to quit the small talk and get to the point. "When that robber shot Shawn, it woke me up."

"Still have that twin mojo going, huh?"

"I guess, but that wasn't the point I was trying to make. I checked the next morning and, when I got the news, it made me think of all the water that's gone under the bridge since ...." Scott met Wendy's gaze. "What happened to us, Wen?"

Wendy lowered her gaze to the tabletop. "*Us* stopped happening," she said in a small voice.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Still the direct one, I see."

"Why beat around the bush? I try to say what I mean and vice versa."

"I meant that you were so earnest. You had these big plans for us and ... well, I guess I felt hemmed in by it all."

"Was it the marriage proposal? I recall us arguing over that."

"I suppose that was part of it, but I was young and I wanted more out of life before I settled down. Shawn offered that."

"What did he offer? Living together, having a baby? How was that so different than what I offered with my proposal of marriage?"

"I don't know. He didn't seem so serious, so driven."

Scott sat back in his seat. "Wow, I had no idea. So, let me get this straight. You left me because I was too serious?"

"It's a bit simplistic, but true enough, I suppose."

"Tell me, Wen, are you happy now? Is your life with Shawn happier than ours would have been?"

The look Wendy gave him told Scott he had hit a nerve, but he didn't push. He rose from his seat. "Well, I've got to find a place to stay in the city, until I go see Mom and Dad."

"How long are you home?"

"I took a month of leave time."

"Why don't you stay at our place until you go see your parents?"

"I don't want to put you out."

“You’re not going to put us out. It’s going to be just me and the cats until Shawn comes home.”

“Okay then. Let me get my bag from Shawn’s room and say good night to him.”

#### 4.

*Shawn and Wendy’s apartment ...*

Wendy set him up in the guest room and Scott unpacked. He wanted to take a shower after the long plane flight and undressed. About to walk to the shower, he considered covering up, but decided not to change his usual routine and strolled to the bathroom naked. No incident occurred until he stood at the sink, shaving.

“Uh, forget to close the door?” Wendy asked.

“No,” he replied, not looking at her. He could sense her eyes playing up and down his body.

“Shawn looked like that, once upon a time.”

“We’re identical twins; what do you mean, ‘once upon a time?’”

“You’re cut; he isn’t.”

“It’s the military life. If you want to talk, there’s a seat here.”

“Do you mean the toilet?”

“Uh-huh.”

“But you’re naked.”

“Is that a problem?”

“You don’t mind a woman seeing everything you own?”

“No.”

Wendy walked into the bathroom and took her seat on the toilet lid. “Well, this is different.”

“Meaning...?”

“Are you still a practicing Christian?”

“I like that description. Practicing. Yeah, I suppose I’ll be practicing until the Lord takes me home. Then I’ll have graduated.”

“And how does that figure into your Christian values?”

“What, my being naked like this?”

“Don’t be deliberately obtuse.”

“Sorry, but I get so many different reactions to my being simply naked, I find I need to establish the playing field.”

“What do you mean? Are you naked in the Army?”

“Of course I am.”

“With women around?”

“It doesn’t happen often, but the guys sometimes like to bring women by to surprise me.”

“Do they ... surprise you, I mean?”

“No, but they sometimes are.”

“What did you mean, ‘establish the playing field?’”

“Well, people have different perceptions about being naked, mostly about its being sexual. The guys thought that until they got to know me. When they saw I wasn’t trying to be sexual, they accepted it and dubbed me ‘Nature Boy.’ Some of the bolder ones even join me in sunbathing sometimes.”

“What about the female soldiers?”

“Some join me.”

“And that’s all?”

“Yup. The guys find it hard to believe, but that’s how it is.”

“What other perceptions do people have about being naked?”

“Let me ask you a question. What did you think when you saw me naked just now?”

“I wanted to know why.”

“Did you give me the once-over?”

Wendy blushed. “Yeah, I did. I’ve never seen you naked before. Even though you’re twins, your body looks different than Shawn’s.”

“Did you have any sexual thoughts?”

“Well, I was interested, but I didn’t want to jump your bones, if that’s what you mean.”

“So, can I say that curiosity was one of your perceptions?”

“I suppose so.”

“Okay then. There’s nothing wrong with curiosity. Some other perceptions are shame, pity, shock, revulsion, but most come from the fact seeing people naked, aside from some so-called primitive cultures, isn’t the norm in our culture.”

“When did you get to be like this? You were so straight-laced back when we dated.”

“It was because of a couple of things, I guess. I did a training tour in Germany and they’re a lot more casual about nudity. I visited some of their clothing-optional beaches and baths, where men and women used them together. It was all quite routine, in spite of the lack of clothing. I suppose that’s what caused me to rethink my personal stance.”

“So you’re a nudist now?”

“As a matter of fact, I’m not. I just realized that nakedness, in and of itself, isn’t wrong. It’s how we deal with it. So, I get naked when and where I can.”

“I wouldn’t think there are many places you can in the Middle East.”

“You’re right there, but I reserve my nakedness to when I’m at camp.”

“Doesn’t the Army have a problem with it?”

“So far, it hasn’t come up and I’m discrete about it. Aside from the surprise visits by female troops, it’s a non-event, just like now.”

“Huh?”

“Well, you’ve been sitting right next to naked me and we’ve been having a casual discussion about a number of things. My nakedness hasn’t been an issue at all.”

“I suppose you’ll expect me to go naked too after my shower.”

“I don’t expect anything, but it would be okay if you did. Do you mind if I’m bare while I’m here?”

“What, all the time?”

“I put a towel down before I sit anywhere, but if it’s a problem ....”

Wendy smiled. “No, go ahead. I think I’ll be able to control myself.”

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Wendy surprised Scott by walking into his room naked after her shower to say goodnight. Scott had stretched out on the bed to read.

“Hey, good for you!” he said, smiling.

“If you make any cracks about my weight, I’ll dress and I’ll expect you to dress.”

“What’s wrong with your weight?”

“I’m not exactly the girl I was when we were together.”

“And ... your point?”

“Never mind. You win.”

“What did I win?”

“Goodnight, smart Alec.”

“Goodnight, Wen. It’s been nice seeing you again and talking with you. I’m looking forward to my visit, despite the circumstances that brought me here.”

“Same here. ‘Night.”

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The next morning, when Scott walked into the kitchen, Wendy stood at the stove, making eggs for breakfast, wearing nothing more than an apron.

“Well, this sure is a homey sight, first thing in the morning,” he said, putting down his towel and sitting.

“If you make any cracks about the size of my butt, you’ll be looking for a hotel.”

“Cracks and butts, not the best choice of words.” Scott quipped.

“Ha, ha. I figured if you’re going to be parading around here in the buff, why shouldn’t I be a little daring? After all, the mystery is gone after last night.” She poured a mug of coffee and brought it to him.

“Thank you. you make a charming barista.”

“Think I should open one of those franchises?”

“With you behind the counter, it’d be a hit.”

“Flatterer.”

“Hey, it’s only flattery if it’s not true.”

“Wow, you’re really working the compliments.”

“Just telling it like it is.”

Wendy looked into Scott’s eyes when she brought the food to the table. “Breakfast is ready, sir.”

“Thanks.”

“Excuse me for a minute,” she said and left the room. She returned with a towel, spread it on a chair, took off her apron and sat. “There ... happy?”

“You make It sound as if I twisted your arm.”

“To tell you the truth, I *wanted* to do this.”

“Oh? Why?”

Wendy stared at her hands. “You’ll think I’m being silly.”

“Try me.”

“I wanted you to see all of me.”

“That’s not silly. I think it’s *you*, being very honest.”

They ate for a while in silence, until Wendy spoke. “You have me totally confused.”

“How so?”

“Well, you ... when we ...”

“Broke up?”

Wendy nodded. “Shawn was everything you weren’t, funny, easygoing, adventurous. You were so ... *serious*.” She looked up and met Scott’s gaze with her own. “You’re still serious, but, now, it seems you and Shawn have reversed roles.”

“I wasn’t aware of any reversal.”

“Well, you seem more relaxed; funnier somehow, which is a surprise to me. I mean, you live in a war zone. Why hasn’t it hardened you, or made you cynical?”

“Are you saying that Shawn’s no longer a fun guy?”

Wendy nodded. "Now, *he's* the serious one."

"Has it affected your relationship?"

She nodded again. "But not as much as .... Last year, he had an affair with a coed."

"Oh, my gosh. I'm *so* sorry, Wen."

"It was over and done with, actually, even before he ... he told me he broke it off because he loved me, but it's put a wedge between us. Our sex life is a joke."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I love Shawn, but what he did was a betrayal. He broke trust with you and that's really hard to forgive. I can understand why you would find it hard to be with him sexually again. He has no one but himself to blame. Forgive me for asking, but *you* haven't had any affairs, have you?"

"No, no!" Wendy cried, but the guilty look Scott caught said otherwise.

"What aren't you telling me, Wen?"

She sighed heavily. "I haven't had an affair, but I've been flirting heavily with one of the lawyers at my firm."

"Are you still a paralegal?"

She nodded. "I went to law school, but, after my first semester and the idealistic fog cleared, I realized it wasn't what I wanted. I felt more comfortable in my support role. I left personal injury law for corporate and real estate law. I don't have to wrestle with my conscience as much."

"What are your feelings for this guy?"

Wendy looked up and a look of panic swept across her face. "I'm not sure. He's a really nice guy, in his thirties, but single and a real gentleman. To tell you the truth, I don't see it going anywhere, but I'm enjoying the thrill of it."

"But, sooner or later, he's going to want more."

"I know, but ... you're right. I should just make it a clean break and work on getting things right with Shawn."

"Why didn't you have kids?"

"Wow, you're really raking me over the coals this morning. This naked thing is honest and open all right."

"I didn't mean to make you feel badly. I'll just shut up."

"No, you deserve answers from me."

"Why do I deserve them?"

"Because you and I had something once and I dumped you on your head."

"It's water under the bridge."

"No, it isn't, but, to answer your question, we did want kids at first, but I had a miscarriage and we just put off trying again. The years went by and ... we're probably too old to be thinking of that now."

"You're not too old at all."

"Tell me, Scott, why isn't there a 'Mrs. Major' in your life?"

"It takes a certain kind of woman to be a military wife and I haven't met her yet. Besides, as long as I keep running around war zones, I suppose it's better that I don't have someone at home to be a widow with kids."

Scott's somber comment caused them to fall into silence and they finished breakfast with no further conversation.

*Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, the next day ...*

“So, did you and Wendy get to catch up?” Shawn asked Scott.

“Yeah, we did.”

“Whoa, so serious.”

“What were you thinking, bro; having an affair with a student?”

Three expressions warred for precedence on Shawn’s face—anger, shame and resignation—before he answered. “Wow, I guess you *did* catch up. Yeah, it was a stupid move on my part, but I told her and we’re past it.”

“Is that what you think?”

Shawn gave his brother an appraising look. “Did she ask you to stay at our place?”

“Yes.”

“And were you doing your naked thing?”

“Yes.”

“Did she get naked too?”

“Later on, yes.”

“Oh, great. So I guess she told all.”

“I didn’t press; she just came out with it. Shawn, she’s hurting and is down on herself. She thinks she somehow caused the affair.”

“Did she tell you that?”

“She didn’t have to; her entire *attitude* told me.”

“Do they teach psychiatry in the Army, along with marksmanship?”

“That’s a cheap shot and you know it.”

“Sorry. What did she think of your studly bod?”

“She thinks you and I have changed places.”

“Yeah, I was once a jock; now I’m a big-bottomed desk jockey.”

“I don’t think it matters to Wendy.”

“I suppose my fling with that student was because she made me feel virile again. Wendy and I had been drifting apart.”

“I may be wrong, but I think it has more to do with the conflict she feels than any sexual incompatibility between you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Shawn, I’m going to be blunt with you.”

“Have mercy; I’m wounded here, but go on.”

“When we broke up, Wendy felt I was too serious and saw you as the exciting, fun guy. Now, the fun’s gone and you have little in common.”

“Did she tell you that?”

“Not in those words, but I got the message.”

“So ... what’s the prescription, Doc?”

“Seriously, Shawn, Wendy and I once shared a faith in Christ and it united us.”

“What happened? Did she lose it?”

“No, but she’s denied it for far too many years.”

“Then all she has to do is walk the sawdust aisle, repent and everything’s okey-dokey?”

“Well, it may solve her problems, but not with your relationship.”

“Oh, here we go again; another sermon.”

“Relax, I’ve given up talking to you; I just pray that God will open your eyes.”

“Don’t do me any favors.”

“It’s not a favor, bro. I love you and it’s my duty as your brother. Tell me something; when that punk shot you, did you wonder what was next for you?”

“No, not really. Actually, I was surprised that it didn’t hurt more.”

“It was shock. I’ve seen it in combat. In the movies, guys start screaming at the top of their lungs. Most of the time, they’re just stunned—at least the seriously injured ones. The ones with the flesh wounds do all the yodeling.”

“You’ve never told me, but were you ever wounded?”

“Once, but it was nothing, really.”

“Oh? Do tell, John, ‘it was only a flesh wound’ Wayne.”

“I was flying a mission to pick up some wounded, when, just as I rotated out of a hover to take off, a bullet came out of nowhere, up through the chin-bubble and grazed my thigh. It bled like a mother and felt worse. If I didn’t have a chopper to control, I’d have joined the choir and hit high Cs with the best of them.”

“Wow, so I’m the one who has bragging rights.”

“Yes, you do. You’re taking this well, like a real trouper. I’m proud of you.”

“Really?”

Scott reached out and laid his hand on his brother’s. “Yeah, really.”

As if on cue, their parents entered the room.

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Sam and Sonora Conklin, now in their late fifties, entered Shawn’s hospital room. Sam stood six-feet tall, still as lean as his football-playing days in high school. Sonora, two years his junior, had put on some weight, but still maintained a voluptuous figure. The couple looked the part of a prom king and queen—only a little grayer—a part they once played for real many years prior. For the first time in the school’s history, a sophomore, Sonora, at Sam’s insistence—since they had been dating since her freshman year—became his “queen.”

The two boys had been Sonora’s first and only children; complications with the pregnancy had led to her infertility thereafter. The boys took after her in the area of facial features and after Sam in physique—an eminently good combination—both possessing sandy hair and, clear, green eyes. Sonora’s somewhat sharp, pinched features worked far better on the boys than on her, but she had nothing to be ashamed of in the looks department. Sam had a squared-off, friendly face—a classic “square head,” despite the Irish moniker—the result of his mostly Teutonic ancestry.

Sonora, as soon as she spotted Shawn, rushed over to give him a gentle hug. “How are you feeling, sweetheart?”

“I’m doing well, thanks,” Shawn replied

Sam went over to hug his wounded son, while Sonora hugged Scott. “It’s good to see you too, Scott. I’m usually worried sick over where you are these days.

Sam shook his hand and Scott could feel the tightness of his grip, his usual test. He easily matched it but stopped short of crushing his father’s hand, something he could easily do, but didn’t out of respect.

“I see you’re as fit as ever, son. The Army seems to be agreeing with you.”

“It’s why I stayed in, Dad.”

“Still flying those whirlybirds?”

“I fly a Super Six Blackhawk, Dad; calling them whirlybirds makes them sound like toys. They’re war machines.”

“Sorry. I just don’t have a lot of faith in those rotary wing contraptions. I prefer my Cessna.” Sam referred to a Cessna Citation II, a small, corporate jet he owned and loved to fly.

“Leave it to you to make your jet sound like a four-seater puddle jumper.”

“You say *po-tah-to*—”

“And you say *po-tay-to*; I know. Anyway, one of our Blackhawks cost more than your jet.”

“A typical example of Pentagon over-spending.”

“No, Dad; it has more instrumentation than your Citation; and more weapons.”

“Speaking of, I thought you were going to fly the Apache. Now, there’s a chopper I can admire.”

“I qualified on them, but they’re strictly hard-core combat machines. I prefer to not always destroy things.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that your Christian conscience is still intact, unlike your atheist brother.”

“I heard that,” Shawn said. “That’s a fine way to speak of your grievously wounded son.”

“Why mince words, Shawn? I thank God you’re going to be okay, but you know how I feel about your lack of faith.”

Scott could see the look of sad disappointment cross Shawn’s features.

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Since she and Shawn lived in a large house, right off campus, when they left the hospital, Wendy insisted that Sam and Sonora stay in a second guest room, even though they had booked a hotel.

“Nonsense,” Wendy insisted. “There’s no way our parents are going to a hotel while we have more than enough room.”

Things went along smoothly until Scott sauntered out of his room without bothering to dress.

“Good grief, son!” Sam exclaimed. “Are you still doing that?”

“I just feel more comfortable this way. Do you want me to dress?”

“I just don’t think it’s right for your mother to see you like that.”

“Why? You and I have the same body parts and I’m certain she’s familiar with yours.”

“Yes, but—”

“Don’t dress on account of me,” Sonora cut in. “I’ve seen you and your brother naked from the time you were born and we were never shy about nudity in our home.”

“Thanks, Mom. I remember those fun, family vacations when we would all skinny-dip. When the guys at school would go all Freudian about seeing their parents naked, I wondered why they thought it odd. It seemed perfectly natural to me.”

“I’m surprised the Army tolerates it,” Sam replied.

“Well, I don’t make an issue of it, so they leave me alone.”

“Aren’t there women in the units now?”

“Yeah, but comparatively few and they billet together, not with the men.”

“Do any of them see you?”

“Some do, when the guys bring one in for shock value, but, being in the Army, they usually take it in stride.”

“What if they report you?”

“So far, none have, but, even if they do, what would they report? I’m not doing anything sexual around or *to* them.”

“Well, it just seems to me to be conduct unbecoming an officer in the—”

The doorbell rang, interrupting Sam’s lecture.

“Oh, that must be Lila,” Sonora said.

“Lila?” Scott asked.

“She’s been living with us these days. You’d best get dressed.”

Scott rose from his seat, but Sam stopped him. “No, I’d like to see Lila’s reaction to his nudity.”

Scott shrugged, sat down and Wendy answered the door. When she returned, a tiny young woman who looked like a classic hippie, followed carrying a floral-patterned duffel. Scott turned in his seat to look at her. Lila wore a yellow, spaghetti-strap tank top, which did little to hide the prominent nipples on her smallish breasts, since she wore no bra. She wore a bright pink, cotton broom skirt that nearly reached the floor, ending just above her bare feet. From the look of them, she went barefoot often. She had a pretty, round face, framed by titian hair, done in dreadlocks. Vivid blue eyes the color of the Pacific took in the room.

“Lila, the studly young nudist over there is my brother-in-law, Scott.” Wendy said. “Scott, Lila.”

Scott got up and offered his hand. He towered over Lila by a foot. “Pleased to meet you.”

Lila’s eyes went from Scott’s face, down his body and back to his face. “The pleasure’s mine,” she said with a big smile. “It’s not every day I get to meet a hunky guy with all his assets on display. I must admit, I like the view.”

“Lila, behave yourself,” Sonora chided. “Scott’s a good Christian man.”

Lila looked over at her. “Oh? Have I missed something in not going to church lately?”

Scott noticed she hadn’t released his hand, which he didn’t mind at all. “My parents find my penchant for relaxing in the altogether embarrassing for them.”

“I’m more impressed than embarrassed,” Lisa said, looking down again.

“She’s incorrigible,” Sonora said to no one in particular.

“It’s not a problem, Mom. I’m used to it.”

“Oh? You meet all your lady friends this way?” Lisa asked, still not releasing Scott’s hand.

“Not unless someone tries to shock me,” Scott replied, looking at his father, who sheepishly looked at the floor.

“Well, if they do, you seem not to mind. I give you points for self-control.”

“Come, Lila, let’s get you set up in your rooms,” Wendy offered in an attempt to deflect the conversation about Scott.

“Well, gotta go, Scott,” Lila said. “Let’s get together really soon.” Then, and only then, did she release Scott’s hand.

Wendy led Lila out of the room and Scott turned to his parents. “How come I never knew we had a cousin, growing up?”

“She’s my brother-in-law’s daughter by a mistress,” Sonora explained, “A very distant relative to be sure.”

“She wasn’t raised by Dirk and Elsa,” Sam explained further. “Lila’s the product of one of his dalliances. It seems Dirk had a mistress he lived with during his trips to Hong Kong. She was Amerasian and, improbably, a redhead. When Lila came along, he supported them. When his work there ended, he arranged to bring them here. Incredibly, Elsa knew nothing about it. Long story short, Lila’s mother died recently and she tracked our family down. She showed Elsa her

birth certificate and immigration papers, but, even though she was convinced, Elsa would have nothing to do with her. So, we took her in. Since that untimely revelation, she and he are still sorting through the ruins of what they thought was a strong marriage.”

Scott shook his head. “Wow, that’s quite a story, but Lila’s an adult. Why take her in like a lost waif?”

“When her mother died and Elsa found out about the arrangement, she refused any support. With her mother gone, Lila has no money ... it ended with her mother’s death and she used what little she had to come here. She came by ship, couldn’t afford a plane ticket.”

“She doesn’t have a job?”

“She works as a waitress, when she works. Currently, she’s between jobs.”

Lila entered the room at that moment and, for the first time, Scott saw the slight cast to her eyes and recalled the hint of an Asian accent in her speech earlier. Their eyes met and she gave him a lascivious smile, so he broke it off.

“Well, I’ll give you points for compassion,” he whispered, sighing.

“Why the sigh, studly?” Lila asked. “Hope it’s not because of me.”

She had changed into hot pink micro shorts under the same tank top, each article so tight they left no doubt as to her assets.

“Must you parade around like that here?” Sonora asked.

“Wait a sec. Scott here is wearing zero and I get the heat?”

“You’re only doing that to get his attention.”

“Would you prefer I was naked, too?” she asked, reaching to pull off her top, revealing small-but-proud breasts and large nipples. “This is legal in New York, you know.”

“Young lady,” Sam said, “please be on your best behavior. We’re guests in Wendy and Shawn’s home.”

Lila flapped her arms and stormed out of the room. She didn’t return.

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The conversation went on long into the evening, as the family caught up on things. They ordered takeout and, before long, the hour crept past midnight. Lila finally left her room, dressed in a voluminous Mumu and remained quiet all evening, occasionally smiling Scott’s way.

Things broke up shortly after midnight and, just before going to bed, Scott took a shower. Halfway through, he felt two arms go around him. He turned to see a naked Lila looking up at him, a big smile on her face.

“I thought you could use some help with washing your back,” she announced.

“Well, you thought wrong. Please let me finish my shower ... *alone*.”

“Don’t be such a fuddy-duddy. We’re two, consenting adults here.”

“Wrong again. I’m not consenting to anything.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Yup. Leave. *Now*.”

Looking chagrined, Lila left the shower. “Is it okay if we talk while you’re showering?”

“Yes, as long as you do it from that side of the shower door.”

For a minute, silenced reigned. Lila broke it first. “I’m sorry if I offended you.”

“Apology accepted.”

He finished the shower, without further conversation, rolled back the door and took the towel Lila proffered. She had made no attempt to cover up.

You’re the first guy who’s turned down this package deal,” she said, not looking up to meet his gaze with her own.

Scott looked at her. She had the tiny, but eminently feminine figure of Asian women. He could see how her pleasingly proportioned figure, steel-gray irises and blonde tresses would rev any man's motor.

"I didn't turn you down for any lack of attractiveness on your part, at least physically; *that's* not what I find unattractive about you."

"There's something you find unattractive about me? What?"

"Your attitude."

"My attitude? What's wrong with that?"

"Well, it might work in a bar, with a guy who's looking for a pickup, but ... well, you do the math."

"Wow, being military and a guy not shy about nudity, I didn't figure you for a prude."

Scott smiled at her. "Well, I suppose, because I didn't tumble to your little act, you'd think that way, but I'm not a prude, I'm a Christian who takes his faith seriously."

"I've bedded my share of Christians, but none like you."

"And now you know why. If you've only met Christians sexually, then they were poor ambassadors of their faith."

"What does sex have to do with their faith?"

"I can't speak for others, but I happen to believe that sex should be reserved for marriage, so that any children will have parents who care for them, not want to abandon or abort them because they're inconvenient, or unexpected."

"My mother didn't abort me."

"Good for her, but she destroyed the marriage covenant Uncle Dirk had with Aunt Elsa. Now, they're dealing with the fallout."

"Don't go putting it all on her. He had something to do with it."

"I'm not. He acted like a real jerk and betrayed his wife, who expected him to honor his vows."

"Wow, you sound like one of those TV preachers."

Scott smiled. "Don't lump me in with TV evangelists. I don't have the poufy hair."

"What about you?"

"What *about* me?"

"You're military. Surely you've had your share of women over the years."

Scott blushed as he answered. "No, I'm still a virgin."

Lila chuckled. "Really? What, doesn't that impressive equipment of yours work, or are you gay?"

"Get out!" Scott ordered. "And leave me alone."

"Look, I'm sorr—"

"Leave. *Now!*"

Lila skulked out of the bathroom, her pert little bottom the last thing he saw. Scott instantly regretted his outburst and sighed.

"Way to go, 'Nature Boy,'" he said to the room.

## 6.

Scott lay, facing the wall, regretting his harsh words to Lila, but her snide, suggestive comments got his dander up. For too many years, he had to endure the taunts of his military peers over his virginity. They took it as a lack of manhood, but his actions under fire soon

disabused that notion. Finally, he had gained enough respect to bring an end to the taunts, but he had another battle defending his premise that nudity, even among the sexes, didn't have to be sexual all the time. Then, a mere snip of a woman made him confront all his beliefs anew and it made him angry. She obviously had no compunctions about inviting a man, *any* man, into her bed and, though he'd be loath to tell her, he felt sad for her, such a waste of a good woman.

He felt the bed move and turned to see Lila slipping beneath the sheet, clothed this time in a long tee shirt.

"What do you think you're doing? Can't you take a hint?"

"Please let me stay. I'm tired of sleeping alone."

Scott rolled over. "Look, I meant what I said. I don't want you to be sashaying out of this room, leaving the thought in everyone's mind that I succumbed to your charms. Now, *go*."

To his surprise, Lila burst into tears. For a few seconds, he thought she might be turning on the waterworks to get her way, but, when he put his hand on her shoulder, she pulled away, turned her back to him and began to sob. Scott had no idea how to react to this, so he just let her cry. After a few minutes, she settled down and lay quietly. When he investigated, he realized she had fallen asleep. He gently slipped out of bed, covered her with the sheet, collected his pillow and the blanket folded at the foot of the bed and went out to sleep on the sofa.

When Scott opened his eyes early the next morning, he saw Lila sitting in the armchair opposite him, watching him with an intensity that made him feel uneasy.

"How long have you been sitting there?" he asked, as he sat up and yawned.

"For about an hour."

"An *hour*? Why, for heaven's sake?"

"I couldn't sleep anymore."

"So you came out here to watch me sleep?"

"You're a light sleeper; you never seem to settle in."

"It probably comes from sleeping in a war zone. You seldom have the luxury of sacking in."

"You must think I'm a slut."

"No, I don't. I think you made some wrong choices, but I wouldn't call you a slut."

"But I came onto you after only just meeting you. How is that not being a slut?"

"Since you bring it up, why did you come onto me and why the harsh assessment of yourself?"

"I suppose because you were a challenge. It never failed to work for me before, though I'm not usually that bold. When you got all stern with me, ordered me out, it made me see myself in a different light. All of a sudden, I felt cheap."

"Is that why you started crying?"

"No, not only that. I realized that, for all my seductive ways, I'm just a scared little girl who lost the only stability she ever had in life ... her mother. I'm all alone now."

"But Mom and Dad took you in."

"They're doing it out of a sense of duty. I can tell I'm a burden to them."

"Don't sell their Christian charity short. They may be stern, but they're loving people. They'll be there for you until you get on your feet."

"Scott, may I ask you a personal question?"

"Okay, go ahead."

"Do you think you could ever be interested in a girl like me? If you're worried about the cousin thing, we're not blood related at all."

With all the bravado and seductiveness gone from her demeanor, Scott studied Lila anew. Sitting there in her long tee shirt, her legs tucked under her, she looked so adorable he wanted to go over and pinch her cheeks. He could see how easily men would succumb to her beauty. At that moment, he realized she *definitely* interested him. For the first time in his thirty-five years, he saw himself as other than single, but fought with himself over it. Lila represented all the things that kept him from committing to a woman. Why did she have this effect on him? Could God's hand be in it? He decided to test this premise.

"I'm *already* interested in you."

Lila's eyes went wide. "You *are*?"

"Though you've used your wiles all your life, I suspect you have little idea how beautiful you truly are. I'm not talking desirable ... you're that in spades. You present an irresistible package."

"*You* resisted."

"Yes, but not for the reason you think."

"Uh-oh; here comes the 'but' part."

"You've heard it *before*?"

"All the time. Oh, not at first; the guys I went with in the past couldn't wait to jump my bones and I didn't disappoint them in that department. I was, in an Asian way, compliant, inventive, attentive and did all I could to keep them interested in me, but it didn't last. It wasn't me, either. I was always faithful to the guy I lived with, but, eventually, they all lost interest in me and sent me on my way."

"I'm not trying to be cruel here, but did it ever occur to you that a relationship built on easy sex couldn't last?"

"I may have thought about it, but isn't getting a woman in the sack the ultimate goal for a guy in a relationship?"

Scott sighed. "Lila, I'm no expert, but that kind of an attraction is bound to crumble. Everything I've read told me that sex is merely the physical expression of a deeper love."

"Everything you've read. So ... as a virgin, how can you be telling me how it should be, when you have no idea what it's like?"

"Listen to yourself, Lila. All you know is the physical side of human relationships. I don't have to have sex to know what love and commitment is all about. I've watched Mom and Dad's relationship grow and deepen over the years into something as durable as stone and they were both virgins when they married. Look what a free and easy sex life has done to your life. Your mother had a long-term affair with my uncle, at the expense of his relationship with my aunt, and it left you all alone." Scott could see a tear creep down Lila's cheek and it brought him up short. "Look, I'm sorry if what I said hurt you, but maybe it's time you heard it."

Lila began to cry softly. He wanted to go to her, but something held him back.

"You're right about being alone. When my mother died, I was devastated. She was always there for me, someone to go home to when a relationship ended. I asked her all the time why she never took another lover after your uncle left her, but she'd just look at me sadly. Even though your parents have taken me in, since mother's gone, I've never felt so alone. You've mentioned the reasons why I'm so beautiful and desirable. I don't see it, but I'll take your word for it. You also mentioned you're interested in me, but I sense something holding you back. What is it about me you don't like? Maybe I can change that. I've always been good at changing."

“It’s nothing *you* can change. Physically, you’re everything a man could want and you seem to have a sweet personality despite the overly sensual aura you exude. What’s keeping me from being with you is that we don’t share the same faith. Tell me; was your mother Buddhist?”

“Yes, but I never practiced it seriously. If it’s because you’re a Christian, I can go to church with you. That wouldn’t be a problem. I’m also okay with the separation and I’ll make your homecomings worth the wait, for you and for me.”

“Wow, that’s quite an offer, but I’m not trying to get you to change religions. I’m talking about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ ... a life-changing experience.”

“I’m listening.”

Before Scott could explain, everyone started getting up and they lost the moment. After breakfast, Sam and Sonora had to go to the hospital to see Shawn, after which they had to catch a flight back home. Just before they left, Scott got together with his mother.

“Mom, Lila and I have been talking and she’s ready to hear about Christ. I was going to get into it, but everyone got up and I lost the moment. When you get a chance, please talk to her about her need Christ.”

Sonora nodded. “I’m surprised to hear you got through to her, but I’ll be sure to get alone with her and share the gospel with her. Pray for us.”

“You know I will.”

Lila hung back to leave last and she spoke to Scott. “I want you to know that I’m taking what you said seriously and I intend to change. I’m going to turn over a new leaf and show you how good I can be for you.”

“I’m sorry we got interrupted, but, as good as all the things you want to do are, you need to talk with Mom and Dad. They can tell you all you need to know about a relationship with Christ; one that can change your life forever. I’ll be praying for you too.”

Scott saw tears well up in Lila’s eyes and it made him want to crush her in a bear hug and kiss her until he bruised her lips. He resisted, but she surprised him by going up on tiptoe, throwing her arms around his neck and pulling him down into a long, heartfelt kiss. Scott relaxed into it and her full, soft lips felt wonderful. Finally, feeling guilty, he broke it off.

“That’s something to remember me by. I intend to fight for your affection. From this moment on, I’m yours and I’ll be yours until you push me away for the final time.”

With that, Lila bounced out of the apartment, leaving a stunned Scott to stare after her.

## 7.

*Kandahar Province, Afghanistan—six months later ...*

Scott lowered the letter and reflected on how much his life had changed in the past six months. The content of the letter made him remember his time on leave.

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He spent the remainder of his month home visiting his brother in the hospital and tending to his needs when he got home. Unexpectedly, circumstances cast him in the role of marriage counselor. They had a conversation about Lila and their uncle’s dalliance with Lila’s mother, which led to them confronting the elephant in the room—Shawn’s affair with the coed. Wendy broached the subject and a heated discussion ensued.

By the end of his stay, they agreed to work on getting past the betrayal and Shawn even agreed to see a Christian counselor Wendy suggested as part of the process of reconciliation.

Shawn, wanting to save their marriage, agreed, with “no promises about agreeing to any “proselytizing,” as he put it.

Even before he left the States, Lila had begun to write to him. She turned out to be a good writer and surprised him with the inventiveness of her prose, occasionally throwing in a poem. Scott read it all with interest and the degree of her commitment to the hoped-for relationship with him touched him deeply. He spent many nights, kneeling next to his cot, asking God to bring Lila to himself.

The letter in his lap, written by his mother, provided the dénouement to the story of Lila’s journey toward faith.

*Dear Son,*

*I pray that this letter finds you far from danger, though I know that’s a bit unrealistic, as you fly in a war zone. Nevertheless, I ask God to keep you in the palm of his hand, where you will always be safe.*

*Good news! Lila wanted me to write first and will follow up with a letter soon. Her journey has ended and she finally committed her life to Jesus. It was a real struggle for some reason and we spent many nights pouring over Scripture and crying. I think she wanted to be sure that Jesus wouldn’t desert her like so many people have in her young life.*

*To make a long story short, we took her to a series of evangelistic meetings at our church and, on the second night, during the invitation, I could sense her uneasiness, so I asked if she wanted to go forward with me. She nodded and we went forward.*

*At first, when the counselor explained what she should do, she stood, calmly listening. He then said he’d like to pray with her and took her hands in his. I didn’t expect what came next. Near the end of his prayer, Lila fell to the floor and wept like a lost child. I heard her cry, over and over, ‘Jesus, please don’t leave me, please don’t leave me ...’ until the counselor, embarrassed, left me with her.*

*I was at a loss as to what to do, so I just sat down and laid my hand on her back, praying while she cried. By this time, I was in tears too. Lila crawled forward and put her head in my lap, clutching my hand. She cried for so long, Pastor Anderson came over to ask if he could help in any way. I shook my head and told him she just needed to get it all out.*

*He surprised me next by sitting with us, laying his hand on Lila’s head and praying aloud that God would remove the demons of guilt and regret from her life, as if he knew her past! Lila reached for his hand and took it.*

*After what seemed like an hour, Lila calmed, got up, hugged Pastor and thanked him and we went home. We talked until near dawn. I have never seen her so excited, or so happy. We went to church with one woman and came home with another.*

*This should interest you. When I got up near noon, a naked Lila stood at the stove, making a meal! When I asked her about it, she said that she wanted to learn to live naked like you. What could I do? Trying to get her to dress would have been hypocritical. Then, when Sam got home, I found out that she had served him breakfast, as naked as she was when I saw her—and he didn't try to stop her, either—will wonders never cease!*

| *Now, it's like having a live-in maid/cook. Lila does all the cleaning and cooking, naked as a jaybird, and never complains about a thing. She's enrolling at the community college, and took two waitress jobs! When she's not working, she sits naked in the living room, reading her Bible. We sometimes find her on her knees, praying.*

*We praise God daily for the wonders He's shown us in Lila's life. We thought we were doing our duty, but we now realize that God was providing a blessing. Be safe and know that we pray for you every day.*

*All our love,  
Mom and Dad*

After sending up a prayer of thanks for Lila's salvation, Scott picked up and slit open the perfumed letter from Lila, holding it in trembling hands.

*Dearest Scott,  
I hope you read the letter from your parents first, for I thought they would tell the story of my conversion far better than I ever could. When I told you I would fight for your affection when I left you, I had no idea the journey I would take. I'm afraid I gave your wonderful parents a hard time, but they loved and accepted me and, when they took me to that evangelistic meeting, for the first time I saw my life as Jesus saw it. It was devastating!*

*Now, I realize how foolish I was to think there was anything I could do to win your affection. Just as my salvation wasn't up to me, neither is your love something I can win through struggle, no matter how much I want it to be so.*

*But there's one thing I do know. I love you from the bottom of my heart and, if you don't choose to love me, I'll understand that it's not God's will for my life. If you do find it in your heart to love me, I'll cherish that love forever.*

*I expected it to be hard to leave my old life behind, but I now know that I'm accepted, both by God and your parents. I suppose the things I did, all the men I slept with, all the pointless and fruitless pursuit of who knew what, was just a way to find acceptance and fulfillment. Now, I know my worth as a human being is assured, because God loves me more than any human can.*

*I'm going to find an apartment soon. Your parents have been so good to me, I feel badly that I've been taking so much from them. I'm doing well in my studies and I want to be a nurse someday. Perhaps, if God sees fit to bring us together, I can join the Army and work at a hospital near you.*

*I'm going to end for now, because I'm falling asleep over this letter and I have to get up early for my morning job at the coffee shop. I pray for you all the time, that God will keep you safe and bring you back to your parents—and me. Please forgive me for hoping that we can have a life together, even though it might not be God's plan for us. I can't help it—I love you too much.*

*Your sister in Christ,  
Lila*

*I Peter 1:3-5*

*P. S. The first chapter of 1 Peter is my favorite New Testament chapter. For a fisherman, Peter wrote so beautifully!*

The simple honesty of Lila's letter touched Scott deeply. Incongruously, the mental image of Lila, standing in the shower with him, with her looking up at him ran through his mind, only now he saw it differently; he saw her as his wife, on their wedding night, anticipating the "one flesh" experience.

For months, any thought of a relationship had been colored by the fact Lila didn't know the Lord as he did. Now, God had removed that hurdle, but he didn't know exactly how he felt. Though he knew that Christ had made her a new creation at the moment of her salvation, he couldn't put the fact of her past out of his mind. She had known so many men and he had ....

He looked up the verses Lila wrote at the end of her letter to refresh his memory. *Blessed [be] the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.* He could see why Lila liked First Peter, for it spoke of acceptance and newness of life, something Lila now experienced. He had no doubts about her newfound faith, but he had serious doubts about his feelings for her. He put down his Bible and slipped to his knees, next to his cot to pray.

*Father God, I'm filled with joy that Lila has come to your Son, but I'm not sure about my feelings for her. She came into my life out of the blue and has such a wanton past. She's also ten years younger. Can a relationship between us really work out? Is she the woman I've committed myself to wait for? I don't want to hurt Lila, but I'm so unsure of what to do. Please show me your will in this....*

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The next day, Scott had a routine flight to pick up some supplies and some new troops assigned to his company. When he flew to the depot to pick up the supplies, a supply sergeant requested he add some ammunition to the load to drop off at an outpost near his base camp.

"Did you clear this with HQ?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. They authorized the pickup," the sergeant replied and handed Scott the papers.

Scott scanned the face sheet. “Okay, then; everything looks in order.” He returned the non-com’s salute, boarded his Blackhawk and headed back.

On the flight back, Scott replayed his thoughts over Lila’s letter. He had awakened with no more assurance over a possible relationship with her. In fact, his thoughts contained an element of uncertainty, even dread, that he couldn’t shake. Puzzled, he pushed it to the back of his mind and concentrated on his flying.

They dropped off the ammo and, just as they began to lift off, the Blackhawk took a volley of small arms fire. Scott could hear the screams of the troops behind him, no doubt from stray bullets entering the cargo area finding them, and rotated the aircraft to prevent clear targets. He saw an opening and moved the cyclic forward, as he pulled collective to rise. In the next few seconds, things happened so fast he had no time to do more than react reflexively.

The fusillade seemed to increase and a staccato of rounds hitting the big chopper provided a drumbeat to Scott’s frantic efforts. He swung left and before he could adjust his takeoff, a spray of blood and brains flew past his field of vision. A split-second later, he felt a blow to the left side of his head that felt as if his someone had decided to use it for batting practice.

*I’ve got to land this thing!* he thought, followed by, *Lila, I do love you.*

## 8.

*Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, Germany ...*

*Am I dreaming? Why is it so dark? Where am I?* The questions circled in Scott’s mind, as a rapid, insistent beeping invaded his confused thoughts. *If you want to know what’s going on,* another sterner thought insisted, *just open your eyes.*

Scott’s eyelids fluttered open and he stared up at fluorescent lights overhead. A monitor to his left sent its beeping-messages into his ear canals, making him wince. The face of a blond, male nurse moved into his field of vision.

“Welcome back,” he said cheerily, in a slight North German accent, while he worked at silencing the monitor and other small tasks.

“Whurr ‘m I?” Scott croaked.

“You’re in Landstuhl, Germany, where wounded soldiers like you come to recuperate.”

“How long ...?”

“You’ve been sleeping like a baby for a month.”

*A month?* Scott thought. *I’ve been unconscious for a month?* “Are my troops okay?”

“I haf no idea vhat you mean, but I’m assuming you’re vorrying about your comrades. I’ll let your Officer in Charge know you’re awake.”

“Th-thanks,” Scott replied, drifting off into the void once again.

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When Scott next awoke, he stared into the face of his brother, Shawn!

“Wh ... why ... how are you ...?”

“It’s good to see you, brother. You gave us all quite a scare.”

Scott looked around and the room seemed the same. “Where ...?”

“You’re still in Germany. To save you more questions, when I heard you were wounded, I flew over to see you. It seems we’ve traded places.”

“What happened?”

“The doctors tell me you took a round to the side of the head, but your helmet took most of the shock. They found the slug just above your ear, up against your skull, but, aside from some internal swelling, there was very little damage. They induced a coma to give your brain a chance to heal.”

“Do you know if the rest of the guys are okay?”

“Yes, most of them, thanks to you, but I’m afraid your co-pilot didn’t survive; his head wound was fatal. Though there were more wounded, you managed to drop your chopper down in a courtyard, out of the line of fire and the unwounded soldiers deployed and made short work of the insurgents.”

“That’s good, but I feel terrible over poor Jake’s death. He just got engaged.”

“Oh, man; that’s a real shame. I’m sorry to hear that. Look, I’m going to let Mom and Dad visit, before the doc kicks us all out for tiring you.”

Sam and Sonora came into the room and a family reunion ensued. Sonora’s face shone with tears, her relief at Scott’s survival palpable. After they visited for a while more, Sam revealed a surprise.

“Son, we have someone with us who wants to see you,” Sam said with a smile, “so we’ll leave for now. Enjoy.”

To Scott’s utter surprise, Lila entered the room! He hardly recognized her. She had lost the dreadlocks and allowed her normally straight hair fall in a red-blonde cascade around her shoulders. A new look of peace turned her already pretty face into a vision of feminine, Amerasian beauty. She wore a simple, yellow, cotton shift that gave her a wholesome, girl-next-door appearance and her clear, gray eyes crackled with joy at seeing Scott, even as tears wet her cheeks.

“You look ... so *beautiful*,” Scott announced.

“Never mind me; how are you?”

“I guess I’ll live. My hard head seems to have deflected the bullet sent to kill me.”

Lila went to the side of the bed and took Scott’s hand in hers. “Oh, Scott! When I heard you were wounded, my heart almost stopped. I prayed like I haven’t prayed since I came to Jesus, asking God to keep you from dying. Mom and Dad Conklin were wonderful and bought me a plane ticket to come here to see you.”

Scott smiled. “It makes me glad to hear you call them that and I’m glad you could come. Do you know what my last thoughts were when I was shot?”

“I’m sure I have no idea.”

“My first thought was that I had to get my chopper on the ground and my passengers to safety. My second thought was of you.”

“It *was*?” Lila said and he could see hope glow in her gaze.

“Yes. I had just read your letter the night before and, before I passed out, I thought, ‘Lila, I *do* love you.’”

Scott squeezed Lila’s hand and her composure crumbled. She stood, crying, so he let her get it out. When she had reined in her emotions, he continued.

“Do you think you could kiss me like you did when you left me back in New York?”

Lila nodded. “That kiss was all about hope and longing. This kiss will be about my love for you.”

Lila lowered her lips to his and they merged into a tender, heartfelt kiss of pure love and joy.

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*A motel in Atlantic Highlands, NJ ...*

“Now that the moment has arrived, I’m so nervous I’m trembling,” Lila said.

“Don’t worry; I’m no expert at this either, so let’s just take it as it happens,” Scott replied.

The couple stood naked in their honeymoon suite, on their wedding night, about to explore the mystery of “one flesh.”

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When Scott left the hospital in Germany, he returned to the States to complete his recovery. While in the hospital in New York, and at his brother’s house, he did some serious soul-searching. He considered leaving the Army, but, since he had received his wounds during his fourth tour of duty overseas, they assured him they would reassign him to a teaching post, where he would train other aviators. To encourage him to stay in, they promoted him to Lieutenant Colonel.

With that decided, he asked Lila some serious questions.

“Sweetheart, remember when you said you’d be a good military wife?

“Yes.”

“Well, since I’m staying in, I need to know if you’re okay with that.”

When Scott’s words sunk in, Lila’s face brightened. “Are you trying to propose to me?”

“No, I was trying to find out your thoughts on being an Army wife. Scott left his seat and went down on one knee, with his right hand behind his back. He brought his hand in front, opened a small, blue box and held it up. “*This* is my proposal. Lila, will you be my wife?”

For a few seconds, she couldn’t find the words. Tears sprang from her eyes. Finally, she spoke. “Oh, yes...yes!” she cried, throwing her arms around him.

They set a date and Sonora, along with Wendy, went into high gear planning a small ceremony at the Spring Lake Country Club in Spring Lake, NJ, followed by a reception in one of their sunny ballrooms. Afterwards, the couple booked a motel in Atlantic Highlands, so they could spend a week lazing in the sun at Sandy Hook’s famous Gunnison nude beach. Afterwards, they planned to fly to the Caribbean to enjoy two weeks more at a nude resort there.

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“I feel so unworthy to be here, with you,” Lila said shyly. “You’re a virgin and I was—”

“Uh-uh-uh; I don’t want to hear any more. When you came to Christ, he made you a new creature. As far as I’m concerned, you’re a virgin from that moment forward. What we’ll share tonight will be new for *both* of us.”

Lila nodded. “I love you so much for saying that. I still find it amazing that God worked it all out for us, in spite of all the sin in my life.”

“I think he enjoys doing things like that, though sometimes we don’t like it at first. It took Shawn’s being shot to save his marriage ... and his soul. I’m still marveling at my atheist brother coming to Christ. Now he and Wendy are more in love than ever. They’re even thinking of adopting soon.”

A sad look passed across Lila’s face. “Though I’m happy that Father and Elsa have reconciled, I can’t help but think of Mother. She sacrificed so much for me, always took me in when I was between boyfriends, and never harped at me for the life I lived.” Lila met Scott’s gaze. “Why did I get a new life in Christ and not her? It makes me sad to know she’s suffering.”

“I can’t give you an answer on that score, but God’s also a merciful God. I’m sure we’ll be surprised at the things he’s taken into account.”

Lila smiled up at him. “Do you know what the first thing I noticed about you was?”

“Aside from my studly bod?”

She chuckled. “There’s that, but I loved your sensitive spirit.”

“I recall being very stern with you.”

“Your *words* were, but I sensed your tender heart and it made me wonder how a soldier could be that way.”

“I’m glad you noticed that in me, but now you’re going to have to forgive my inexperience.”

Lila smiled. “I know I’m new in Christ now, but I’ll use what I learned to make this night special.”

“All I need is your love; that’ll make it *very* special for me.”

Lila reached up and pulled Scott’s head down for a long, passionate kiss and as her hands moved to intimate places, they began their new life together as man and wife.

Two souls united as one.