



SUSAN M.
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Slam-dunk
Christmas

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Slam-dunk Christmas
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1

NOVEMBER

CARL R. DARNALL ARMY MEDICAL CENTER,
FORT HOOD, TEXAS

"Oh, man. All these years and now this?" Slam-Dunk grumbled as he put on his shirt, covering up the bandage across his torso, a final memento of his Army career.

"Sorry, Sam, but this means you'll need to retire now," the nurse said as she cleared away the equipment he'd been connected to during his hospital stay.

"Retire?" Pain caused him to stop and take a breath. Everything ached. He had hoped to stay in the military for at least a few more years. Medical discharge was not the way he wanted to leave. "What would I do? Moving to the Rocky Mountains of Montana to be close to Maverick sounds good if I could find the right property, but am I ready to settle down to being a rancher?"

The nurse smiled at him. "Who knows? A handsome man like you will likely find something to do, perhaps less dangerous. I'm sure you'll figure it all out. Maybe you'll find time for love."

"Right. Who'd want me all broken up like this?"

"You'd be surprised what some women want. We are capable of looking beyond surface issues to the character of the person underneath." She winked at him. "Who's picking you up?"

A large man filled the doorway. "I am."

Sam rose to his feet. "Hey, Greaser. Glad you made it through unscathed."

Greaser entered the room and smiled at the nurse. "Hello, Mary."

She blushed. "Hi, Greaser."

"You two know each other?" Slam-Dunk asked with an eyebrow raised as he sat back down, weakness suddenly overtaking him.

"We've met a few times over the years," Mary offered. She handed Greaser the papers. "All the instructions and limitations on Sam's recovery are in here." She handed him a plastic bag with some prescription bottles in them. "These are for pain, if he needs them. He's proven to be stubborn about taking these, but relaxing and resting are the best thing for his healing." She came to Slam-Dunk, bent over and kissed Sam's cheek. "Take care, Sam, or Slam-Dunk, or whatever you go by now."

"Thanks, Mary. I appreciate your care." Slam-Dunk offered as he slowly rose to his feet again, fighting the wooziness that overwhelmed him. He grabbed the edge of the bed and leaned against it.

"I believe the wheelchair is right outside, Greaser. It would be best if you used that to get him to your vehicle." Mary winked at the large man and exited the room.

Greaser walked out the door and brought the wheelchair in. "Come on, invalid. Time to get you out of here and to Rebel Falls Ranch. Maverick said you could recuperate with them while you figured out your options."

Sam settled into the chair. "Great. I really didn't look forward to the apartment. I've hardly been there in the past two years. It's full of dust, cobwebs, and unpacked boxes. Spending time in the Rocky Mountains of Montana sounds like heaven."

They headed down the hall to the elevators.

"It is. I took the liberty of packing you some clothes. If you want I can pack it all up and have it put in storage until you figure out where you'll be. Probably be cheaper than paying rent."

"Might be best. Looks as if I won't return. I've had enough of Texas anyway. Way too hot down here. Do you think they have snow in Montana?"

"Probably. They are up in the mountains. Might be colder than you expect."

"I'll need to finally buy a car. Doubt those taxi companies work way out in the mountains and I shouldn't always be borrowing Maverick's." Slam-Dunk settled into the chair and Greaser placed his duffle bag, papers, and the pills on his lap.

"Like they'd care?" Greaser maneuvered him out the door. "I have your tickets and plan to go on the flight to make sure you're OK, but then I need to return here and try to figure out our next steps."

"How's the rest of the team?"

"Doing well. A few bruises. You suffered the

worst. What were you thinking?"

"I had to save that woman. I couldn't allow her to become collateral damage in our expedition. Besides, that isn't what did me in. It was that stupid fungi."

Geaser pulled the chair into the elevator and punched the button for the bottom floor. "Well, thanks to you she survived. Was the slap she gave you worth the trouble knowing you rescued a potential enemy combatant?"

"You don't know that. It was a split-second decision. I can't second-guess myself." He sighed. "It was probably the last hurrah of my Army career."

The door opened and Greaser pushed the chair, and Sam, toward the entrance.

"We're all getting older, and the risks don't get easier to manage with the years."

Slam-Dunk glanced up to his friend. "You sound as if you're ready to cash it in yourself."

"Maybe. It's an option to retire. I've got enough years and rank. I envy Maverick the life he has."

"Yeah, Whitney is a sweetheart, and now they'll be adding a baby to the mix." Slam-Dunk sighed. "Marital bliss. If anyone is a good advertisement for that, it would be him."

"Yeah, but you and I, wouldn't we both miss the action? The danger?"

"There is something to be said for peace and quiet, Greaser. Maybe I'm old enough now to finally appreciate that. Life is always filled with adventure and risk, just not always in the way we think or something we seek out."

The automatic doors opened, and they exited the building.

"Yeah. I guess so. I'll consider it. On the up side you'll never need to shave your legs and don that ludicrous dress and wig like you did when working with Maverik." Greaser chuckled as he pulled up to his SUV.

"Don't forget that bra. It kept wanting to go lopsided on me. I don't know how women can wear those things. Shaving my legs wasn't bad until the hair started growing in. Prickly. Ugh." He stood and got into the passenger seat. "Are we headed straight for the airport?"

"Pretty much. I gave us enough time to make sure we'd be good. Your suitcase is in the back along with mine, although I'll likely be gone in a day."

"So, no retirement party for me?"

"Well, maybe Major Masters will let us all come up there for that around the New Year if nothing else pops up needing the team's deployment."

"Sounds good. I might be healed up enough by then to enjoy it."

"You'll need to get through Thanksgiving first, I'm sure Whitney's cook will get some meat on those bones. You should eat more."

Slam-Dunk reached over and patted the man's stomach. "I know that what you got is muscle there, but I just don't have the build to carry that much. But who knows, without regular physical exercise, maybe I'll put on some weight."

"Right, like Maverick will let you get away

without mucking out those stalls.”

Slam-Dunk grinned. “I love horses and the smell of straw and fresh hay and grain. Once I’m able to, I’ll gladly pitch in. Maybe we can set up a basketball hoop in the barn so we can do a few games during the winter.”

“Yeah, I’m sure the horses would love that.” Greaser shook his head. “I’d like to see you talk Maverick into that.”

“I’ll be struggling to ditch his nickname and call him Blake now.”

“Are you giving up your moniker?”

“For everyday life, I guess so. It’s weird when someone calls me Sam.”

“I’m sure you’ll get used to it. If it helps, I can always call you Slam-Dunk when I see you.”

“You’re a good friend, Greaser.” Slam-Dunk grinned.

“Back atcha, buddy.”

Soon enough they were through security at Killeen Airport.

“One stop at Houston and a layover in Denver before we land at Great Falls. Blake said he’d have someone waiting for us.” Greaser explained as he brought Sam a cup of coffee and a sandwich.

“Thanks. Long day. I’ll be exhausted before I ever get there.” Sam took a bite of his sandwich.

“At least it’s a commercial flight and not in the back of a cargo carrier.”

“True. Far more comfortable, to be sure.”

“And cute flight attendants.” Greaser grinned.

"Some are men."

"Oh, yeah. Well, guess I won't be flirting with them," Greaser shook his head.

"I hope not." Slam-Dunk sipped his coffee and closed his eyes. He'd be resting at the ranch tonight and would have time to figure out his next steps.

~*~

Nine hours later, Slam-Dunk finally saw Maverick, also known as Blake.

The retired, former Army intelligence officer greeted them with a big grin. "Hey, guys! Over here!"

Handshakes preceded getting into the vehicle.

Greaser took the back seat.

"Whitney let you out of her sight?" Slam-Dunk asked as he buckled up.

The car merged into traffic to head north.

Blake nodded. "Danger is all around, but we can usually anticipate it. She finds it easier to let me go than when I was in the Army. Remember that encounter with a grizzly bear when we rescued Whitney after her first kidnapping?"

"That terrified me. I began to doubt the capability of my rifle when faced with the immense power of that beast." Slam-Dunk involuntarily shivered. "I'm glad we didn't need to find out."

"You never told me about a grizzly." Greaser grumbled from the back seat.

"You were dealing with a fire if I remember correctly, there were other more important things than

surviving a visit from a big bear," Blake said.

"Everything quiet up at the ranch?" Sam asked.

"For now, yes. Praying it continues that way for a long time."

"Amen," chorused both Sam and Greaser.

Arriving at the ranch, a Border Collie ran out to greet them with happy barks and a wagging tail.

"Ah, the fierce and faithful Nitro." Slam-Dunk bent to pet the dog.

"Welcome!" Whitney called from the front porch. Even with a coat on her pregnancy was evident. She came to greet them giving them kisses on the cheek. "I want you to feel right at home as you heal. Come on in. We saved dinner for you."

Greaser rubbed his tummy. "I'm grateful. They don't serve too much on the planes anymore."

"Right, as if anything they used to serve would have satisfied that bottomless pit of yours." Slam-Dunk stopped and glanced at Whitney. "I am sorry, Whitney."

The poor woman had been kidnapped and trapped in a box canyon.

She gulped. "Yeah, I don't have as many nightmares about that bottomless pit of a canyon anymore. I'm grateful you and Blake rescued me."

"I'm sure there are memories that will surface every once and a while. You went through some awful experiences." Greaser picked up the suitcases and headed into the house.

Slam-Dunk followed Whitney and Blake. The couple held hands. Over seven years of marriage and

they still acted like newlyweds. He shook his head. Would he ever have that kind of happiness? Who would want this battered and beaten soldier who had seen more horrors in his life than any civilian ever could imagine? How would he ever explain the impact of that to someone who didn't understand?

Oh, Lord, what am I going to do?

Wait. When did he start praying?

Maybe Rebel Falls Ranch would be a place where he'd heal more than his body. It was probably time. His last brush with death terrified him more than he ever let on to anyone.

2

MISTY GULCH, MONTANA

Mika Slovinika shivered as her boss walked into the kitchen. She stayed focused on the dishes.

“Mika? Oh, there you are, dear. All done cleaning up in here? Good. When you finish with making beds and cleaning the bathrooms, Vincent will drive you to the grocery store. I compiled a menu for the week. You will purchase the required items. Do you understand me?” The master’s strident tone bespoke no affection.

“Yes, ma’am. I understand. Bedrooms, bathrooms, and grocery shopping.”

The grey-haired woman nodded. “Very good. And remember. You are not to talk to anyone while in town unless you need help finding something. Do not disobey.”

Mika nodded. The “or else” was unspoken but understood.

The woman strode out of the room, the click of her heels on the polished marble floor echoing as she walked away. Mika released a breath she didn’t even realize she’d been holding. *Jesus, please help me. This isn’t what I’d been told it would be. I need You.*

She methodically went through the motions as prescribed by her master. Perfection was expected, and

the punishments could be harsh. She had the bruises and a few scars to prove her initial strong-will and protest against her situation after she'd arrived in the United States. The promised dream of freedom had been an illusion. She could speak and understand more English than the master realized.

How had she fallen into this trap? She was well-educated and she'd wanted to come to America. But this? This was not what she'd hoped for. She shrugged on her coat and got in the car with Vincent, who didn't speak much English. She wasn't sure what language he spoke. It saddened her to have no one to confide in. Nowhere to find comfort.

She entered the grocery store and proceeded to put the required items in her cart. She wasn't paying much attention to her surroundings. There was no help for her here. She feared that those around her were aware she had no papers. She was an illegal, but not by choice. She must be careful. She'd been warned that she'd be in jail if she were discovered. Her cart was about to turn a corner when it crashed into another cart. She gasped.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry, miss," the tall gentleman said.

"No. I apologize. I should have watched closer. Pardon me." She ducked her head and pulled past the man. When she turned to glance back, he was staring at her. *Oh, no. Move on. Act normal.*

Whatever that was.

She arrived at the meat counter and gave the butcher the list of specific cuts her master requested. A

voice disturbed her peace.

"I'm new in the area, living up at Rebel Falls Ranch. My name is Sam."

"That's nice," she said while fidgeting with her cuff.

"You're supposed to give me your name now." He gave her a beautiful smile. "I noticed a slight accent. Slovene is my guess, and you have the look of someone from the Balkans."

Terror filled her heart. She turned to look him over. "Mika. Please leave me alone."

He smiled. "I'm right, aren't I? I love the name. You come from a beautiful part of the world. I've been there."

She frowned.

"You doubt me?" He began to speak to her in Hungarian. "Do you understand me?"

She nodded. Mika spoke to him in Italian, even though she wasn't as fluent in that language. "It a cold day."

The man shivered. "Yes, it certainly is. You are quite the linguist."

She didn't respond. This man was handsome, intelligent, and far too perceptive. Perhaps too much so. She'd already violated her master's dictates. The butcher handed her the wrapped packages of meat she'd requested. She accepted them. "Thank you." Mika put them in her cart and moved away.

~*~

Slam-Dunk was instantly smitten. It was as if God had tossed his heart into her shopping cart. Why? She was obviously an immigrant. He had no qualms with that, but why so closed off? She moved away with graceful speed. He turned to the butcher. In this small town, everyone probably knew everyone else's business. "She's an intriguing woman. What do you know of her?"

The man shrugged. "Nothing. She gives me a list, barely says more than 'please' and 'thank you,' and leaves. She's here at the store at least once or twice a week. Ask the head cashier. Sometimes she speaks to her."

"Thanks, I appreciate that." Slam-Dunk went about filling his own basket. Boredom had dictated he take on this chore for Daniel, the chef at Rebel Falls Ranch. He went to the check-out lane and gave the cashier a big smile. "That woman, Mika, who was just here. Do you know her?"

She shrugged. "Not really. She's been coming in for a few months now. Quiet, pays cash, is always driven in the black SUV with tinted windows. We know almost everyone around here but not where she, or the driver, lives. She hasn't caused any trouble, has she?"

"Not at all. Just intrigued. Cash, huh? In this day and age when most people use credit or debit cards, that is unusual. Thank you." He swiped the ranch card to pay, grabbed his bags, and headed to Blake's SUV.

A man helped Mika load the groceries into the black vehicle. Interesting. She wore no ring. There was

no sense of intimacy between the two. She opened her own door in the back seat, and he entered the front. Not much of a gentleman either. He glanced at the license plate, which was difficult as it had a tinted cover over it. He snapped a quick photo with his phone. He had resources...and he wanted to know more about this girl.

~*~

Mika spied the stranger. He said his name was Sam. She hoped Vincent had not been keeping tabs on her. There could be cameras anywhere. If master found out, Mika would be in trouble. She sighed. Grief washed over her and she sniffed. If only a man like that could rescue her. But there was no way. *Lord. Help me escape. Somehow.*

She didn't even know where to turn for help. She wasn't allowed to go to the library or church. Only the store. She had no phone, and the house didn't even boast one with a cord. She'd heard about immigration officials being mean and putting people in cages or sending them back to their own country.

Her home growing up had been luxurious compared to her current situation. She'd always dreamed of traveling and possibly living in America. Her parents weren't very supportive of her dreams. They hadn't been wealthy. Life was primarily about survival. For all of that, at least there had been warmth, and love. This property was more like a prison than a mansion. Cold and heartless. She wondered if her

parents missed her or realized she was gone. She'd been living in the city in a shared apartment and hadn't been able to go home often. Life for her had also become about survival while she saved up for her trip to the United States.

Now she had no money. The promised wages that tempted her to come to this country never materialized.

"You will need to work off the cost of bringing you over here before we can give you any money," Master had said.

When Mika asked about the money that she had paid to the agency to come to the United States, she was punished severely. She never asked again.

Mika had no idea how long it would be and doubted it would ever happen. She'd already been here for around six months. Even when the forest fires had come near their home, the staff had been locked up in a room while Master and her family escaped. Fortunately for them, the fire didn't get as far as this elegant, yet cold-hearted mansion. Or was it an American version of a castle? She wished she could look up that information to find out.

Vincent said not a word. Even if he had seen her talking to Sam, he probably lacked the English to squeal on her.

Entering the house, she found the kitchen a mess. One of the other residents in the home, an adult child, must have fed themselves. Mika placed the bags on the table. Vincent followed suit and left. The Master suddenly appeared and saw the chaos.

“I thought I told you to clean up this mess,” Master said.

Mika cowered. There was no point in defending herself with words.

The Master slapped her. “If you don’t shape up, worse will be done. Now clean this up and do what I brought you here to do.” The woman departed. *Click, clack, click, clack, click, clack* went the heels.

Mika missed that sound preceding her master’s arrival because of the noise of dealing with the groceries. Not that she could ever really hide from the master. She’d tried that once, and got three times the normal punishment. She couldn’t sit for days. Not that she ever had much time to sit on this job.

Silently Mika wiped away a tear and put the groceries away. After cleaning up the kitchen again, she read through the recipes and began preparing for the evening meal. All the while, she thought of handsome Sam. He’d become an escape fantasy—false hope was still a comfort.

Lord, will he know I need his help? What could he even do?

Hopelessness washed over her. She wiped away another tear.

~*~

Sam found the information he sought. The vehicle belonged to Evelynn Forte. Further investigation revealed that she lived not far from town in a mansion on the brink of foreclosure. Yet somehow the woman

made regular trips overseas. Her last trip?

Slovenia.

She'd purchased four extra tickets for the return trip.

Hmmmm. Something was off with this woman and Mika. He'd need to do some more investigating. His thoughts wandered to his last mission and how painful surgery had been. His team had continued their work. He was helpless to do anything to change his fate.

One night, when the pain meds had lapsed, he'd suffered in agony, and wondered for the first time why living was so important. He might be out of a career. His entire purpose in life was gone. Why fight to hold on? What was the point?

I love you. Your work isn't done.

"Hello?" Sam whispered. "Who's there?" How had that disembodied Voice discerned the unspoken musings of his heart? Was his breathlessness due to that or that part of the partial lung that remained?

The throbbing waves of pain took over his body until a nurse arrived to give meds. As the medicine clouded his brain into hazy fog, his last thought was that God had spoken and wouldn't leave him behind.

The promise became a lifeline of hope.

Sam shook his head to clear the memory. He sighed. Maybe Mika was feeling as alone as he had not that long ago.

Lord, be with her, please.