

NIGHT CALL

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Hey, Holmes! I thought you were in Vegas?”
“Yeah, I was.” Tristan sank down on the ugly green vinyl sofa that occupied one wall in the OR lounge and propped her feet up on a nearby chair. “But when I heard you all were having so much fun back here, I left early.”

Most of the Philadelphia Medical College surgeons and anesthesiologists were in Las Vegas for a trauma meeting all week, and only a skeleton staff remained at the hospital. Tristan had been there too until she’d received an emergency call from her chief. Acute staffing shortage, he’d informed her. Two of the senior anesthesia staff were unexpectedly out of commission—one with a broken leg following a collision with a goose while he was rollerblading through the park along the Schuylkill River, and the other with a family crisis. Since Tristan was the low man—or woman, in this case—on the ladder, seeing as how she’d just started on staff only a few weeks before, she’d gamely saluted and fallen on her sword for the good of her brother and sister anesthesiologists. She’d taken the redeye back the night before and gone straight to the hospital.

The only thing that made the premature return trip and no sleep tolerable was the memory of the outrageous few hours she’d spent with a woman who had taught her a couple of things about herself and what she enjoyed in bed. For Tristan, that was a remarkable revelation, because, although she didn’t consider herself a player, she enjoyed the company of women. And being twenty-nine and single and planning to stay that way, at least for a good many more years, she enjoyed the

company of women frequently. So discovering that she liked being fucked senseless by a petite toppy femme in four-inch heels, while her hands were restrained over her head, ranked right up there with some of her most enlightening experiences. So much so she couldn't stop thinking about it—not the woman, who'd been easy to look at and interesting even when they weren't in bed, or the admittedly mind-blowing sex—but just how much she liked being completely *not* in control. She doubted anyone who knew her, including herself, would have ever described her as being happy with someone else calling the shots. But she'd been more than happy having Melissa direct the action; she'd been exhilarated.

“So the meeting was a drag, huh?” Charlie Dixon probed.

“Oh yeah. Deadly boring.” Tristan craned her neck and grinned up at the six-foot-four mocha-skinned trauma fellow before putting thoughts of hot blondes, power play, and multiple orgasms out of her mind. Charlie only had half a foot on her in terms of height, but he was svelte, the way some dancers were. He always made her feel like a clod with her solid build that required sweating three times a week in the gym and pounding the city streets for ten or twelve miles every few days to keep her body muscular and not just bulky.

“I hear Vegas is a swinging place,” Charlie said mournfully as he slumped into a rickety chair at the round table in the center of the room.

“Couldn't prove it by me.”

Charlie eyed her suspiciously, but Tristan refused to bite. She'd always found that the guys she worked with accepted her being a lesbian without much fuss, but they were still curious about how she made out with women. Sex was a popular topic around the OR, since there wasn't much to fill the long hours between emergencies most nights except talking about sex and sports. She didn't begrudge the guys their interest, but she didn't play to it either. Maybe she didn't want to spend a lifetime with the women she dated, but they weren't conquests or notches on her bedpost. And if she was seeing more than one woman at a time, she didn't make that a secret with any of her dates. She had nice, friendly, comfortable relationships with her girlfriends, and she wanted to keep it that way. So when the guys hinted for a little kiss and tell, she just smiled and shook her head.

“Say, Charlie,” Tristan teased, “how's your wife?”

“Bitching that she never sees me,” Charlie replied.

“Can’t blame her. It’s true, isn’t it?” Tristan didn’t really mind the long hours, especially now that she had a staff position. She kept an apartment a few blocks from the hospital in West Mount Airy for when she was on call and had fifteen acres of rolling farmland in Bucks County for the weekends when she wasn’t. She’d grown up in the Philadelphia suburbs, so a few times a month she joined her parents and one or two of her siblings at their parents’ club for dinner or some other social outing. Most of the time she was too busy to think about the fact that she hadn’t had a relationship longer than a few weeks for more than a decade, and since she rarely had difficulty finding a date whenever she needed company, she didn’t dwell on her chronic single status when she did. She loved her work, she loved women. Life was good.

“I keep telling my wife—one more year,” Charlie said. “One more year and I’ll be in the big time, just like you.”

Tristan laughed.

“Yeah, and look what I’m doing in the middle of the night on a Sunday. Sitting on my ass in the OR lounge waiting for the next—”

Their beepers went off simultaneously, and Tristan grabbed for hers. “Shit.”

“There goes the rest of the night,” Charlie grumbled as the overhead announced a code red. “The chopper’s going out. Bet it’s a multiple MVA. Right time of night for it—drunks driving home or tourists coming back from the Shore for work tomorrow. Trying to make time in the middle of the night and then falling asleep. God damn it.”

Tristan pulled the trauma beeper off the waistband of her scrub pants and frowned at a number she didn’t recognize.

“Huh. Must be a mistake.”



At the sound of a knock on her door, Jett McNally, who sat with her back against the wall and her long legs stretched out on the bed, stuck her finger between the pages of the book she was reading and called, “It’s open.”

Linda, the flight nurse on Jett’s medevac team, poked her head in. “Hey, Cap, we’ve got a scene request. I don’t have the details yet, but the first responders are calling for a physician ride-along.”

Jett shook her head in amused resignation. She'd explained to Linda she'd never been a captain, and she didn't have a rank anymore, *and* she didn't stand on ceremony anyhow, but Linda insisted on calling her Cap. Healthstar, the medevac company Jett flew for, received two types of requests—scene requests, usually accidents or some other trauma, or transfer requests, transporting patients from one hospital to another. Ordinarily, the medcrew consisted of a nurse and a paramedic, but Jett's EC-145 Eurocopter could hold nine, including the patient, if needed. Once in a while, a physician accompanied them if the patient's condition was extraordinarily precarious. Jett didn't really care what kind of flight she went out on, but she preferred emergencies to transfers. The adrenaline rush of racing against time, of beating the odds, gave her the satisfaction very little else could. When the stakes were high, she felt alive.

"How far away are they?" Jett asked.

"About thirty miles."

Jett tossed her book onto the single bed. When she had started her tour earlier that night, housekeeping hadn't yet been by to clean the flight crews' rooms, so she had changed the sheets and blankets herself. The cover was tucked in so tightly the book bounced. Her DI would have been proud. "See you on deck."

With her flight gear under her arm, Jett hustled down the hall and outside to the rooftop helo deck. One of the medcrew would get the rest of the pertinent medical information. All Jett needed to do was confirm they could fly and then prepare the aircraft. Even though she was flying civilian now, her routine was ingrained after thirteen years in the Army, including a tour in Afghanistan and one in Iraq. She saw no reason to change anything now, because she could go skids up in four to five minutes once the call came in, and whether it was a civilian emergency or combat, every second counted.

When she'd done her walk-around earlier at the start of her twelve-hour tour, she'd reviewed the aircraft's maintenance logs and run through as much of the preflight checklist as she could. She'd also determined that the weather was adequate for flying. Just the same, weather could change in six hours and she was responsible for the safety of her crew. She wouldn't fly in bad weather, even though there were injured to be evacuated. The rule was, you didn't risk three lives for one. She'd taken chances, sure—in combat. All of the pilots had,

rather than leave their comrades behind. Those few times she hadn't been able to reach the wounded haunted her still.

Tonight the sky was nearly cloudless, a hot, hazy summer night. The flight was a go. By the time she had suited up, climbed into the cockpit, and run through the rest of her preflight check, Linda and Juan, the paramedic, were waiting, helmets in hand, ready to board.

"Where's the doctor?" Jett yelled from the cockpit.

"Should be here any second," Linda called back.

Jett disliked civilian physicians in her aircraft. They weren't used to flying and weren't used to taking orders. With one aboard, she had one more thing to worry about, but there was nothing she could do about it. The civilian world operated differently than the Army, where rank trumped everything, including education or perceived skills. Despite the fact that her medcrew was trained to handle anything out in the field, if the first responders wanted a physician, then a physician they would get.

At that moment, the double glass doors enclosing the elevator lobby in the far corner of the rooftop opened wide and a woman in pale blue scrubs sprinted out toward them. An assortment of beepers bounced on the waistband of her scrub pants, and a stethoscope danced around her neck. Jett gave her a cursory glance. She appeared young, probably a resident, her body muscular and fit-looking. Her collar-length brunette hair was thick and casually styled. In the harsh lights of the helo deck, her blue eyes stood out in startling contrast to her olive complexion.

"Make sure she gets squared away," Jett called to Linda before starting her engines. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Linda grab the doctor by the arm, and all three ducked their heads, ran under the spinning rotors, and climbed aboard. After giving them a second to strap in, Jett took the helicopter up from the roof of the main hospital building and headed northwest toward the turnpike. She checked her watch. Four minutes and twenty-five seconds.

She was flying. Life was good, for these few minutes, anyhow.



"What's going on?" Tristan shouted to the woman who had introduced herself as Linda as she pulled the safety harness across her

chest. She didn't know either of the flight crew, and all she could see of the pilot was a strong profile, dark eyes, and thick sandy hair sticking out from under the back of her helmet. Tristan had a brief instant to register that the pilot was female and good-looking before her mind honed in on the question of what faced her. All she'd gotten from the paramedic who phoned her was that Healthstar needed a doctor, and Tristan's name was on the top of the roster tonight. She was double-boarded in anesthesia and critical care, like a lot of anesthesia docs, so when her new chief had asked her if she'd take trauma call, she'd said sure. She'd never been up in a helicopter before, and this wasn't exactly what she'd had in mind for her first time. A romantic ride with a beautiful woman around Manhattan, a view of the Statue of Liberty in the background, was more what she had pictured. Even though a glance out the window told her that the scenery from here would be pretty spectacular, knowing what waited for her—or rather, not knowing—definitely killed the mood. The two people beside her were better equipped to deal with most emergencies in the field than she was. Her expertise was hospital-based and most of what she did was in a room filled with high-tech equipment, a multitude of drugs, and sophisticated monitoring devices. “You have a report on the patient?”

“Details are sketchy,” Linda replied, handing Tristan a radio headset with a microphone. “It's the governor's daughter-in-law. MVA. Reports are she's in bad shape.”

“Shit.” Tristan could see it now. Not only would they have to deal with a critically injured patient, they'd probably have news people crawling all over them, documenting everything they did or didn't do. It was a PR nightmare, and as the physician on scene, she was going to get all the attention.

“No kidding,” Linda said.

“I'll take a quick look at her airway,” Tristan said, “then you two concentrate on securing the victim, just like you would if I wasn't there. Anything you need me to do, tell me. I guess you know not to talk to anyone.”

Linda grinned. “Oh yeah, we know all about that. HIPAA HIPAA hooray.”

A lot sooner than she expected, Tristan realized they were landing at the edge of a field adjoining the turnpike. The accident scene below pulsed with a life of its own as the lights of a dozen emergency vehicles

beat against the night sky. Two other helicopters were setting down simultaneously, hovering like menacing behemoths over the ring of patrol cars, ambulances, and fire engines whose headlights illuminated a jackknifed tractor-trailer and three mangled automobiles. Two forlorn, white-tarp-covered forms lay alone on the oil-stained highway while rescue workers swarmed around the wreckage, tending to the still-living.

The instant the helicopter touched down, Tristan jumped out behind Linda and Juan. Following Linda's directions, she helped unload a stretcher and rapidly piled emergency equipment on top. Then she set off running with them toward the scene.

"We're from PMC," Linda called to a man with a lot of gold braid on his uniform cap who Tristan figured was the incident commander. He held two radios and was waving emergency crews in various directions.

"Over there," he directed.

Tristan looked where he pointed. A cluster of emergency personnel knelt on the highway inside a loose ring of state police. Two news vans were angled on the shoulder of the road and a handful of reporters with television cameras strained against a temporary barricade of yellow crime scene tape, trying to get footage. The patient, assuming she was in there somewhere, was not visible.

"Jesus," Tristan muttered under her breath.

Juan cleared the way by announcing who they were, and the crowd parted enough to let them through. When she finally cleared the protective ring of cops and the assorted curious, Tristan saw a woman in her early thirties, unconscious, bleeding profusely from obvious facial injuries. Judging from the victim's position, Tristan surmised she'd been ejected from a vehicle—probably the overturned Lexus SUV covered with flame retardant foam that was now resting on the median. Her right leg was angulated, a portion of the femur protruding through a long rent in her once-white slacks. With trauma to both her head and lower extremities—bracket injuries—there was a good chance she had internal injuries as well. She already had IVs running in both arms.

Tristan dropped to her knees by the patient's head and placed her stethoscope quickly on both sides of the patient's chest, listening for breath sounds. She heard no air movement on the right. "Pneumothorax on the right."

While Juan positioned the backboard next to the victim, Linda opened the emergency equipment box and pulled out a thin trocar with an attached flexible polyethylene tube connected to a syringe. She pushed aside the remnants of the patient's bloodstained blouse, quickly swabbed a spot below her breast with antiseptic, and pushed the three-inch needle between her ribs. Then she slid the tubing in after it and used the syringe to evacuate the air from the patient's chest. As Tristan listened, breath sounds returned. It was a temporary measure, but it would do for now.

"Better," Tristan said.

Despite the improvement in airflow, the patient's breathing was labored. Fractured ribs. Tristan gently palpated her jaw. The mandible shifted beneath her fingers with a grating sensation. Fractured as well, and probably her mid-face too, if the amount of blood streaming from her nose was any indication. With this much hemorrhage and mobile facial fractures, her airway was very unstable.

"She needs to be intubated."

When Tristan glanced up, Juan already had a laryngoscope out and handed it to her. Using the portable suction, he cleared some of the blood out of the patient's mouth while Tristan inserted the scope's flat metal blade with a light at the end into the back of her throat. Moving the tongue aside and carefully lifting up on the jaw so as not to move the victim's head, Tristan squinted into the oral cavity, hoping to find some landmarks. Unfortunately, with the continued bleeding and massive swelling, she couldn't see a thing. Still searching for anatomical landmarks, she held out her free hand for the endotracheal tube and made a blind pass in the direction of the trachea—or at least where she hoped the trachea was. She really needed to get this tube in, because the last thing she wanted to do was an emergency trach in the field. Too much risk to the patient, especially one with an unstable neck. Tristan eased the tube in a little more. God, she hated blind intubations. *Please, baby, come on.*

Juan pressed his fingers to the patient's throat, and as Tristan continued to push, he nodded and said, "Feels like it's going through the cords."

Tristan persisted until only a few inches of the tube protruded from the patient's mouth. Then she took the ambu bag that Linda had connected to the oxygen tank and carefully hooked it to the end of the

endotracheal tube. She squeezed the inflatable bag while Linda listened to the patient's chest.

"You got it," Linda announced with satisfaction. "Good breath sounds on both sides."

"All right then," Tristan said. "Let's get her on the backboard and go."

Tristan stabilized the head, Juan placed a cervical collar, and then on Linda's count, they rolled the patient, slid the backboard underneath her, and strapped her down. While Linda secured the IVs, O2, and other tubes, Juan splinted her leg. Within minutes, they were ready to go. As they worked, Tristan could hear shouted questions from the reporters.

"Is that Marsha Eisman?"

"How badly is she injured?"

"Does the governor know?"

"Is she going to die?"

Tristan ignored everyone. She'd have to face the reporters soon enough, but it wasn't going to be out here. She had far more important things to do than worry about the hospital's PR.



Jett checked her gauges in preparation for takeoff while she waited for the medcrew to return with the patient. She hated this part—the waiting. She wanted to be out there in the field, doing something. But her job was to get her crew out and back again as quickly and as safely as possible. She could and had assisted in retrieving the wounded. But that had been under different circumstances.

"Chief, you shouldn't be out here! Get back to the chopper."

The major had to scream in Jett's face to be heard above the rattle of small arms fire and the explosion of mortar rounds that came with such rapidity the air reverberated with the continuous roar.

"The incoming fire is getting worse. We need to get the wounded aboard," Jett shouted back. She helped the major roll an injured soldier onto the stretcher, grabbed the other end, and lifted. "Another few minutes and we might not be able to get airborne."

"If we don't have a pilot, it won't matter how long we take."

Since the major didn't actually order her to drop the stretcher, Jett

just put her head down and ran for her Black Hawk. They loaded the injured and raced back for more. After that, there wasn't time for talk. The medevac crew finally cleared the field of injured and Jett somehow got them up and out in one piece. As soon as she'd landed at the field hospital and the wounded were off-loaded, she'd gone back out again. The hours ran together until finally she was off duty and she staggered, weak-limbed and numb, away from her aircraft for some much-needed food and rack time. She slumped down at a table in the mess tent and mechanically shoveled whatever was on the plate into her mouth, not tasting it, not caring, just knowing she needed it if she was going to wake up in a few hours and do it all again.

"Nice flying, Chief," a dark-haired major a few years Jett's senior said as she sat down across the table from her. She wore medical insignia in addition to her oak cluster, and Jett figured her for one of the medcrews.

"Thank you, ma'am," Jett said, trying to put a little enthusiasm in her voice. She was so tired she could barely see her plate.

"You ought to stay with your aircraft, though. We can't spare any of our pilots."

Jett recognized her now from the first run of the day, which seemed like a week ago after the night she'd had. "Sorry. I didn't recognize you, Major."

The major smiled, and Jett tumbled into the warm blue depths of her eyes. Quickly, she looked away.

"But not sorry you put yourself in the line of fire, is that it, Chief?"

"I was only thinking of the wounded."

"I know." The major extended her hand across the table. "Gail Wallace."

Jett took her hand. Her skin was smooth and warm. Warm like her eyes and her smile. Jett couldn't remember ever seeing anyone so beautiful.

She jolted back to the present as Linda rapped one hand on the side of the helicopter. "All set, Cap."

Jett watched the team lift the stretcher into the aircraft, and when she was sure her crew was secure, she took the helicopter up, Gail's face still vivid in her mind. She couldn't remember how many times

she'd glanced back to see Gail behind her, tending the wounded or leaning out the door, manning a gun while Jett took off under fire. She didn't want to think about Gail, not now, not while she was flying.

Flying had always been her escape. As soon as she was airborne, she was free—free from the memory of her father's anger, her mother's misery, her own helplessness. Behind the controls, she *was* in control. Even in the midst of combat, she felt only exhilaration, not fear. She made choices, and no matter the outcome, she would live or die by them. No regrets. Except one.

Ignoring the familiar ache in the pit of her stomach, she gave herself over to the strong, steady hum of the rotors above her head, like the heartbeat of a lover in the dark. Even knowing it wouldn't last, she welcomed the few moments of peace and headed toward home.