

The Colonel nudged her and Heather bounced up from her seat. There was a practical reason Heather tried to keep him by her side. He stayed focused while her mind tended to wander.

“Thank you for that warm introduction sir,” Heather turned toward the colonel as she spoke into the microphone. “You have no idea how much it thrills me to hear a Marine speak of an Army punk in such glowing terms.” Laughter. She thanked the other officers too. “I also thank my good friend Retired Colonel Joshua Wolfe.” Heather was looking back at her friend, so she didn’t see the surprised looks being thrown Sergeant Wolfe’s way. “He started out as a private pilot for my adorable husband, but he’s become more like a father to us. We love having him around. He’s surprisingly useful for an Air Force officer,” Heather grinned and looked at the men and women in the bleachers, “but he is a former Marine and that counts for a lot.” The roar of approval died down quickly. Heather continued her lighthearted banter for a few minutes before getting down to business.

“When I talk to schools, the kids always want to know if I was afraid when I was out there in the desert. They want to know how I did what I did. I know you guys don’t have those questions. You know the fear that keeps you alive. You know you push past the fear and let your training and your love for your brothers- and sisters-in-arms take you places you don’t know for sure you can go until you have to do it.”

Heather stepped to the side of the podium. “Some of ....”

She looked surprised when her voice didn’t carry through the loud speakers. She looked back at the Colonel with a grin and he shook his head with a small, fond fatherly smile. Heather stepped back behind the podium and reached for

the microphone.

“Does this thing come off? I really can’t stand behind a podium. I guess I forgot to mention that to your poor protocol officer.” She turned to the Colonel. “Remind me to put something in my packet, sir.” She raised both hands and trailed the right one away from the left. “Warning, does not perform well on a leash. Stubborn. Opinionated. Insists on her own way.”

Heather went back to figuring out how to get the microphone off the stand. The Colonel laughed with a tender smile and he looked nothing like his rigid, angry son.

“I’m firmly convinced that God allowed me to receive debilitating wounds because I was foolish enough to think I wanted to have a career in the Army. I’m rather a big girl.” Heather gave a triumphant cry as she got the microphone free. She talked as she unwound the cord from its stand and gave herself freedom to roam. “And I grew up sandwiched between kolohe ..., um, rascally brothers who are even bigger than me, so I’m a bit of a roughneck, a tomboy. Big, strong and like to fight. The military seemed the perfect place. Wrong! Living with the aforementioned brothers, I also learned contrariness. Say left, I wanna go right.”

Heather demonstrated and chuckles rippled through her audience. “That tends to really tick off a drill sergeant,” Heather said with chagrin and a touch of surprise. The chuckles turned into a roar of laughter.

“I have an inborn need for things to be done right, and that pretty much means my way, especially on my turf. I was a motor sergeant. I remember one day my C.O. came down,” Heather turned to walk back to the left. She spotted the officers sitting behind her and gave a start of surprise. “Oh no. Never mind. I probably shouldn’t tell that story now.”

She turned back to the bleachers where the vast majority were enlisted men and women. She grimaced and rolled her eyes. They acknowledged her discretion with another hearty laugh.

“So where was I? Oh yeah. Things done right, my way. That’s really how I got this,” Heather touched the Medal that hung around her neck. She looked down with a bemused frown. “I was just so ticked off because it wasn’t supposed to go that way. We were supposed to recover those vehicles and be back for dinner. No one was supposed to go home in a body bag.”

You could have heard a pin drop. The rage and tension in Heather’s voice echoed through the hearts in the room. The Colonel wasn’t the only one who felt tears on his cheeks before Heather was through.

“For God’s sake, that was my team, my squad, my family! That sniper shot my driver, PFC David Reynold Dixon. Barely nineteen. Not even a year out of A.I.T. Five ten, one seventy. Laughing brown eyes, blond hair. Collects football cards. Loves Nascar. A redneck out of a little place called Burnt Corn, Alabama. His girl was a freshman at Alabama University.

“She was there on a full-ride scholarship and he was so proud of her. ‘She’s smart, not like me,’ he told us. ‘I gotta get money from Uncle Sam ’fore I can go ta college.’ They’re going to be teachers. He was so funny and kind. He reminded me of my younger brother back home in Hawaii fighting his way through college but always so happy and cheerful and wanting others to be happy too.

“When that bullet hit him in the shoulder, spraying his blood and bone chips all over my cab, when he screamed, I just got so *ticked off*!

“I truly don’t remember much of what happened after that. It’s all a blur of rage, fear, pain and determination. Not on my watch! I will *not* send a body bag home.”

Tears rolled down Heather’s cheek. Her left fist was clenched, raised shoulder high, her head up, eyes closed. Slowly she dropped her fist and her head. She looked at the Marines sitting quietly before her.

“But I’m preaching to the choir. You know what I’m talking about. Been there, done that. Some of you could have, should have received this Medal, not me. Some of you were, are, wondering why me? Why not you? I have to confess that I wonder the same thing.”

Heather turned and looked at the Colonel. “Right after I got this Medal last winter, I asked Colonel Joshua that question. He didn’t disagree that others who have been downgraded have deserved it more. But he pointed out that the earning and the awarding are two separate acts. We control our destiny on the first, Congress controls the latter. What I did, I did with no thought for the Medal, only for the men and women I loved like family.

“God used circumstances to make sure I got this Medal, not because I deserve it more than others, but because he wanted me to use it for his glory. And today, what brings him glory is to give you this message.

“This,” Heather touched the Medal again, “is not the epitome of bravery. It is merely the emblem of something that’s at the tip of the iceberg of true honor and bravery. This is earned with a lot of help from those who train you to give you the skills and those who have loved you to give you the courage. It is earned with true bravery and honor.

“But there is a deeper bravery and honor that walks without either of those things, no love, no skills. The deeper, even truer honor is found in the little boy whose father beats him mercilessly, leaves scars on him, and yet he bravely chooses to grow into a man of caring and compassion. True honor is a boy whose father is murdered right before his eyes, whose mother takes her own life and leaves her body to be found by her son, and yet that son bravely chooses to reach for love instead of rage, life instead of death. True honor is the woman who is raped and bravely chooses to love the child that came from that rape. True honor is a grown man who admits that he’s destroyed his family and bravely chooses to become a better man.

“True honor doesn’t get medals in this life, but it surrounds us. It fills this

room. It's the young mother who refuses to abuse her children the way she was abused. It's the young man who keeps his virginity even though he is teased terribly about it. It's the father who has lost his son but he gets up every day and keeps living because there is no acceptable alternative.

"True honor is the refusal to accept the easy way out. True honor won't be victimized. True honor bravely rises above the morass of life and reaches for something more. True honor is rejecting the circumstances that are sitting right before you and bravely reaching for the better thing that's so much harder to get, even if it isn't the socially acceptable thing. True honor is rejecting the logical bitterness and anger, refusing to place blame and instead stepping up and bravely taking the responsibility for who you are and what you will be. True honor reaches for joy and love and life even in the midst of suffering and pain."

Heather walked back to the podium and slipped the microphone back in its stand.

"Some of you have been heroes out there," Heather pointed with her left hand then placed her right hand over her heart, "but you haven't become a hero in here yet. Some of you will probably never be heroes out there, but you have been a hero in here for a very long time. This Medal," Heather reached behind her neck and unfastened her Medal, "is really for you." She laid the Medal carefully so it hung from the front of the podium. "Because true honor and bravery is really who we are, not what we've done."

Tears streamed down Heather's cheeks as she turned and walked toward the Colonel. With tears on his own cheeks, Joshua stood and wrapped her in a warm embrace.