

A Paratrooper in a Pear Tree - Excerpt

A rat-a-tat-tat drew her glance from the cut on the man's cheek, and she looked outside. The snow fell so fast and furious now, Destiny could see nothing but a white sheet.

What if the snow doesn't stop until next spring?

Stop being dramatic, Destiny; at least we have heat.

Even though the cabin had warmed to tropical-beach temperature, an arctic shiver gamboled across her neck.

I'm a New Yorker. I can cope with anything.

Focus, focus. One line at a time, one task at a time. Clean his wound.

Sitting on her heels, she edged closer to him.

Getting the helmet off his head proved a harder task than she'd anticipated. Destiny worked up a good sweat and almost gave in to the temptation to turn the thermostat down a notch. Almost. One glance at the wet white snowflakes *thud-thudding* on the window nixed that notion.

He had to weigh well over two hundred pounds. His shoulders were rock hard, and both her hands couldn't span his corded neck. When she cut his helmet's chin strap, he groaned. She flinched at the low rumble and lost her balance. The hard hat jerked off his head, Destiny landed on her backside, and the helmet slid across the wooden floor.

Gasping for breath, she swiped a palm across her damp forehead and blew a lock of hair off her right cheek. "You owe me, Mister."

Shifting, she braced her elbows on her bent knees and surveyed her booty.

He had the usual armed-forces buzz cut, a square face, and a nose that had met a few fists at some point in time. "I bet you have an ego the size of this state."

She found gauze in the medical kit, dampened the cloth, and dabbed at the dried blood covering the thin diagonal slash running from one temple to his earlobe. His skin smelled of Irish Spring soap and leaves. The layer of stubble covering his chin felt soft and downy.

All angles and planes, his face held no hint of softness, his swarthy complexion spoke of mixed blood, and the last adjective she'd use for him would be handsome, because he wasn't.

Testosterone and pheromones jumped out of every pore, he smelled the way a man's man should smell, hard and capable and in command of his own destiny. A jagged scar ran along the line of a jaw punctuated by hollow cheek dimples and ridged bones.

Definitely not urban-male-model handsome, yet being mere inches away from those craggy features made her lungs work harder and her toes curl and uncurl. Leaning across his visage to sponge away the blood streaked into the tanned crinkles bracketing his eye, she muttered to herself, "You are *not* attracted to him. He probably barely graduated high school. Ten to one he hasn't a clue what *War and Peace* is, far less who wrote it."

"Tolstoy," he said.

Destiny yelped and sat back on her haunches.

He couldn't have woken up twenty minutes earlier?

How long had he been conscious? A lick of flame scorched her throat and cheeks; she studied the camouflage pattern of his jacket.

Please don't have heard that. Please. I'll volunteer at the food bank four times this year if he didn't hear that. She bit her lip to fight the urge to look at the ceiling.

"Who are you?" He had a voice like the deep, belly-echoing roar of a Long Island ferry idling.

She tried to even out her ragged inhales, trailed her gaze inch by inch up a throat the delicious color of caramel toffee, and swallowed around the molten ball sucking the moisture out of her mouth.

Hazel eyes, clear and focused, met hers; then his glance swept the cabin. "Where am I?"

God, what a voice. His words rumbled and shuddered up her spine, and the barometric pressure in the cabin dipped and hip-hopped.

It'd been a long time since she'd been with a man.

And she'd never been with a man whose muscles looked hard enough to ricochet bullets.

Stop, Destiny. Stop. You will not think of a roaring fire and naked, entwined limbs.

"Ma'am. Where am I?"

Ma'am? How old does he think I am?

"Healy, Alaska. Or near it anyway."

Wincing, he sat up. Thick fingers traced the line of the cut on his face. “I was supposed to touch down on the east side of Denali.”

“Denali?”

“Denali National Park. Two hundred acres are on fire.” He rose in one fluid, graceful move.

She stood right away. For such a big man, he moved lithely. Destiny felt like a dwarf and had to crane her neck to meet his gaze.

“I don't think you have to worry about fighting a fire,” she said. “It's blizzarding.”

His eyes flickered to the picture window and then back to her. “I can see that. Where did I touch down?”

“In the pear tree.”