

~ Three Days ~

by Catherine Burke

Disclaimer: This is a story I shelved because a friend of mine didn't like the end. Be warned this is not the typical story ending found on this web site. I'll tell you not to read at work because I'm the HR person at my work and would wonder why you are being paid to read fan fiction at work.

The characters are mine. The story is mine. Any likeness or similarity to anyone is a fluke. This is a work of fiction and belongs solely to the writer/owner, me.

Take care and thanks for the feedback. Burkcatherine@aol.com.

"I know I'm late." Maggie Carter proclaimed as she stepped on to the station platform. Her sisters were standing watch over the ten or so children they brought to the Santa Express, the Christmas train ride through the valley as Santa, Mrs. Claus and the elves read stories, passed out gifts and treats to all the girls and boys.

Huddling close against the cold, the children were buzzing about going on the train. The eldest of the children, Devon, leaned over the protective barrier trying to see the locomotive. The Express sold out each year, but still adventurous souls would come just to see the lighting displays in hopes of snagging a ticket on the holiday showcase.

"I just sold your ticket." Debbie, her oldest sister confessed. "Really Mags, you are always late and I...we thought you'd miss the train."

"What?" Maggie said as she registered what her sister said. She did have a tendency to run behind, but she always showed up. "Why?"

"The train is on time and you usually aren't. Besides, mom said it was okay. We thought you'd miss the train, besides there are kids wanting to see Santa. What are you, thirty two? You've seen Santa enough."

"Really Maggie, do you want to get on a train full of children who are all pining to see Santa?" Her sister, Ellen said. "I'll trade you. If you want to go, I'll give you my ticket as long as you watch the kids." Ellen said as she pulled her youngest, James on her hip. The toddler was crying and his nose was running.

"Oh, it's okay." The last thing Maggie wanted to do was be responsible for a sick two year old and three other children under the age of nine. She loved Ellen's kids, but all of them at once along with Debbie's four were just too much for the single aunt to handle. She saw the twinkle of humor in Ellen's eye and smiled. "You are so full of it. I'd still want to go see the Christmas lights." Just as they were speaking, Jean Carter walked up the platform and wrapped her arms around her youngest daughter.

"Blame me, darling. They were saying they were looking for people to give up their tickets so more kids could go. I love you, but we already gave up your ticket."

"I'll forgive you." A wave of relief washed over Maggie as she realized she didn't have to spend three hours on a locomotive with eighty screaming sugar high children. "I might walk the path and check out the displays." A smile appeared on her face as she looked towards the displays of lights set up along the tow path in the metro park. Her eyes drifted over the crowd gathered along the fence line. Couples waited patiently with overly excited children anticipating boarding the train. Her brown eyes locked on a tall confident frame leaning against the split rail fence. The woman's short dark hair fluttered in the cold breeze. Her torso covered by a black varsity coat with leather sleeves, her arms relaxed at her sides held lightly to the wood for support. Long blue jean clad legs were crossed at the ankles revealing the bright polish of her black boots. Maggie's heart began to race as her chest tightened. The woman was beautiful. Maggie's eyes flicker upward to her face and realize the woman was staring back.

"Jesus." Maggie stammered and lowered her gaze to her feet.

"What's wrong?" Debbie asked. Maggie looked back towards the woman than to her sister. "She's pretty." Debbie smiled. "And she's checking you out." Maggie's head shot up immediately and looked back at the woman on the fence. The woman was no longer on the fence, instead she was walking towards Maggie through the huddled children and adults. Maggie heard the snickers from her sister as she watched the woman move towards a group of holiday participants. The woman spoke to the group for a minute but turned, approaching Maggie. A smile lit up her face as she stepped on to the platform, holding Maggie's gaze.

A loud hiss of steam and a long pull on the whistle startled Maggie. When she looked back the woman was at her side. Standing close to five foot five, Maggie had to look up several inches to see the woman's face.

"Good evening folks." The stranger greeted the family. Her gaze made the rounds of the adults finally meeting Maggie's. Bright hazel eyes smiled softly at Maggie. "Forgive me for being forward, but I believe I heard you don't have a ticket."

"I..I.." Maggie stammered out.

"Actually, I sold Maggie's ticket. I knew my sister wouldn't mind." Debbie dropped all the right key words to let the stranger know they were family.

"When they asked for volunteers, I was the first to offer. I haven't been around kids in aw..ever." The stranger corrected her adverb. "With all the energy around here, I think I'd jump off the train and walk back." A small gray haired woman walked to the stranger's side and placed her arm around the slim waist.

"Did you find a friend honey?"

"My Aunt, Doris Randall. I'm Andi Cotton." The dark hair woman held out her hand to Maggie. Grasping the rough calloused hand filled Maggie's body with warmth. She tingled from her head to her toes. She smiled as she tentatively removed her hand from the taller woman's.

"Maggie Carter." Gaining her composure Maggie's voice got stronger. "This is my mother Jean and my sisters Debbie and Ellen. That brood over there is a combination of nieces, nephews, and a neighbor or two."

"Maggie gave up her ticket for one of the kids and I was just going to ask." Andi explained to her aunt then shifted her focus on Maggie. "Would you like to get some coffee?" Andi pointed towards the small café just a few hundred yards up the path.

"That would be great." Maggie felt the blush creeping up her throat to her cheeks. Hoping the cold temperature would hide the redness. Racking her brain to think of the last time she actually felt an attraction like this. She was out to her family and since the disastrous relationship with Jeanie, she had played the field a bit. Always keeping a safe distance from any dates or set ups. Debbie and Ellen were enjoying this moment all little too much as they poked at Maggie's side. Paybacks for the years of teasing them about the boys, she never cared for. Her mother looked at her for a moment trying to figure out what suddenly made her offspring go crazy.

"Andi is home from the Army. She's the best gift we could have for Christmas. Safe at home for a few days."

"I'm on active duty in the Middle East." She saw the pensive response from the Carter clan.

"Thank you." Ellen said. "I'm sure your family is elated to have you home safe."

"I'm glad to be home." She looked at Maggie trying to gauge the woman's reaction to her status as military.

The patrons began to line up along the fence as instructed by the Express employees. The women moved to the side out of the way. Their families followed the line as each car was loaded. The last member of the Carter family turned to wave at Maggie.

"Are you disappointed?"

"God no!" Maggie said as she put a hand to her chest. She suddenly felt guilty for not wanting to go. "I mean, I wouldn't mind spending time with my family but the train is a little much."

"I understand completely."

"Your aunt, is she..."

"She's not really my aunt. It's more of a term of endearment we use. She is actually the caregiver for my great aunt Sylvia. Doris is the neighbor and has looked after my aunt for years. We are pretty sure that Sylvia won't last past the New Year."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"She's had a very good life. She was a nurse in Vietnam and was awarded a purple heart."

Andi turned to look at Maggie. "I joined the Army to be just like her. I think I'm a little bit too much like her as far as the Army is concerned." When Maggie gave her a strange look, Andi shrugged her shoulders. "Don't ask, don't tell."

"Oh..." Maggie let a little smile appear on her face. Her gaydar was still intact. "We have a something in common."

"A gay great aunt?"

"No, a closer connection." Maggie said shyly as she pulled at the belt of her leather coat. She was actually flirting with the stranger next to her. Andi made no attempt to hide her sexuality and Maggie found that refreshing. Women had toyed with her before, making her guess about their sexuality. She wasn't bi-sexual. She wasn't curious. She was a lesbian.

As the train pulled away, Maggie turned to look at her newly found companion. Taking in Andi's sun darkened skin, such a contrast to the piles of billowy white surrounding them. When Andi's hazel eyes shifted her way, a strong flutter erupted in Maggie's stomach. *Nervous energy*, she pushed the feelings aside. This woman was playing havoc on her anatomy.

"Coffee?" The towering woman asked again. Her statuesque figure nervously swayed back and forth on her heels.

"Absolutely." Maggie replied.

They walked side by side, the soft crunch of snow under booted feet. Warmth greeted them as they entered the double doors of the diner. They were greeted by the hostess, an elderly gray haired woman. She showed them to a booth overlooking the holiday lighting displays and took their request for coffee. Andi flipped over their mugs as the hostess returned with a pot of the black liquid and menus. "In about an hour, the displays will light up the whole area." She said as she set the menus down and walked away.

"How long are you home?"

"Three more days."

"Three days?" Maggie asked as she glanced at the menu. The woman across from her was only going to be here for three days. When confused hazel eyes looked blankly at her, she explained further. Turning the ceramic dinner cup in her hands, Maggie inspected the contents of mocha colored liquid. She remembered a time when she never drank the caffeine enhanced substance, now she couldn't get out of the house without a cup.

"That's right. I ship out six hundred hours on Tuesday." The subject seemed to hang in the air, neither of them knowing what to say. Silence and awkwardness surrounded them.

"Hang on a second. I just buzz killed that moment, so let's start over." A curious hazel eyes lifted from the table top. "Maggie Carter." She stated promptly and held out her hand. A smile crossed the soliders face. Her hand was quickly engulfed in a warm strong calloused grip. This time Maggie held tight. She wrapped her fingers in Andi's settling their hands on the table top. "I'm youngest of the Carter clan... children. There are four of us. Many many nieces and nephews along with cousins out the ass. So many that I can't even start to begin. Currently single..." She added pressure to their hands for a moment than looked into Andi's eyes. "Taurus with Virgo rising..if you're into that kinda thing." A soft chuckle came from the dark haired woman. "Last serious relationship ended over a year ago, lost my dog but kept my truck."

"Do you like country music?"

"What?"

"Lost your dog, kept your truck, that's got to be a country song." Andi commented as Maggie tried to look offended.

"No, seriously, she took my dog, Scamp." Maggie looked at their hands, such a difference in the color of their skin. Andi's skin dark from hours in the sun. Maggie pale from not enough sun and the curse of Irish heritage. "Do you have any pets?"

"No, I'm not at home that much to take care of one." Andi cleared her throat and began to play along. "Andrea Cotton." A slight blush colored her cheeks. She was obviously not used to talking about herself or using her full name. "Andi, to friends and family. Andi with an "i" not a "y." Born and raised all over the world. My father was career military. He is from here and Sylvia is his youngest sister." She saw Maggie's eyebrows rise. "My parents were older when they had me. Both have passed. Sylvia is my only living relative. Currently single and according to current policy always single or they don't need to know. My lifestyle is not what the military wants it to be, but I tend to keep my personal life on the quiet side. Too many complications in what I'm part of to worry about who I'm sleeping with. And just an FYI, I'm not sleeping with anyone."

She looked out at the setting sun and watched the displays begin to come to life. The waitress came back and asked if they wanted to order food or needed more coffee. They both opted for more coffee. "I went to college on a ROTC scholarship. Enlisted after graduation and the rest is history." She smiled a toothy bright smile. "My birthday is September 7th. Not sure what that makes me except for the youngest in my class in high school and grade school."

"You're a Virgo."

"You're not upset with your family about selling your ticket?"

"No, I'm thankful. Can you imagine what it's like on that train? Almost a hundred kids all waiting to see Santa. Add sugar into that mix. Dear God. No, I love them more for it. What about you? Don't be offended, but you don't seem like the type to hop a train to the North Pole."

"I'm not." Andi let out a hearty laugh. "My aunt had the tickets and wanted to include me on the family thing. Mind you, I haven't seen them in eighteen months. I didn't want to disappoint her. Not sure what her thought pattern was in getting me a ticket. Giving my ticket up was an easy decision. Meeting and having coffee with you is just a bonus."

"I'm a firm believer that things happen for a reason. I'd rather be here with you than on that train with those kids." They both smiled and busted out laughing. "I couldn't see you on the train looking down at those kids telling them to be quiet."

"As if you would do better."

"Ummm tonight, if you're not busy, a friend of mine is having a party. Would you like to go with me? Be my date?"

"Date?"

"Yes."

"On one condition..."

"Which is?"

"No games. I'll be your date, but the first jealous girlfriend that shows up or starts a fight, I'm gone."

"Absolutely, you're only here for three days, I have to make most of it."

~~~~~  
"You're kidding, she came with Maggie?" Whispers called out.

"Yes. Do you believe it?" An answer returned.

"She's gorgeous. I didn't think Mags was dating?"

"Nothing serious since Jeanie dragged her over the coals. I heard military with this one..."

"I wonder how they met?" Another questioned.

Maggie shot the unruly group of woman huddled in the dinning room the nastiest look she could muster. It was always the same. The who, what, and when of the dating world. She knew two of them had asked her out. The other two had slept with Jeanie at one time.

Why was she here? Why had she dragged Andi here and subjected her to the single woman's club of Northbrook? The group's eyes darting quickly between Maggie and Andi. She cringed because she knew the hen house was just starting up the rumor mill. Warm hands covered her shoulders from behind. Her body tingled as Andi leaned close.

"If they make you uncomfortable," Andi whispered in her ear. Shivers ran down her spine. "I can go over and have a chat with them. Military style." Andi paused, her face pressed against Maggie's hair. Her lips still lingered close to Maggie's ear. The heat from her body pressed against Maggie's backside. The scent of vanilla and musk infiltrated her senses. She wanted to turn her head and capture Andi's lips. Her knees began to give out as the thought of touching Andi's body.

"No." Maggie covered Andi's hands with her own then turned to face her. Still holding on to her hands.

"Hey!" A yell from Lynn, the host, diverted their attention from each other. "You are standing under the mistletoe." Lynn pointed to the traditional foliage positioned in the doorway.

"We're under the mistletoe." Maggie repeated as she stared at Andi's full lips unconsciously licking her own dry ones.

"May I kiss you Maggie?" Andi quietly whispered as she leaned closer to Maggie, shivers running down her spine. With a nod, Maggie brought her lips to Andi's. Soft and tentative at first touch, she surrendered to the warmth of the woman whose arms formed a cocoon around her. Every question she had went out the window when Andi kissed her fully. Her arms lifted to Andi's neck, her fingers threading their way into the soft short raven hair pulling her close, wanting to brand her possession. A gentle hand touched her chin and eased her away. Opening her eyes she stared into questioning hazel eyes.

"You're beautiful Maggie. I can't make promises to you." She leaned forward and settled a tentative kiss on her forehead. "I'll cherish our first kiss. You make my heart ache." Strong arms tightened around her as Andi buried her face in Maggie's honey brown curls. A small kiss on her sensitive skin sent her senses on hyper drive.

"Let's go home." A whisper escaped her lips.

~~~~~

Maggie felt the soft press of lips against her neck, the touch of a hand to the underside of her breast. When a thumb brushed over her nipple, she cried out. Andi's lips dropped to her clavicle, across her deltoid and skimming a hot breath over her nipple to rest innocently between her breasts.

"Andi, please"

"Please what?"

"Don't tease." Maggie arched off the bed, trying to get closer to the source of her pleasure, but Andi pulled away. Hovering, Andi gazed down at her. Maggie reached up and placed her palm on the side of her face. Holding it there. Feeling the heat radiate off this woman made it real. She wasn't dreaming. "Please make love to me." Sincere brown eyes fixated on the bright hazel ones shining above her.

"With everything I have to give." The husky tone in Andi voice sent a rush to her nether regions.

Lowering her head, Andi captured a rose colored nipple with her mouth. Her touch tweaked the nipple to attention pebbling under the tease of tongue and gentle touch of lips.

Maggie's breath caught as Andi latched on to the peak with a nip of her teeth. Her breasts receiving equal attention, Maggie laced her fingers in rich soft hair to pull Andi closer. Her hips began to involuntarily move in rhythm.

With a groan, Andi raised her head and touched her lips to Maggie's swollen ones. "I want you so much." Tears hinted at the corners of her eyes. "I can't seem to get enough of you."

"I'm yours." Maggie's voice tore as Andi's lips descended on her and a muscular thigh settled between her legs. She could feel her wetness seeping as Andi pressed into her center. She bit back a cry of lust. Is that what this was, lust? For a woman who would be gone in a couple of days. Did she want this? Another surge of pressure against her center caused her to scream out "Yes!"

She didn't care to label what was happened between her and Andi. She wanted to feel. Andi's hands and lips continued to explore and conquer every crevice of her landscape. Except where her primal need lay. Again her hips raised in an offering. Andi's wandering hand wavered at the juncture of her hip.

"Are you sure?" Hot breath caressed her abdomen. Another cry of need escaped her lips as Andi trailed a line of kisses to the top of her coarse hair. "No promises." Andi lifted a thigh and draped it over her shoulder. Lowering her head, she placed a lingering kiss on Maggie's core. The stroke of her tongue through the smooth terrain of womanhood broke the dam of juices. A swirl of emotions flooded the brunette as a tongue and fingers stroked her core. They moved as one, harvesting the connection between them. Andi filled her physically and emotionally. The press of a tongue against her clit evoked another scream of passion. Holding Andi's head to her center as the waves of orgasm rolled over her, Maggie called to her as drowned in the sea of euphoria. She felt wrapped in the warmth of a thousand suns as she arched off the bed, calling Andi's name.

Coming to as fingers stroked her face and her hair, Maggie gazed at Andi's face. She smiled and lifted her body so she could touch Andi's lips with her own. Pulling away a few inches, she placed her hands on Andi's shoulder and waist. In a quick motion, she rolled Andi on her back. Straddling the soldier, she sat lightly upon her stomach. Painting her desire on Andi's stomach, she began the rhythm of rocking against Andi's skin. Andi placed her hands on her hips to steady and match her motion. Lifting her hands to her breasts, she heard Andi's quick intake of breath.

Maggie pulled and teased her nipples until Andi sat up and covered the tight bud with her mouth. Moving her hands to her hair, she lifted the mass off her neck. Andi caught her nipple between her teeth and nipped, lightly at first, then harder. Maggie's motion increased in conjunction with the pressure on her nipple.

"Let me touch you." The request from Andi was met by Maggie lifting her hips to allow Andi's hand between them. When the strong fingers slipped inside her, Maggie bit down on her lower lip to suppress the cry. She rode Andi's fingers as the raven haired woman pressed kisses on and licked her torso. Latching on to her breast again and again, Andi worked her mouth, her fingers and her thighs across every reachable inch of her body. The fire between them intensified. Maggie felt her body jerk as Andi's thumb worked against her clit.

"God, so good. You feel so good." Maggie's orgasm sent her collapsing on to Andi's chest. "I want to taste you." She said as she touched her tongue to the salty skin under her. She licked, sucked and bit Andi's flesh. Pulling a taut nipple between her teeth, Maggie slid her thigh between Andi's legs. The wetness she felt there saturated her thigh and made her groan aloud. She hurried her path down Andi's torso to her stomach and kissed her navel, brushing her nipples against the coarse tuft of hair between Andi's legs. She felt Andi jump from the contact. Maggie maneuvered her nipple to Andi's core, letting the bud graze against the bundle of nerves.

"Maggie..." The desperate cry of need emitted from the woman beneath her. Maggie lowered her body to Andi's center, inhaling the scent, memorizing every twitch, every moan, until she covered her with her mouth. Tasting Andi for the first time, Maggie ran her tongue along Andi's seam, listening for sounds of pleasure. Working her mouth on Andi's center, she placed her hands on her hips to pull her closer. When she took her clit between her teeth, she felt Andi surge off the bed, her legs clasp against Maggie's head. "Oh God!"

Maggie added her fingers into Andi's center. The soft warm velvet engulfed her. Maggie moved her mouth and fingers in time with the steady rhythm. Andi's hips pumped in time with her hand. Lifting her head to look into Andi's eyes, she felt the internal muscles clamp down around her fingers. Shifting the weight of her body to one hand as she continued to savor the sweet touch and taste of Andi.

"Andi...look at me." She waited until the desire hazed eyes lifted to her face. "You feel so good."

"Maggie..." The cry of her name was followed by Andi's center clenching on her fingers. Maggie kissed her with all the passion she felt as her own body released. Collapsing together, Maggie's hands and lips danced across the plane of Andi's neck, across the broad expanse of her back. This woman was a mixture of gentle warmth and demanding heat.

Wrapping her arms around the muscular shoulders, touching the soldier as much as she could, holding Andi to her, she asked. "How much time do we have?"

"No... no... Maggie, don't ask. Right now is what we have." Andi's eyes filled with concern as Maggie lowered her torso against her lover. She nuzzled her face against her neck, filling her senses with memories of scents and taste she would recall later.

~~~~~

Maggie regarded her reflection in the bathroom mirror. A royal blue dress clung to her figure. A plunging neckline came dangerously close to being risqué. A sapphire necklace centered against her sternum. A small red mark marred her neck. Brushing her hair to cover the love bite Andi had left brought a smile to her lips and a flush to her cheeks. *Andi would be leaving.* Her hands clenched the counter of the vanity. Tears threatened to break but she held back, knowing there were no promises. She would make the best out of the time they had left. Fixing her mascara, she put on the finishing touches. She pinched her cheeks and tried to smile. When the doorbell rang, a heavenly awareness surrounded her. Her steps rushed and her smile no longer fake, she opened the door.

Standing at her full height and with the chiseled demeanor of a soldier, Andi swept her cap under one arm and offered Maggie a dozen red tipped yellow roses with the other. The gold chevrons running down her sleeve glistened against the dark dress blue jacket. A crisp white shirt showed underneath as sharply pressed slacks that matched the jacket ran down her form fitting legs, ending at the tops of her shining black leather clad feet. At least a dozen ribbons covered the squared area over her heart. On the opposite side of her chest a bright brass name plate engraved with A. COTTON shone. Stoically dressed in uniform, the soldier in front of her took Maggie's breath away.

"Beautiful." Maggie stammered as she took the flowers, inhaling their fragrance. Andi smiled as Maggie turned and set the bouquet down on the entrance table. "And you, Ms. Cotton, look stunning." Maggie ran her hands along the four brass buttons up to the open collar. She saw the quick pulse of the vein in Andi's neck. She leaned forward and placed a feathery kiss on the artery. Her fingers examined the satin ribbons above her breast. In an impish gesture, she began to run a finger dangerously close to the sensitive nipple. "I could eat you up in this outfit." A hearty laugh erupted from Andi.

"I don't think I've ever heard that before."

"Maybe not to your face, but I'm sure it's been uttered behind your back." Maggie slid her hands around Andi's waist to grasp her backside firmly, then smacked her on the rear.

"What was that for?" Andi protested, knowing there was a playful meaning behind it.

"This... Captain." Maggie moved her hair, revealing the sucker bite.

"It's Lieutenant. And this is fine work." Andi leaned in and placed a kiss over the red mark. "You look and smell." Andi kissed her fully on the lips. Pulling back she smiled. "You look gorgeous and smell delightful. You maybe dangerous in the setting we are going to."

"Since it's a secret, I had to use my best judgment."

"Your judgment is very good."

"Let me put these in a vase, then we can leave." Maggie hurried in the kitchen, the roses in hand. She knew if she continued to stand there with Andi, they'd never leave the house. It was hard enough to let Andi leave this morning. She stopped and placed her head in her hands. *What would it be like Tuesday morning?* Squaring her shoulders, she couldn't think about that now. She heard the footfalls as Andi came into the kitchen. She leaned against the door jamb, her hands folded under arms.

"Do you need some help?"

Maggie shook her head, not trusting her voice at the moment. She arranged the flowers and ran water into the crystal container. She felt Andi's arms come around her and she swayed into their comfort. Andi rested her cheek on the top of Maggie's head. They stood together in silence. "Maggie." Her name filled the silence as a light kiss was pressed against her temple. She turned to face her soldier. Leaning forward a hand pressed securely on Andi's chest her lips searched for their counterparts. *Three days...no promises...Three days was all she could offer.*

~~~~~

Candles burned brightly on each side of the church. The seats were now empty as most of the Christmas Eve worshippers had left. At the main altar, a single blue spruce stood in the corner, covered in white lights and traditional decorations. A nativity scene placed near the altar so the parishioners could view the depiction of Christ's birth. When they pulled into the church parking lot, Maggie didn't know what to expect at first. She hadn't been to service in such a long time. All eyes seemed to be on the sharply dressed woman next to her as they walked up the side aisle. The navy blue outfit with golden adornments caught the eye of the young and old, men and women. She proudly served her country. Stopping in front of the statue of Joan of Arc tucked in a small alcove lit with candles, Andi knelt in front of the statue for a few moments, her head bowed in prayer. She stood and lit a candle. Turning to Maggie, she offered her hand. Maggie quickly grasped the strong fingers as they walked out of the church together.

"I was never very religious. I was raised Catholic." Andi explained as they made their way down the snow dusted sidewalk to the car. "I don't come to service here anymore. I'm not welcomed." There was a bite of disdain in her voice as she raised her eyes to the stone building.

"I come to pray to Saint. Joan." She explained as she opened Maggie's car door. When she settled behind the driver's wheel, she turned to her passenger. "Just being over there, it's different." Maggie didn't probe. What Andi saw or dealt with in the Middle East would cause anyone to turn to a spiritual thought. "I'd like to go to service at Pastor Mike's church. We are all welcome there. I hope you don't mind."

"I'd love to go with you." Maggie said as she touched Andi cheek.

"Thank you."

~

Unlike the Catholic Church, the UCC service was the celebration of the birth of Christ. As Pastor Mike delivered his message, he paused and asked everyone to pray for the soldiers who were not able to make it home for the holidays. Maggie felt her hand being squeezed. She looked in Andi's eyes, knowing she was grateful for being able to return.

"We are also pleased to have one of our own returned safely. Welcome home Andi." The congregation began to clap. Maggie placed an arm around her waist and leaned into her. She could tell Andi was uncomfortable at the attention, but graciously nodded to the elderly bald man at the podium. With a bit of coaxing, Andi got Maggie to take the offering to Pastor Mike with her. After the service, there was a gathering in the main hall. Refreshments were being served and a collection of toys was being collected to take to the local orphanage. Each year the orphanage depended more and more on the church to provide presents for the children.

"Nice to see you Andi."

"Good to have you home." The greetings were many that Andi received. Maggie stood in the wings, watching the interaction of the tall dark haired soldier and the members of her church.

"We don't see her often." Pastor Mike said as he stood next to Maggie. "She looks good. Tired and a little thinner but, I'd have her looking anyway as long as she is okay." Maggie nodded. She didn't want to let the pastor know she had never seen Andi look any different than she did now. "Do you have plans this evening?"

"Family things after this." Maggie knew she was expected at her sister Debbie's to help wrap presents once the kids had gone to sleep. They were also slated to stop at Andi's Aunt Doris's house for Christmas Eve visitation.

"I'm glad she's safe."

Me too... Maggie thought as her eyes locked with happy hazel ones. Three days was up in the morning. They had just returned from Maggie's parents' home. A flurry of children screaming and crying as the adults tried to ignore or pacify them. Andi was cornered by Jason, Maggie's father about the activity of the troops and the decision of the President. Maggie had to intervene on more than one occasion, reminding her father of Andi's status as her guest. As the night wound down, Maggie began to think of what the morning would entail. Andi would be leaving and still no conversation of future, just the promise of three days. She could feel the tears forming and the quiver in her lower lip didn't help. When Ellen placed a hand on her arm, Maggie looked at her older sister.

"I don't want her to go."

"Maggie, you knew who she was and what she did when you met her. Enjoy what you have and don't let her forget you." Ellen kissed her on the forehead and gave her a hug.

~~~~~

Her fingers absently traced the brass buttons on the front of the dress blue uniform. A crisp starched white shirt stood out from under the dark material. Ribbons for valor and service covered the left breast. Her finger traced them as she had the first time she had seen them. Roaming freely, she touched each ribbon, knowing what an honor it had been to earn them. Golden piping and decorative bands were along the seam. The chevrons were symbols of her rank. The small polished brass plate bore the name of A. Cotton over the area just above the right breast. She traced her fingers over the inlayed letters.

"They're ready." Pastor Mike said as he touched Maggie's shoulder. She gave him a nod and put on a brave face.

Taking her place, she stood waiting. When the first round of gunfire filled the air, Maggie's resolve crumbled. The seven members of the honor guard positioned their rifles again. The second wave of shots filled the air. When the third round rang out, the twenty one gun salute had concluded. The members of the guard held the draped flag off the mahogany casket. When the lieutenant brought the folded flag towards the family, Maggie was overcome when he handed her the symbol of her fallen lover.

"It was her wish Miss." He backed up two steps and saluted. Orders were given and the detail proceeded out of the cemetery.

Tears streaming down her face as she sat there questioning why she was to receive this honor. She had only known Andi for three days. Three days special days filled with love and need. She wished she had a lifetime to love the dark haired woman, time to wake up in her arms. To learn more of her likes and dislikes. To learn what it was like to have an argument and make up afterwards. She wanted to see the sparkle in the hazel eyes that haunted her dreams. Her shoulders convulsed as sobs racked her body as the pain tore her soul apart.

Andi didn't promise her anything more than three days. Maggie didn't want the flag of honor, for giving a life to her country. She wanted more than three days. She wanted Andi at her side. Three days wasn't enough. It would never be enough.

The End.

---