

ONE FOR THE ROAD Epilogue by Lynne Marshall © 2011

Six Months Later

Tyler stood on a makeshift stage in a military hangar at the USO Camp Liberty in the heart of Baghdad. Right or wrong, the war had happened and the soldiers needed to be respected for stopping their personal lives to fulfill a commitment to their country. That, and that alone, was why he was here. The soldiers deserved a break from the personal hell they'd been through with some down home, country music entertainment compliments of the Tyler White Band.

Hundreds of soldiers surrounded the venue. He'd traded his regular clothes for fatigues. So had the band. The astounding welcome touched Tyler more deeply than he could have ever imagined. It clogged his throat and squeezed his heart, and he worried the surge of emotion might interfere with his singing.

He glanced at Bear who looked svelte and tidy now that Marlene had gotten her hands on him. He still hadn't gotten used to his steel guitar player's transformation. At least Ricky-Bob hadn't changed his style. He wore camouflage soldier pants with his black leather vest over a khaki colored military shirt with retro hair piled high and stuck in place with styling paste. R.B. had made the trip alone as Gina couldn't leave the kids to accompany him, especially since she was expecting their third child.

J.T. looked happier than Tyler'd ever seen him. He'd shocked Tyler into a state of awe when he'd announced his marriage plans to Tammy a few months back. She couldn't

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take a leave of absence from her court reporting training, so he'd traveled to the Middle East alone, separating from his bride for the first time since they were married. Now, sporting a wedding band, J.T. prepared for the next tune by picking up his wire brushes and snare drum.

It was time to sing the song that had brought Tyler, "the next Bob Hope-ful" halfway around the globe.

Sundown Records had given him free reign at the studios and he and the band had cut the finest CD of his dreams. The first single release was *Star Spangled Heart* followed by *What Would it Take?*, both inspired by Dee. Life was bittersweet that way.

Star Spangled Heart had landed in the country top twenty with a bullet after its first week of airplay, then the song rocketed to number one in an amazing two weeks' time. Even Toby Keith hadn't ever done that.

Tyler looked toward the side of the stage where a pert little lady in camouflage stood watching and decided to let the audience in on a personal story.

"About eight months ago, I met a person who suggested I write this next song." He paused as his gaze scanned the vast audience seemingly rapt by his every word. He smiled. "She's here today and I'd like to introduce y'all to her."

He waved Dee out from behind the heavy olive green curtain.

"This here is the light of my life, my new wife, Dee White."

The audience roared its approval sending a thrill from Tyler's feet all the way up to his chest.

"Now, you may think this is one hell of a way to spend a honeymoon, but for Dee and me, it just seemed like the right thing to do. Especially since her son, Specialist

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Randall John Palmer, just started his first tour of duty stationed right here in Iraq. We'll see you after the show, Randy. God bless."

He smiled down at Dee. She looked cute as could be under her serviceman's ball cap and wearing baggy fatigue pants, shirt and thick black boots. She smiled back at him as he wrapped his arm around her and gave her a kiss on the lips in front of the world. As always, the kiss was special, soft, welcoming and meant only for him. Something he could never get enough of.

The servicemen howled and made catcalls, no doubt wishing they could lay big wet kisses on their own loved ones. He wished they could, too.

He released Dee from his grasp, and motioned for her to stick around. "Are we ready to play?" Tyler asked the band.

"Hell yeah!" they yelled back in unison.

The song began.

"We all sing about freedom, in the land of the free.

We talk about justice, it's real for you and me.

About the blessings heaped upon us, we all rave, 'cause it's true,

And my star spangled heart, loves your red, white and blue.

Tyler yelled into the microphone to the troops. "Sing along with me!" He pulled Dee to his side for the refrain and she sang, too. The thrill of having hundreds of voices sing the words he'd scribbled out on an envelope in the back of Dee's RV astonished him. Ragged sounds from men sleeping in the desert and risking it all for their homeland flag brought a lump to his throat. He glanced down at Dee who looked overwhelmed and was already in tears, and it made his vision go blurry. This was the best moment he could

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ever imagine after saying “I do” to the true love of his life. He felt blessed that she was there by his side to share it with him. Overwhelmed with emotion, his voice cracked and he couldn’t get the final notes out.

Thank God and Sundown records for recording his song and putting it on the airwaves, the crowd of soldiers knew the words and picked up where he left off...

“Red, white and blue, stars and stripes, I love you,

From the East to the West, we stand taller than the rest.

U. S. of A., old glory, statue in the bay,

American independence...will always see us through,”

Finally, Tyler found his voice and joined Dee, his band and the crowd.

“That’s why we love, the red, white and blue.”

The End