

Up, up and Away

Emily Kerr languorously stretched across the expanse of the silk coverlet draping the bed of the Palm Springs Resort.

<http://www.palmsprings.com/active.html>. Decorated in a light ocean green palette, it reminded her of the Pacific Ocean they'd left behind yesterday. Cool, comfortable and peaceful.

Pulling one of the overstuffed feathered pillows to her chest, Emily opened her eyes a crack, to the October morning light streaming through the large glass windows. Light danced off the red desert mountain vista beyond. The view was as unbelievable as the room and just as serene in its own way.

When they'd driven into town, Emily had resented Reid Carter taking control but at this moment she was grateful he had. The resort was definitely nicer than the motel she'd arranged for them to stay in. That was a major understatement. They were in two completely different ballparks. The resort was so wonderful she'd had to tell Carol www.carolburnside.blogspot.com about it.

Her crew member, Billy Starnes acted the kid he still was, when they'd driven up to the entrance and under the bright

yellow awning. As the valet pulled up in a golf cart and asked if he could help them, Billy's reaction had turned comical. He'd never stayed anywhere this fancy. It had taken all her willpower not to outright laugh at him. Not wanting anyone else driving the SUV with her hot air balloon stored on the back, she asked if there was a spot to park in order to keep the balloon out of harm's way.

"I'll see that it's put into a secure lot." Reid assured her. "I don't think anyone who can afford to stay here needs to steal a balloon," he whispered conspicuously.

She wrinkled her nose. "Maybe not, but it's my balloon and without it I can't win the race."

"It'll be fine, Em," he said with a humoring grin. "Wait here and I'll go find Steve."

"Told you I don't like--"

"To be called Em. I know, Em."

Reid returned minutes later with a good looking blond gentleman dressed in a suit. They walked towards her and Billy still sitting in the SUV. It was obvious by the way Reid slapped him on the back that they were close friends.

When they arrived at the SUV, Reid introduced Billy and her to his friend, Steve. He raised his eyebrows at Reid at the

mention of her name as if they share a secret she wasn't privy to.

Steve shook hands with she and Billy. "Welcome to Palm Canyon Resort. I hope you enjoy your stay. I understand you're concerned about your balloon."

She nodded.

"I've put you in a three bedroom cottage in the back of the resort. We'll also have security checking by regularly. If you need anything just let me know. Enjoy your stay." He turned to Reid. "Nice to see you, buddy."

Reid climbed back into the SUV and gave Billy instructions on which way to drive through the manicured and palm line roads that twisted and turned through cottages spaced far enough apart to be private. In front of each building were bright pink flowers that stood out against the pale yellow stucco backdrop of the cottages walls.

"Billy, why don't you back into the parking spot," Emily said. "I can put a lock on the basket, but I want the box to be close to the door." Emily couldn't help but worry. If something happen to her balloon she'd have nothing. Nothing.

"Will do," Billy said.

Reid led them to their cottage and unlocked the door. Emily entered ahead of him and stepped into a spacious room with

windows across the back and filled with overstuffed chairs and ottomans grouped together to take advantage of the view. Three doors led to separate bedrooms and there was a small kitchenette in one corner. Sliding glass doors opened onto a tiled area where a white patio table and chairs set. Beyond that was an azure blue pool with a Mexican tile fountain bubbling water.

Reid came up beside her. "What do you think?"

"It's amazing," Her voice was breathy with amazement.

"It is, isn't? I love coming here. I don't come here often, but I come every chance I get."

"I can see why you'd want to." She faced him. "We can't stay in places like this every night, you know?"

"I understand. This is your race, your call. I won't butt in again."

"Thank you. I'd appreciate it. But somehow I doubt it." Emily murmured the last few words.

"Boy this is some place," Billy said as he went from one bedroom to the next. "I'm taking the blue bedroom if that's okay?"

"Sure." Reid said before turning back to Emily. "Steve said to use any and all of the amenities. I'm going to meet him for dinner. Would you and Billy like to join us?"

Emily shook her head. "I don't think so. I have to check in with the ballooning committee about the weather in the morning."

"I figured that's what you'd say. I'll see if Billy wants to go." He headed toward the bedroom Billy had disappeared into.

A few minutes later, Billy stuck his head through the door of her room and said, "I'm out of here. I'm going to check out the night life. Want to go?"

Emily had papers spread out across her queen size bed and was trying to figure out what she needed to do to better her chance of moving into first place. "You're not going to dinner with Reid?"

"Naw. I'm going to find something more exciting. Girls. Reid's buddy gave me one of the hotel cars for the evening."

"Be careful. Don't do anything stupid. We've an early morning."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Is Reid a cool guy? Boy, I like this place." He waved his hand at her and was gone.

"Yea. Pretty cool," she muttered. And handsome, rich, funny, demanding, controlling... The list seemed to go on and on.

A few minutes later, the outside door opened and closed again as Reid left.

Emily looked at the clock on the white bedside table. An hour had passed. Hungry, she ordered a burger from room service

and had a quick bath while she waited. Tossing her ball cap on the bed, she pulled the band holding her hair out, and shook her head.

Stepping into the bath, she found it had mirrored walls. Too much really.

She studied herself. She wasn't ugly. Her breasts were full, her figure slim but shapely. If there was anything unattractive it would be the scattering of freckles across her nose. Freckles were for children, not for a grown woman trying to build a business. Her looks were nothing outstanding, just ordinary Plain Jane, and John, her ex-boyfriend, had seen to it that she didn't believe any differently.

Dripping wet, Emily twisted her hair into one of the plush white towels. She'd wrapped another around her when there was a knocking sound. Stepping into her bedroom, she found Reid standing in her doorway with a tray in his hand.

Emily's squeak of surprise brought a smile to his lips. She gripped the edge of the towel holding it tightly in place across her chest. "What're you doing in here?"

"Well, that's certainly not much of a welcome. And here I am bearing your food."

"I thought you were eating with your friend?"

"I was, but he got called away, so I thought I'd see if you'd changed your mind about joining me. When I got back the bell boy was here, so I just asked him to bring me something also."

The food he held smelled heavenly. Her stomach made a loud noise in response.

"That wasn't every ladylike."

Blood crept to her face. "I'm starved."

"Why don't we eat out on the patio? It's nice tonight."

She'd wanted to enjoy the fall sunset and that would be the perfect place to do so but she hadn't plan to watch it with Reid. Somehow it seemed too intimate but being inside alone with him wasn't much better. "Okay. Let me get some clothes on first."

Emily watched as Reid's gaze started at her feet with the fire engine red toenails, and moved up her body until his eyes met hers. With each inch he studied, a wave of heat followed until she was sure her face was as ruby as her hair.

"That's a fetching outfit. You don't have to change on my account."

Emily closed the door firmly behind her making him move quickly to avoid being hit in the face. His gravely chuckle carried through the door making her shiver.

Reid was already a handful where their business agreement was concerned, and no way would she allow him to have a personal affect on her. But with his charm, there would be no controlling him if he knew he could rattle her.

Seated at the small table outside, Emily took a few bites of her burger before Reid's meal arrived. They ate in silence at the small table. Finished, she moved to one of the cushioned lounges to watch the sun's final farewell to the day. Reid remained at the table, stretching out his long legs and crossing them at the ankles.

Emily was engrossed in the oranges, reds, corals and pinks as they moved over the large mesa before her.

Reid took the moments while Emily was so absorbed in the view to study her. The waning sun shining in her hair mirrored the rusty autumn colors of the desert. Man, it was something else. He'd never seen hair like hers before. The light seemed to dance through the curls. She'd worn it under a cap all day and he'd never guessed her tresses were that beautiful. He'd always gone for blonds but a redhead might make a nice change.

He'd been working on the new fabric for the balloon leaving little time to socialize, and now was not the time to lose focus. His company had been testing the material for months.

This was his opportunity to see what everyday wear and tear did to it. He'd a job to do, and Emily with that glorious hair could ruin his concentration. This trip was about testing Skytech, not chasing a prickly woman.

"It's gorgeous." She watched the plain before her.

"Yeah," His eyes were on Emily.

She glanced at him. "You weren't even looking at the sunset."

"I was too."

He left the table and eased the other lounge close to her, stretched out. Emily shifted as far away from him as possible. If she kept this up he wouldn't be able to resist stepping into her personal space. Heck, why was she so jumpy around him anyway?

Crossing his arms over his chest, he relaxed. It'd been a long time since he'd watched a sunset with a pretty girl. Reid planned to make the most of this one. Silence surrounded them. Minutes later a light show of stars began appearing. The small lights lining the patio illuminated the area with a soft glow.

"The stars are amazing," Emily whispered in awe. "I'm glad I didn't miss it."

"I'm glad I didn't either." He would always remember the fire and lights in Emily's hair.

She started to rise.

"I ordered dessert." He wanted her to linger. "Want to share it with me?" Reid pointed toward the take-out box on the table.

She stood. "I don't think so."

"Come on try it. It's Triple Chocolate Canyon Cake. The specialty here. I order it every time I visit."

Emily hesitated, and then sat again.

"I even remembered to bring two forks."

He retrieved the plate from the table. Removing the wrapping, he showed her the five-inch high marble cake with thick chocolate icing. Even by the faint light, Reid could see he had her attention. So, she does have a weakness.

Emily sat on the lounge again and he took his place next to her. He cut off a bite of cake, put it in his mouth and then pulled the fork through his lips, his aaah coming out long and low.

She watched him intently.

"Changing your mind?"

"Maybe, a bite," Emily said.

Holding the plate steady, he let her scoop a fork full of cake.

"Mmm," flowed from her mouth.

She returned the fork. He ate a few bites more before he offered her the utensil again.

Emily didn't hesitate to take it this time. She made a scene of eating the second morsel as much as she had the first.

Reid grinned as Emily made that delicious sound again. Did she make that same noise when she was enjoying other pursuits? He was tempted to find out.

She reached for another forkful.

"I thought you only wanted a couple of bites."

"This is really extraordinary cake." She licked her lips.

Reid offered her the last bite, and she accepted, with a grin.

"I should've never started. I can't stop when I do. Now I'll have to work the calories off."

"I wouldn't think you'd have to worry about those. You look great."

"Thank you. But I know better."

"There's a great workout room here and the pool is available."

"I like to swim but I didn't bring a suit with me. This isn't a vacation trip." The last words were said like a teacher reprimanding an unfocused student.

"You know what they say, all work and no play...get a suit at the boutique inside the lodge. Just charge it to the room."

"I couldn't do that. That wouldn't be right. You're supposed to be paying for race related items only."

He'd no intention of fighting with her over that matter. "Look at that sky. Beautiful. The stars remind me of your freckles in the sunlight. Small hints of beauty appearing."

Her hushed thanks could barely be heard in the still, dark air. He'd embarrassed her, but the inflection in her voice said she'd been pleased by the compliment also.

"I can see the appeal of Palm Springs. The views here are unbelievable." She stretched her pale neck further back, exposing it fully.

He couldn't agree more about the view. A sudden desire to plant kisses along the length of her neck filled him.

"I have to go in." She turned toward the door. "We've an early morning."

"Why? You don't race again until day after tomorrow."

"I want to work on a couple of maneuvers. Practice always helps. You don't need to come. Billy and I can handle it, if you want to sleep in."

"No way. I'm all in on this race. I plan to be part of the winning team." This cross country race was going to be more interesting than Reid had first thought.