



SEEKING SOLACE

Lorie Wolford

"What'll ya have?" the bartender said over his shoulder to a patron taking a nearby seat. Absent-mindedly, he stroked the bottom of his salt and pepper handlebar moustache before glancing at the mirror behind the bar. Recognition of the patron's face caused a tiny frown of concern to flit across his features. Turning, he continued, "The usual?"

Tossing down a newspaper and making himself comfortable, the young man leaned forward, resting crossed forearms on the bar. Without raising his eyes from the polished surface of the counter, he nodded. A weary sounding "um-hmm" was the only verbal response he gave.

A scotch on the rocks was quickly placed before him and he downed it in a few quick swallows, unaware of the less than covert glances thrown in his direction.

Patron and bartender they may have been, but their relationship also bordered on friendship. Freddie once again groomed his moustache with the back of his hand. As he did so, he wondered if he should get involved with affairs best left undiscussed. Dixon had been a long time regular, the cheery sort, a bit on the shy side but never slow to smile, the kind of guy who wouldn't hesitate to help someone out, the kind who'd have 'a few' and then head home. Watching him, Freddie wondered what was bringing the increasingly morose young man in for lengthier visits. Sincerely liking the man, it bothered him to see the almost haunted look on a face that should have been grinning. But the bartender had rules for touchy situations like that; don't ask questions and don't offer advice. Fight-

ing the urge to break his own rules, he refilled the glass and moved down the length of the bar to take another order.

Sighing deeply, Dixon cupped both hands around the glass and tilted it slightly in his direction. His mournful expression slowly drained from his face as an inner warmth began to wash away the heaviness enfolding his heart. That didn't last long however, as he began staring into the glittering depths of his glass and memories, unwanted memories, stabbed deep.

A mild breeze lazily drifted through the large open doors of Pan Pacific's hangar #5. Inside, airplanes of various types were being disassembled for repairs or maintenance checks. Several men stood off to one side of a Ford Tri-motor discussing a problem. Two other men, supposedly busy making repairs, were trading tall tales and jokes best not retold at dinner parties. In disbelief, one threw a dirty rag at the other. Before too long they were dodging rolled up rags and generally ignoring the tasks before them until a quick warning whistle from their new boss brought the festivities to an abrupt halt.

Not long after he had gotten things calmed down, Darryl Dixon strolled toward the wood and glass enclosure that served as his office, noticing as he drew closer to it, the piles of service manuals, electrical schematics and requisition forms strewn about the desk top. A worried frown creased his pleasant features as he surveyed the

clutter. He was quickly realizing that his new job not only entailed assigning men to repair crews but also handling incredible amounts of paperwork, paperwork that was rapidly smothering every piece of furniture in the tiny office. The frown deepened as he wondered when he was going to be able to attend to it. After all, there were just so many hours in a day and insane thoughts of secreting it in the garbage can danced through his head.

All concerns over the matter instantly faded as he stopped just outside the glass paned door that bore the words *Chief Mechanic* in bold letters. With a faint smile tugging at the corner of his lips, he took a second to stare at the words before entering the room. The look of pride was still on his face as he maneuvered around the antiquated desk and settled into a chair that was a certifiable relic from the Jurassic age.

Glad to have a few moments of rest he sighed and leaned back, eliciting an almost human moan from the chair's springs. Dixon grimaced as he looked downward, mentally resolving to retire the poor thing before it died with him in it.

A grumbling from the pit of his stomach reminded him that lunch time was approaching but he glanced at the clock on the wall anyway. The newly hung diplomas and photo of his mother and sister drew his attention away from the clock and he stared in that direction as if seeing them for the first time. His sister Katie smiled broadly, looking pixieish; adorable rather than beautiful. Yet even if she had been strikingly attractive, her beauty would have gone practically unnoticed beside that of their mother. Dixon smiled gently as he studied her face, just the sight of it reminding him once again of the boundless love she showed her children. But the more he looked, the more objective he became, realizing that she looked very small and fragile beside Katie. Dixon was far from religious, but he took a few seconds to mentally thank God for helping him get the kind of job that allowed him to give his mother and sister a reasonably comfortable life while the country was still in the midst of the Depression.

Still deep in thought, the harsh clamor of the telephone almost caused him to jump out of the chair. For a panic-stricken moment he couldn't find it, buried as it was beneath an open service manual. Flipping the book with his left hand, he put it to the side, leaving it open to serve as a reminder that he still had a problem to solve, while the other hand snatched up the receiver. After listening for a moment, the grin reappeared on his face.

"Hiya, Charlie, how ya doin'?' Hey thanks! Well, it did come as a surprise...No, everything's great!...Yeah, couldn't be better...I just wish I could borrow Bailey's secretary for a day...or two...or three...Yeah, I'm drowning in paperwork...Whatta ya mean 'already'? I remember when you took over at Boeing. You kept moaning about writer's cramp...Hah, my memory isn't that bad...Oh, no! How come every time I say something it always reminds you of a funny story...Listen, the last one was half an hour long...Okay, okay, I'll listen, but only if you promise to make it short."

Barely five minutes into the conversation Dixon caught sight of a red haired man, nattily dressed in a vested suit, approaching his office. He watched as the guy paused just outside the door, raising a well groomed hand to knock lightly on the pane of glass.

Without lessening his grin, Dixon waved to his visitor with a beckoning gesture. The phone remained nestled between right ear and shoulder but he forced back a laugh as the stranger entered the office. Palm upward, Dixon gestured toward the room's only other chair. Expressive brown eyes, alight with joy, watched 'his' men preparing to break for lunch as he continued to listen to the voice on the other end of the line.

"Listen, I gotta go," he said suddenly. "Oh, and thanks for callin'."

Seeing the serious expression on his visitor's face caused the boyish grin to instantly disappear. "A friend of mine calling to congratulate me," he stated uncertainly, feeling the need to explain himself even to this stranger.

Not waiting for further comments, the visitor introduced himself. "I'm Whittaker, Evan Whittaker, from the administration office. I came by simply to inform you that Mr. Bailey wishes to see you at your earliest convenience."

Rubbing his jaw, the chief mechanic glanced at the clock on the wall. Knowing Bailey as he did, 'earliest convenience' meant immediately, regardless of the fact that it was almost lunch time. He also reminded himself that Bailey was the one who had recommended him for the position in the first place. Whittaker, his task finished, got up to leave.

"Thanks," the mechanic called out after him, "I'll be there in a second."

As soon as Whittaker exited the hangar, Pan Pacific's chief mechanic peeled off his wrinkled, grease spotted coveralls, revealing tan trousers and a tan and blue plaid short-sleeved shirt. Briskly, he walked to the bathroom to wash up, more conscious of his appearance now that one member of the airline's upper echelon wanted to see him. He took a second to study his reflection in the mirror, ruefully noticing his disheveled appearance and the dark streak of grease that extended from cheek to jaw, passing through the earliest beginnings of a beard.

Quickly washing his face, he then ran his fingers through wavy brown hair, trying to look a bit more orderly. *It isn't perfect, but it'll pass*, he told himself. *Besides, he knew what I looked like when he promoted me.* That thought provided no comfort. He continued to feel self-conscious because deep down he was still asking himself if he was right for the job, if he was capable of handling all the responsibilities that went with the promotion. Troubleshooting, he knew, would provide no problems. Dealing with hierarchy, well...only time would tell for sure.

Quickly exiting the washroom, Dixon caught the two pranksters reengaged in their game of rag-

dodging as one particularly grimy piece of cloth sailed straight toward him. Instinct alone saved him from catching the rag full in the face.

"Hey, come on you guys, cut it out!" Dixon called out to them. His tone however, did not match the meaning of his words. Trying to force back the grin he added, "You know, if you don't stop goofing off I'm gonna be the one Bailey'll blame. So do me a favor and try behavin' for a while."

"Yes, Sir!" they shouted in unison. "Right away, Sir!" Both men were experiencing considerable difficulty trying to keep a straight face, but suddenly Jerry Hicks looked thoughtful. "Oh, by the way, how's your mom feeling?"

Dixon's smile softened. "Fine...just fine. Listen, she really loved the flowers you brought and I want you to know I really appreciated your going up there to see her."

"No problem. Besides, I was glad to do it. Take it from me, being in the hospital can be a miserable experience and it always helps to have company. And on top of that it was the least I could do. After all, she's been like a second mother to me."

Richie Porterfield nodded as if to second the statement then asked, "Going someplace interesting?"

Dixon smirked. "Depends on whether or not you call a visit to Bailey's office interesting."

Making several sympathetic noises Porterfield said, "Have fun!"

"Yeah, sure," Dixon replied with a wry grimace. He began to walk away but turned suddenly and said, "Oh, before I forget, you guys wanna go to Freddie's after work?"

"Silly question," Porterfield answered. "You honestly expect us to refuse an opportunity like that? Of course we'll be there."

As Dixon walked to the administration building he became wrapped in thought, trying to figure out the purpose for the impromptu meeting, while at the same time fervently hoping it was routine procedure. Before he realized it he was standing before Paul Bailey's door. Tapping lightly brought no response so he repeated the action, more firmly than the first time.

"Come in," a rich baritone voice called from inside.

Dixon's hand hovered uncertainly over the door knob for several seconds before he grasped it and entered the office, a real office with a fancy new desk, several mahogany bookcases, and carpeting on the floors. None of it served to put him more at ease but he moved softly forward anyway.

"Close the door, will you?" Bailey said pleasantly, the tone of his voice immediately reassuring Dixon that nothing serious was wrong. At least not in how he was performing his job. After light-

ing up a cigarette Bailey continued, "Have a seat. So how are things going, Darryl?"

Dixon blinked, arching his eyebrows slightly. Last week and on the other rare occasions he had spoken to Bailey he had simply been Dixon. Not Mr., not by the nickname his co-workers used, and certainly not by his first name.

"Everything is...fine, Mr. Bailey," he responded quietly, uncertain of where the conversation was leading.

"Good, good. Now for future reference, call me Paul. After all, you have moved up in the world and it's time we got to know one another better."

"Oh, okay...Paul."

"Excellent," Bailey chuckled, "you're learning. Now why don't you relax. You're making me nervous. Have a seat. Smoke?"

"No, thanks," the mechanic replied as he sat down. Some of the tension had drained from his body but its presence was still noticeable by the wide-eyed way he watched Bailey's every movement.

"I'm glad to hear that you're adjusting well. It's always easier when one is already familiar with the way things are run, isn't it?" Bailey said, more statement than question. "I suppose you're wondering why I called you in here?"

"Yeah, uh...yes." Dixon corrected himself.

Bailey smiled as he explained, "Well, it's actually quite simple. First, I wanted to see if you were having any problems, but you've already answered that one. And second, to tell you that new applicants for repair crews will be coming in Monday. All you have to do is screen them and pick out the two you feel best suited for the job. That's one of the fringe benefits of entering into a supervisory capacity, you know, the opportunity to hire and fire."

Dixon frowned slightly. "But -- but I have a full crew already."

"Not after today."

"I don't understand."

"We're weeding out deadwood, Darryl, my boy. And two men in your area fit the description."

"Which two?" Dixon asked already suspecting the answer.

"Hicks and Porterfield."

Without thinking, the mechanic blurted out, "But they're my friends!"

"I know. That's exactly why I had your predecessor evaluate them before you took over. It's out of your hands. In fact it was never in your hands. Your only job is to give them the news. It's about time you learned to handle the more unpleasant tasks. There aren't many but this, unfortunately, is one of them. If they want expla-

nations just tell them that they weren't performing their jobs as they should have been and if they want further details, it was because they spent more time playing games than working. Now I want you to see to it that their belongings are gathered up and escort them out. Oh, and make sure they don't walk off with any company property. That means tools in particular. Got it?"

Numb, Dixon could only nod.

"Good. Well now, Darryl, you enjoy your lunch."

Stiffly rising to his feet, his face a mask of shock and dread, Dixon left the office, too upset to bother closing the door.

Freddie stepped from the back room with a fresh bottle of scotch. Without pause he opened it and filled the empty glass. Unhesitatingly, Dixon brought the glass to his lips. The act appeared to be done more out of habit than conscious thought. His fingers strayed to the newspaper, began to open it, then ceased all movement as though uneager to see what was within. His courage seemed to fail and he let the paper drop back to its original position, draining yet another glass as he did so.

"How the hell could you do that to us, Corky?" howled Jerry Hicks as Dixon broke the news to them.

Porterfield appeared extremely agitated. "Yeah, Dixon, you were one of us. I mean, I just can't believe you'd fire us like that! Ah, forget it, Jer, they're all alike. Make 'em bosses and they change. I told you it'd happen." Turning back to his ex-boss, who was several years younger and several inches shorter, he said, "I don't get it, Corky! What'd we ever do to you, huh?"

"N-nothing, but--" Corky began as he quickly sized up the two men, both of whom were looking particularly hostile at that moment.

"What am I gonna tell my wife and kids?" Hicks broke in. "The least you coulda done was warned us, for Chrissake!"

"I didn't know they were gonna fire you, I swear! I just found out about it myself."

Porterfield waved an arm in disgust. "Hah, listen to him, why don't ya. The next thing he's gonna tell us is that he didn't know the ad for our jobs was in yesterday's paper. Well, Corky, 'old friend', a buddy of mine from Boeing told me about it this morning, but I figured that with all the activity going on around here you were just looking to take on some new guys to help us out. But no, you had to be sneaky," he continued. "And you know what hurts the most? Accusing us of not doing our jobs. How're we gonna find work with references like that?"

Corky, feeling the rush of blood to his face, implored, "Please, listen to me. It's like I told you before, I had nothing to do with it. I'd never

do anything like that to you guys."

"So why didn't you stand up for us?" Hicks asked. Seeing the look of guilt on Dixon's face, he stated flatly, "You didn't even try, did you?"

"What could I say? Bailey is my boss. Are you forgetting that? He made the decision because he expected me to stick up for you."

"You still could have tried."

Feeling both angry and on the defensive, Corky simply said, "You know I support my mom and my sister. I need my job as much as you need yours but I still have mine because I took my work seriously. I told you a long time ago they'd get after you. Now, I'm sorry this happened but you brought it upon yourselves and no amount of pleading or lies about your...dedication...is going to change that."

The jaws of both men dropped. They succeeded in looking both shocked and angry at the same time, but Hicks recovered first, his voice one of cold steel. "Okay, be that way and may the Lord forgive me for sayin' it but I hope that someday you wind up in our shoes so you'll know how it feels!"

Freddie was a firm believer in following rules, particularly those of his own making, but he was also aware of the truth in the old adage: Rules were made to be broken.

Gathering up several empty glasses, he put them in a basin near the young man, all the time watching long, slender fingers idly tapping the nearby paper. Yes, rules were made to be broken.

"Care to talk about it?" was all he said.

Dixon, already past the point of 'feeling no pain' half-looked at him a moment before making a decision which became visual as a small shake of his head.

It took Corky several months before he got over the incident. He missed having his two friends around, listening to their stories, occasionally taking a part in their practical jokes, going out for a sandwich and a quick beer or two.

The two new men he hired were capable workers but distant, preferring not to talk to their boss unless it was work related. Feeling a bit vulnerable, Corky left them alone, not making any attempts to start new friendships. On the whole, however, he continued to interact well with the other mechanics, his ingenuous nature automatically accomplishing the task for him.

Corky was helping Pete Hippert troubleshoot a particularly elusive electrical problem when one of the newer mechanics, Bob Tyrell, came strolling over, carrying a grease covered part. Showing it to Corky he said, "We're all out of these. You want me to use the other ones?"

"No. The ones we used during our last PMIs are already showing signs of stress fractures. I'll call Wesevic's again and see if I can get them to ship more of these D-28s to us in a hurry."

Walking briskly, Corky entered his office, and began digging for the phone. He returned ten minutes later looking decidedly unhappy. "Jeez, we've got problems now. They said they'll be back ordered on this part for two weeks."

"Then what do we do?" Hippert asked.

Corky wiped the sweat off his face with a semi-clean rag before responding, "We wait."

"But we can't keep sidelining every plane that needs them. Even this tri-motor is due for replacements soon."

"I know. I'm gonna talk to Bailey. Maybe he can speed up the shipment."

"...Yes, Darryl, I'm already aware of the situation but there should be no problem. You do have Beauden's equivalent of the D-28 don't you?"

Corky frowned slightly, "Yes, sir, but they're not very good." Bailey had been the one to suggest ordering from Beauden's and had convinced him of the quality of their products.

"In what way?"

"Well...uh...they've been getting fractures--"

"Didn't the others?" Bailey cut him off.

"Yeah, but not nearly as often--"

"Still, as you say, it does happen."

"Well, yeah..." Corky agreed reluctantly, not liking the direction of this conversation. Wear and tear on parts of all kinds was to be expected but not to such an accelerated degree.

Bailey was too good at manipulating people. Deep down the mechanic sensed what was going to happen and he was disappointed with himself for not standing up to the man. Suddenly a question popped into his head. "Why can't you just give Wesevic a little push? We've been dealing with them for a long time."

"True. They're also getting to be very expensive. Ordering from Beauden is cheaper."

Shocked at the implications, Corky exploded. "We -- we're not talking about money, Mr. Bailey. We're talking about human lives! People could get killed if we use those parts and they fail!"

"So you simply keep a closer watch on them and if necessary you replace them more often," Bailey responded, not correcting the use of his last name.

Corky's brows knitted thoughtfully. Somewhere, something was wrong with that logic. "You don't understand. Those things could go at any

time."

"You're wrong," Bailey smiled reassuringly. "I do understand and it's your job to see that it doesn't happen."

"I -- I won't do it," Corky half-whispered. "I don't want to be responsible for--"

The smile instantly faded from Bailey's face and a cold light gleamed in his eyes. "Do you like your job, Darryl?"

Lowering his eyes, Corky managed a faint nod.

"I hate to put it to you this way, but you leave me no choice. If you want to retain your position with us, then you do as you're told. Think of it this way. We've already made the decision for you. It's out of your hands."

I've heard that one before, Corky thought to himself as Bailey began speaking again.

"Oh, I'd like to make one suggestion. I realize that you could create a stir over this if you wanted to. Just bear in mind that, if you do, there are people who could see to it that you never get another job with an airline again."

Resting his chin on steeped fingertips, Bailey allowed his 'advice' to sink in before gesturing toward the door, but only after seeing resignation replace anger on his chief mechanic's face. Yes, he thought to himself, *Dixon certainly was the right man for the job. Hardworking, talented...and pliable.*

Hands wedged deeply in his pockets, Corky walked over to the hangar, dragging his feet with every step. He was confused, hurting and it showed in his entire posture but in his heart were the beginnings of a seething anger. For the first time in his life, he found himself actually hating somebody. Two people, in fact. Bailey for making inhuman demands and himself for acquiescing to them.

Tyrell was waiting for him by the plane's port engine. "Well? Do we use the new parts?"

The turmoil in Corky's soul built to a crescendo as all factors rolled into one boiling mass. People could die...but he had to support his mother...if he did inspections more frequently, maybe things would be all right...but if the parts failed...and if he did say something to the authorities, how could he ever find another job doing what he loved most? His face, more accustomed to happier emotions, clearly showed his suffering. Sighing deeply, he managed to meet Tyrell's gaze. "Yeah," was all he said.

Later that night, seeking the solace that only total forgetfulness can bring, he stopped at his favorite bar and, driven by the thought of all those potential time-bombs that would be greeting him in the mornings to come and his own inner weaknesses, he promptly got loaded. It helped that night but not the next morning, so once again he returned to the bar. And the night after that one as well.

The following year was an eternal, hazy, guilt-ridden nightmare. The ground crew, under his constant supervision, managed to stay abreast of the problem but just barely, and the number of avoided accidents continued to rise.

"We're going to be cleaning up in about an hour," Freddie said, automatically refilling the glass.

It was several seconds before the message took on meaning. Brown eyes gradually shifted to the clock. It said five minutes past midnight. An expression of disappointment and a touch of sadness weighed down the corners of his mouth when the full import of the statement finally hit him.

"I thought you're op'n 'til three," he replied after working up the energy to speak.

The bartender looked askance at him as he continued to clean glasses. "Not on a Thursday, you know that. Why don't you pack it in for tonight? You've got work tomorrow, remember?" he stated even though he knew that bit of helpful advice was going to pass unheeded.

"Huh," the young man murmured as though expressing doubt, then slowly shaking his head, he brought the drink to his lips.

The entire crew in hangar #5 had been kept busy making repairs and doing maintenance checks. They were so overrun with work that even the chief mechanic had to assist in doing routine work.

The sound of a telephone ringing was clearly audible over gently murmuring voices and the occasional clanking of tools.

Hippert, nearest to the phone, ran into the office to get it. A few seconds searching and his hand came up holding the receiver. "Corky, it's Mr. Bailey," were his only words but he held onto the phone until Corky took it from him. Before saying hello, Corky decided he wanted to be in a more relaxed position so he promptly sat down. The entire call lasted fifteen minutes and was obviously one-sided. Bailey's side.

From his position on the ladder, Hippert could see the chief mechanic hunched over the desk, one hand clutching the phone, the other supporting his brow as if his head was suddenly too heavy to bear its own weight unassisted. Corky, totally unmoving, remained like that for better than ten minutes after hanging up. Finally he heaved himself up to a standing position. Exiting the office, he closed the door behind him then gently ran his fingers over the black and gold letters on the glass.

Unable to control his curiosity, Hippert put down his tools and strolled over to the office. The chief mechanic appeared to be in such a trance-like state that even Hippert's hand grasping his shoulder failed to draw a response.

"Cork? You okay?"

As Dixon turned to face him he could see that the man's eyes were misted over with great sadness. Or despair. Or possibly both. Seeing that lifeless look on his face, Hippert felt his own heart beating painfully.

"It happened, didn't it?" he asked, his voice barely more than a whisper.

Staring at his feet, Corky didn't answer immediately. Finally, still looking down, he groped for words. "Yeah, it -- it happened all right... Los Angeles flight. Twenty people... twenty people..." he responded almost inaudibly. The ensuing silence spoke volumes.

It took Hippert several minutes to find his own voice. "So what happens now?"

"There'll be an investigation. And they'll look for somebody to blame."

"You don't think they'll try putting it all on your shoulders, do you?"

"Who else? I told you to use those damn things."

"But what will happen to you then?"

Unable to voice his thoughts, Corky began walking away. Then, as an afterthought, he stopped and faced the mechanic. Struggling to meet Hippert's gaze, he said, "By the way, Bailey wants to see you at your 'earliest convenience'."

"Come on, wake up Corky. We're closing."

Dixon lifted his head off of his forearms as Freddie tapped him several times on the shoulder. With a concerted effort, he tried to focus his eyes as he licked dry lips. The clock on the wall said one-fifteen. He drained his glass and fought to keep himself upright. As his attention centralized on the nearby newspaper, a look of resolve appeared on his face, a now or never look. Quickly, almost fearfully, he tore it open.

As the bartender watched, he saw the paper slip limply through Corky's fingers.

"Lemme have another one for the road, will ya Freddie. And make it a double this time!"

