



True Blue

Trilogy No. 107

Cat
Johnson

Trilogy No. 107: True Blue

by Cat Johnson

Romance/Erotica

This book is dedicated to the real-life heroes who selflessly put their lives on the line daily for the sake of others. Always know you are appreciated.

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As with all my military novels, any inaccuracies or liberties taken in this work of fiction are purely my own.

THE COMMANDER

Chapter 1

"Hello, pumpkin. How's my favorite girl doing?" Hank Miller leaned back in his desk chair and closed his eyes. It had been a long day already, and he still had a long night ahead of him.

"Hi, Daddy. You just caught me. I was on my way out the door."

Hank glanced at his watch. "It's twenty-two hundred ... I mean ten o'clock. You're going out at ten at night?"

He heard his daughter Mary giggle. "Dad. I'm twenty-three years old. Jeez. Nobody goes out before ten on a weekend."

"Well, at your age I was married to your mother and in the Army and she was pregnant with you, so neither one of us was going out anywhere." Scowling, he decided to get back to the reason he had called. "I just called to say I love you."

Silence, and then, "I love you, too. Is everything alright?"

"Fine."

"You're going away someplace horrible, aren't you?"

For the first time, he realized what being his daughter had cost her. "No, pumpkin. Just a training mission."

"At twenty-two hundred at night?"

He smiled as she turned his own words against him. "Night HALO jumps. Piece of cake. I swear."

"Daddy, high-altitude-low-opening parachute jumps. mance.com for information on additional titles by this and other authors. at night are so not a piece of cake."

Maybe he'd over-shared with her when she was growing up. It was making it extremely difficult to reassure her now.

Hank opened his mouth to comfort his daughter when there was a knock on his door.

"Hold on, Mary," he told her before loudly calling, "Come in."

The door opened and one of his men stuck his head in. "Commander. We've got to get moving if we're going to make it to the airfield in time."

Hank nodded and waited for the door to close again. "I've got to go, pumpkin."

After a pause, she said softly, "Stay safe, Daddy."

"I will, don't worry about me. Say hi to your mother for me." It never hurt to have all your ducks in a row before doing full-dark HALO jumps. Even though, for a man of his long military experience, it was probably more dangerous crossing the street off base than leaping from a plane at thirty thousand feet.

Hank replaced the phone in its cradle on the desk. The desk that held nothing personal. No family photos, no mementos. He was simply the commander to the men of Task Force Zeta, someone to be respected, feared and followed. He couldn't be those things and be human, too. Certainly not a man with an ex-wife, a two-room bachelor apartment that contained a pile of laundry you could lose a small child in and a twenty-three year old daughter he still called 'Pumpkin'.

The desk chair scraped along the floor as Hank stood. No, he couldn't let them see him as a person. But what he could and would do was jump out of a plane on a dark moonless night alongside these men. He'd be damned before he'd become one of those leaders that asked his team to do something his wasn't ready, willing and able to do himself. Any one would give their lives for him without a blink of an eye, just as he would for them. And that was what being a team was about. Too bad his wife hadn't had the same team spirit within their marriage.

He thought of his ex-wife and her new nice, boring, suit-wearing civilian husband as he strode toward the door. Compared to a nine to five job, plummeting to the ground at one hundred and thirty miles per hour didn't seem so bad. In fact, it had always been a very freeing experience for Hank. And that, in a nutshell, was why there were men born to the call of duty, and other men born to sit behind a desk, answering phones and wearing a necktie all day. Given a choice between the two, Hank would rather wear a noose.

Nope. There had never been any doubt in Hank's mind which kind of man he was, and that point was reinforced as a feeling of anticipation grew and his adrenaline began pumping the moment he and his six-man team pulled the van onto the airfield just in time for their pre-jump preparations.

As exhilarating as the thought of the jump itself was, that was how boring the pre-jump preparations were. It was a lot like Thanksgiving dinner. It seemed to take forever to get ready, and then in the blink of an eye, it was all over.

Hank suited up and pulled on the mask that would allow him to breathe one hundred percent oxygen while on the ground. This pre-breath was the only way to rid the jumper's bloodstream of nitrogen to prevent the bends that can occur from being over thirty thousand feet up in a non-pressurized cabin. Physically, being that high had the same effects on a body as diving deep below water, another training exercise Hank did with the team. Perhaps his ex was right when she had said his life was too extreme for her to deal with. Hank liked extreme.

He glanced at the various members of his team as they pulled out reading materials and, in one case, a laptop computer to kill the time during the hour-long pre-breathe. Looking at the guys, Hank realized one thing. Families weren't created only by marriage and birth; they were made, too, by the tears and the blood they shed together.

And right now, Hank hoped a member of his extended family had brought something along for him to read since he had forgotten. The oxygen mask made normal conversation impossible, so sitting around and chatting was out of the question and he was too keyed up to nap for an hour.

He rose to make his way over to Matt Coleman, the computer geek communications specialist, to see if he had a magazine or something to loan him, when a gray haired man wearing a flight suit tapped him on the shoulder. Hank didn't recognize him, but he had been told there was a new safety officer riding along with them tonight – not that his guys needed anyone. There wasn't any damn safety officers in the plane with them when they silently and invisibly inserted into places most people had no idea American military personnel had ever stepped foot.

"I'm the safety officer on this mission," the guy yelled through his mask.

The words were muffled, but he got the gist of it. Hank extended his hand and attempted to be cordial through the plastic barrier. "Nice to meet you." Then he turned back toward Matt when he felt another tap.

The man shook his head. "No. I mean you go home." He pointed a finger at Hank's chest.

Hank frowned. "What?"

"I'm going up." He made a hand gesture to indicate up as if Hank didn't get the idea. "We don't need two of us for this team." The guy held up two fingers then pointed to the six seated men.

Now Hank understood. The safety officer was so new he thought Hank was another instructor. "I'm on the team," he yelled back, pointing to himself, and then his men with his thumb.

The man's brows shot up and his eyes opened wide. "Oh. Sorry."

Oh? And not just any 'oh' but a distinctly judgmental sounding 'oh' at that. What the fuck did that mean? Was this guy, who was no spring chicken himself, insinuating Hank was too old

to be a member of this team? Alright, some of them were in their twenties, but at forty six, Hank was only twelve years older than the most senior team member, Jimmy Gordon.

Frowning, Hank stalked over to Matt and slapped his shoulder harder than he meant to, startling him so he nearly dumped the laptop onto the floor. "You got anything to read?" he roared.

Hank wasn't really in the mood for the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition* that Matt handed him after the 'oh' comment. He glanced down at the bikini-clad, sand encrusted girl who was probably his daughter's age and felt nothing. Maybe he was getting old.

* * * *

More than two hours and one death defying but successful HALO parachute jump later, Hank was convinced he was getting old as his team made plans to drive directly to the off-base bar to grab a few beers before closing time. The only thing he could think about grabbing was some sleep. Not that he slept all that much anymore. Oh, he fell asleep just fine – exhaustion will do that to you – but then somewhere in the vicinity of o-three-hundred he'd wake up and remain awake. He would start to doze off again just about the time the alarm went off.

"You comin' to the bar, Commander?" southern boy Jimmy Gordon drawled as they piled into the team van.

Hank laughed. "Aren't you guys ready for home after a fifteen hour day?"

Jimmy's brother Jack laughed. "You're forgettin', sir. I live in the apartment above the bar. It is home."

Hank smiled at that logic and shook his head. "Thanks for the invite, guys, but I think I'll head to my own home and bed."

Jimmy hesitated. "I'd really like it if you could come for just a bit, Commander. I'd like to talk to all of you together."

"Hey, now! I agreed to beer and hopefully some ogling of that blonde cocktail waitress, but no one said anything about having some big deep group talk," Matt griped.

Hank ignored Matt. "You sure you want to talk at the bar, Gordon? Wouldn't you rather discuss whatever this is at the team meeting in the a.m.?"

"No, sir. It's ... ah ... personal."

The personal comment was met with numerous middle school worthy 'woos', which Hank once again ignored. The guys needed to release after the jump and though childish, the teasing was harmless.

"Alright. One beer, a quick talk and then I'm outta there."

Jimmy smiled and nodded. "Good enough. Thanks, sir."

Hank had the entire drive to the bar to ponder what in the world Jimmy was so anxious about discussing. There were a few possibilities, none of which Hank liked the idea of. He sincerely hoped Jimmy wasn't about to announce he was retiring or seeking a transfer off the team.

They arrived at the bar still with no hint from Jimmy of what the announcement would be. The team grabbed two tables and pushed them together as Trey Williams, the team's language expert, set them all up with bottles of beer after planting a big kiss on Carly the bartender, who was also his girlfriend.

When everyone was settled in and as quiet as they were going to get Jimmy stood up. "Um, I'm not very good at speeches..."

This sounded pretty serious. It didn't seem like a very promising start to whatever announcement Jimmy was about to make.

"I am, big brother. Let me tell 'em," Jack piped in.

Jimmy frowned down at him. "Don't you dare. I can do it." He paused long enough to take a deep breath and then rushed on. "Lia and I are gettin' married and I want all you guys to stand up with me at the ceremony."

Hank let out a breath filled with relief. "Congratulations, Gordon. It would be an honor to stand up with you at the alter."

"When you taking the plunge, Jimmy?" Bull, called that because he was as big as one, asked.

"Um, well that's the thing. It's next weekend."

"Next weekend?" Trey sputtered on his mouthful of beer.

There was a collective shocked silence for a moment before Jack, who was rarely silent, chimed in, "Yup! I'm goin' to be an uncle!"

All eyes turned to Jimmy as he in turn shot Jack a nasty look. "Thanks a lot, little brother."

"Well, they're all gonna notice eventually. Lia's boobs are gettin' huge already."

Hank stifled a laugh as Jimmy smacked Jack's arm none too gently. "Keep your eyes off my future wife's chest."

"How can I?" Jack asked. He looked around the group for support while holding up two hands in front of his own chest. "I mean prize winnin' cow udder huge."

That earned him a pretty hard punch in the arm this time.

"Hey. Stop that. I'm only tellin' it like it is," Jack griped and rubbed his arm.

BB, what the guys all called Billy Bob, stood and shook Jimmy's right hand, probably to keep him from punching Jack again. BB, youngest child of nine kids, always was a peacemaker.

"Congratulations, Jimmy. I'm really happy for you. I'm sure every one of us would be honored to stand up with you."

"Of course we will," Bull nodded. "As long as we don't get assigned before then. Where you having the wedding?"

"Well, that's the other thing. I really want to have it at Mama's farm in Pigeon Hollow."

Trey laughed. "Is Lia's daddy the state governor going to be alright with a farm wedding? Doesn't he want to book the ballroom at the Hilton?"

Jack snorted. "I for one don't really give a flyin' pig crap what he thinks. Anyone should be

proud to have a weddin' at the Gordon farm."

Jimmy smartly ignored Jack. "He's fine with it. Remember, he's all in to supporting the small farmer. It's good press for us to get married at the farm." He rolled his eyes, indicating what he thought about that.

"And he's alright with, you know, the little Jimmy on the way and all?" Matt asked.

Jimmy cocked a crooked smile in his direction. "He'd rather have us married than not."

"Bull made a good point, though, for once." Jack tipped a bottle to Bull in a playful salute.

"What if we all get called in on an assignment while we're hours away in Pigeon Hollow?"

Hank watched all eyes turn towards him. "Well, boys, I say it's time we turn Central Command's asinine rules right back on them."

"I like the sound of that! What do you have in mind, sir?" Bull asked.

"Remember last year when they forced us all to take a two week mental health leave because no one was taking their annual vacation days?"

"How can I forget?" Jack grinned. "Best two weeks of my life. I met my girl Nicki, got to have a little off-duty fun with both my brothers Jimmy and Jared and my teammates..." he gave Trey and Matt a knowing look.

Hank shot Jack a warning glance. "I think we best not discuss that right here and now." *Or ever.* He knew damn well Jack's girl — Hank called her 'New York Nicki' in his mind so he'd remember her name — was involved with a shady character from the New York mob. Hank had long since decided when it came to this particular situation, what he didn't know couldn't hurt him. Particularly since he did know that four of his team of covert ops had all conveniently converged in Pigeon Hollow just hours before a mysterious tip about secret cash accounts and tax evasion put the infamous mobster in jail for quite a while.

Matt, the one man in this group most likely able to hack into a mobster's computer, send the files to the FBI and not leave a trail, laughed and raised his longneck bottle in a toast. "Yes, sir."

Hank shook his head and turned the subject back to safer territory. "Anyway. I propose, if you are all agreeable, that we use a few of our vacation days to go to Pigeon Hollow for the wedding. Central can't complain, it's their damn policy in the first place, and we can't get called in."

Jimmy smiled at him. "Thank you, sir. This means a lot to me."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world, Gordon. Besides, I can finally meet the famous Mama and taste her prize-winning sweet potato pie you're always bragging about."

Jimmy laughed. "And I'd love to have you meet her, sir."

Hank took the last sip of beer and rose. "Well, boys. I'm heading for home."

"I'll walk out with you, sir. I don't want to worry Lia by staying out too late after the training."

"Whipped already and you didn't even say 'I do' yet, Gordon," Matt joked.

"Jealous, Coleman?" Jimmy countered.

"Damn right I am. Don't forget I've heard you two going at it over the comm unit the night you met her and 'forgot' to check in back at base after the mission. She sounded like something else."

"Watch it, Coleman. She's the mother of his child and about to become his wife," Hank warned.

"Commander. You were there listening, too, you have to admit..."

"Zip it, Coleman." Hank used his commander voice and Matt scowled.

"Yes, sir."

Sometimes it was good to be in charge. "Good night, all. Anyone who comes in tomorrow morning with a hangover gets an extra ten miles on the course."

Grumbles followed Hank and Jimmy as they walked out to the parking lot.

"So you alright with all this happening so fast, Gordon?"

The parking lot light illuminated Jimmy's face enough so Hank could see the beaming smile when he replied, "I'm thrilled. I'm more than ready to be married to Lia. She was so busy running her father's political dynasty, she wasn't in any rush to make things permanent." He grinned slyly. "But the baby changed that."

"James Gordon, tell me you didn't..."

They both stopped by Hank's car.

"Get her pregnant on purpose? No, sir. But it sure worked out well in the end. Now she has to marry me." Jimmy smiled wider.

"Our line of work is tough on a marriage, son." Hank didn't want to pry, but if he was going to lose one of his operatives, he wanted to be prepared. Besides, their discussion was already about as personal as it could get.

"We've been together for a year now, sir. Lia knows what to expect."

"A baby might change things." *Trust me, I know.*

Jimmy shrugged. "Then we'll cross that bridge when we come to it, sir."

Hank nodded. "So, what day do we descend upon the unsuspecting town of Pigeon Hollow?"

Chapter 2

A convoy of one black van containing five special operatives, seven dress uniforms and one wedding dress, a convertible sports car holding a bride and a groom, and a truck with Trey and his girlfriend Carly, traveled to Pigeon Hollow early Thursday morning.

Everything was all set. Jimmy and Jack's youngest brother Jared had a bachelor party planned for that night concurrent with Lia's bridal shower/bachelorette party. Hangover recovery (for the men at least) and the wedding rehearsal were scheduled for the following day and night

respectively and the big event was to take place on Saturday. They would all drive back to base Sunday afternoon, minus Jimmy who would be on his honeymoon.

Hank liked having a schedule for everything in his life whenever possible. Though in his field of work, things often changed on the fly. However, he liked to at least start out with a plan, even if he had to alter it later. He was happy that the Gordon family was sticking to the same philosophy in their arrangements for the spur of the moment wedding. He knew what to expect and when.

"Are we there yet?"

Hank turned to glare at his communications officer. Matt smirked in the far back seat of the van. "That wasn't funny the first dozen times you said it, Coleman. It sure as hell ain't funny now."

Jack, who was driving, laughed. "Don't hog tie him, Commander, 'cause here we are."

Hank looked forward again in time to see the lead car in the caravan, the convertible driven by Jimmy, turn off the interstate.

Jack continued, "Just a few more miles now, and I do wish that brother of mine would use the damn blinker when he's drivin' my car!"

"I think he's got a few other things on his mind right now, Jack," Bull reminded.

Jack flicked on the blinker and slowed for the exit.

"Yeah? Well, drivin' should be one of them, especially since I was nice enough to let him and the blushin' bride take my convertible."

Hank glanced in the side mirror to make sure Trey and his girlfriend still followed and had turned off behind them. A thought struck him as he did. Against all odds, both Jimmy and Trey had gotten together with their girlfriends while on an op. The only people Hank had ever met during an assignment were bad guys who were trying to kill him. Sometimes fate had a real strange sense of humor.

The interstate turned into a two-lane road. That changed from rural to populated small town in a blink of an eye, leaving them suddenly in downtown Pigeon Hollow according to the 'welcome' sign and Jack's running commentary.

"Now he's speedin' down Main Street like a bull runnin' downhill toward a herd of heifers," Jack shook his head. "Look. There's Bobby Barton's deputy sheriff's car parked in front of the diner. Friend or not, it would serve Jimmy right if Bobby gave him a ticket. I mean, I got my girl Nicki waitin' for me at the farm and it's been a mighty long time since I've plowed her field, but you don't see me kickin' into a gallop in the middle of town, now do you?"

Hank heard Matt's bark of laughter from the way back of the van.

"Is everyone in your family as colorful as you, Jack?" BB asked from behind Hank.

Jack met BB's eyes in the rearview mirror and smiled, "Next to my little brother Jared, I'm the calm one in the family."

At that Bull, crushed in the seat behind Jack mumbled, "God help us if that's true."

Silently, Hank agreed. At least this weekend wouldn't be boring.

They were through town before Hank could say 'Pigeon Hollow' and turning onto a dirt road. A dirt road! Hank had grown up in an apartment on Kennedy Boulevard in Jersey City, New Jersey. There was plenty of dirt in that city, but it wasn't on the roads.

After about a mile, Jimmy sharply swung the convertible, sans blinker again, into a pretty magnolia-lined gravel driveway marked by a large mailbox that read 'Gordon Equine'. Jack followed with the van. "Here we are, boys. Welcome to the Gordon farmstead, home of the tastiest pies south of the Mason-Dixon line and the finest bred horses east of Kentucky."

"You're quite the spokesperson, Jack. Next time Central Command has Katie looking for a poster boy for the military recruiting campaign, I'll suggest you to her so I don't have to do it," BB offered.

"Oh, no you won't. I saw what they made you wear in those posters. My Nicki is the only one who's goin' to be takin' pictures of me half naked with my bloomers showin'." Jack slowed the van to a crawl to prevent the tires from kicking up the gravel and continued driving.

There was still no house in sight. How the hell long was this driveway? Hank turned in his seat to BB. "Dalton. Where is the lovely Katie? Isn't she coming to the wedding with you?"

BB nodded. "She's coming. She's flying directly down from a business meeting in New York."

Hank liked BB's girlfriend Katie, even if Central Command had hired the marketing guru to be a pain in his ass. And that was another couple that the job had brought together, BB and Katie. Damn. Hank felt like cupid, hooking up lovers all around him while having no one for himself.

"Here we are, boys!" Jack announced. Hank looked forward as an old, sprawling, white farmhouse came into view, so typically southern, right down to the columns on the porch, that he wouldn't have been surprised if Scarlet and Mamie came out of the massive front door.

Scarlet wasn't there, but he did see three females and one male, a younger version of Jimmy, emerge from a screen door off the side of the house. From a distance he recognized one of them as Jack's girl 'New York Nicki' by her short curly black hair. She visited the base regularly, so they'd crossed paths a few times.

The Jimmy clone, who could only be the infamous youngest Gordon brother Jared, had his arm around a blonde, leading Hank to assume she was his girlfriend.

But it was the third woman that intrigued Hank most. Did Jack and Jimmy have an older sister? He didn't think so. If they did, they'd never mentioned her. Maybe she was their housekeeper or something. Hank really didn't care what she did for a living, he was too busy admiring her denim hugged curves as she ran for Jimmy and was swung up and around in his arms before she turned to the blushing bride Lia and gave her a warm hug.

Jack threw the van in park and was out the door and hugging Nicki as fast as — what was his saying — a bull running down a hill, or something like that.

Speaking of bulls, there was a distinct odor of shit as Hank opened the van door and stretched his cramped legs. It was so pungent Bull followed him out, sniffing the air. "What's

that smell?"

Matt crawled out from the third row of seats. "Horse manure."

Hank laughed. "Lia's father the governor is going to love that being the prevailing odor during his only daughter's wedding. I only hope his friend Senator Dickson is invited so he can enjoy it, too."

Matt laughed. "I'm sure Senator Dickhead is used to the stench since he's full of bullshit. But you get used to the aroma. Honest. And if you're lucky, Jared will let you watch when he breeds the horses."

Hank frowned deeply. "You are a sick boy, Coleman."

Matt grinned broadly. "Yes, sir. Yes, I am."

BB laughed and Bull shook his head at Matt's perversion.

Hank leaned against the van and watched the Gordon family reunion happening as Trey and Carly parked their truck and joined them.

Trey stretched his arms above his head. "Ugh. That was a long drive. I for one am looking forward to a slice of Mrs. Gordon's pie. I'm starved."

Carly shook her head, sending her chestnut ponytail swinging. "You would eat all day if you could."

Matt laughed at her very true comment. "You got that right!" He looked past Hank at the Gordons. "But Mama Gordon's pies are worth eating, believe me. Can you believe that woman is old enough to be Jimmy and Jack's mother?"

"I know. She must have been a teenager when she had them," Trey agreed.

The rest of the group turned to look at the woman who was now in Jack's arms.

"*That's* Mama?" Hank sputtered. The tempting female in the flip-flops, blue jeans and well-filled t-shirt? The one he'd been staring at and drooling over for the past few minutes?

Matt and Trey both nodded.

"No way," Bull shook his head. "I pictured her looking like Betty Crocker. You know, short, plump and covered in flour with a pie in her hand."

That was exactly how Hank had visualized her, too. He certainly hadn't thought he'd be imagining rolling around sweaty with her, which is exactly what he had been doing since he first laid eyes on the woman.

"Are you sure that's Mama?" Hank was having trouble wrapping his mind around this new turn of events.

"Of course we're sure. Trey and I were here for a few days last year during our furlough," Matt reminded him.

Trey poked Matt in the side, his eyes open wide. "We were here to visit Jack and Jimmy, just for fun."

Hank rolled his eyes. "Of course you were." He had more important things to worry about

than what these two jokers had done a year ago, like for instance, the fact that the only woman he'd been interested in getting to know better since his divorce was also the mother of two of the men under his command. Talk about sticky territory.

Sticky. That brought to mind how it had been an extremely long time since he'd gotten 'sticky' with a woman. Damn. Didn't it just figure? Mothers had to be as off-limits as sisters among soldiers, probably more so. There was a reason 'mother fucker' was a derogatory term.

On that cheery thought, Hank watched as Jimmy hustled a slightly green looking Lia into the house. Poor thing must be having morning sickness already or else the long car ride got to her. Jared and the blonde followed them into the house with the suitcases from the trunk of the convertible as Jack escorted Mama back toward the van, and Hank.

He felt his heart rate speed up and nearly cursed aloud. His body was acting like he was a teenager. That was the last thing he needed right now, to develop a schoolboy crush on an off-limits woman.

Hank searched for a reason to not be attracted to Mama, besides the fact she was 'Mama'. He knew Jack and Jimmy's father had abandoned them when they were young so he wasn't in the picture at all. Maybe Mama had a boyfriend. A mature woman who looked that good wouldn't stay alone long. Yeah, that would be good. If she was involved with someone, then Hank couldn't even be tempted. If she were dating, the guy would be invited to the wedding, then Hank would know for certain. He wouldn't even have to wheedle the information out of the boys. This was good.

So why the hell did he hate the thought of her with another man? Hank blew out a soft breath and watched Mama take another step toward him. Perhaps if he kept calling her *Mama* in his head, he'd remember exactly how off limits she was. That was his plan and he was sticking to it, he vowed as she stood directly in front of him.

"Commander, this is my mama, Lois Gordon," Jack introduced them. "Mama, Commander Hank Miller."

Close up she looked even more like her sons. She had the same big hazel eyes and wavy golden brown hair, except hers came to just above her shoulders. Hank stuck his hand out toward her. "Mrs. Gordon. It's a pleasure to finally meet you. Your boys have told me so much about you." *Except that you were a babe.* That bit of information would have been nice to have in advance.

Lois—dammit, he'd already started calling her by her first name in his head—smiled and took his hand in a firm grip. "We don't stand on ceremony around these parts. Call me Lois. Can I call you Hank or do you prefer Commander?"

She cocked a brow in his direction and his heart sped faster. Something about her made him say, "Hank is fine, ma'am."

She shook her head and treated him to the same crooked smile he'd seen on both of her sons' faces more than once. "Maybe when you've been here awhile we can turn that *ma'am* to *Lois*."

"Yes, ma'am." Hank felt his face grow hot and he couldn't bring himself to look at his men's faces. If they were smirking at him, he didn't know what he would do.

Thank god Jack whisked Lois off to be introduced to BB and Bull and he was out of the hot seat while still having an opportunity to observe her. She greeted both men with the same firm handshake, a smile and a cocky comment, which told Hank that Jack's smart mouth came from her side of the family.

"Bull." Lois raised a brow and her gaze way, way up to speak to the six foot four hulking man with the closely-shorn hair who scared most people on sight. "I can see where you get your name. Then again, maybe I can't."

Hank was firmly holding on to his delusion that he had misunderstood and she wasn't being bawdy until Matt nearly choked on his laughter and Bull blushed. Dammit. He needed her to be the prim and proper southern lady he'd imagined even if she didn't look like Betty Crocker. He really didn't need to see her as a woman, and one totally at ease with her own sexuality at that.

"And BB Dalton! You don't need an introduction. Your picture has been the screensaver on my computer since the day the ads hit. The one where you are shirtless and covered in camouflage paint. Phew! The girls from my book club are all comin' over to meet you. I hope you don't mind signin' a few autographs."

Now it was BB's turn to blush, but unlike Bull who had been rendered speechless, BB managed to choke out a, "Yes, ma'am. Uh, I mean, no ma'am. I don't mind." Poor guy looked ready to crawl into a steaming pile of manure to get away.

Lois went next to Trey and Matt and gave them both hugs as big as those she'd deposited on her sons, then she was introduced to Trey's girl Carly. Hank wasn't sure if he was happy or jealous he'd gotten a handshake instead of a hug of his own.

"You didn't happen to bake a pie today, did you, Mrs. Gordon? I've been dreaming of a piece of your pie the whole drive here," Trey, usually the quiet one on the team, boldly asked.

Yeah, Hank was sure he'd be dreaming about Lois' 'pie' tonight himself. Shit. Did he really just think that?

Lois smiled. "I've baked six pies today, Trey. Half for you all, and half for the ladies at Lia's bridal shower tonight. But we're having spare ribs, corn bread, sweet and sour coleslaw and Grandma's black-eyed peas for lunch in a little over an hour. We'll have the pie after lunch."

At that Trey's stomach grumbled loudly and Lois laughed out loud. Damn, she had a sexy laugh. "Alright. I see you can't wait. I'll go put up the pot for coffee and you all can have your pie before lunch. Just be sure to save room for ribs."

Jack's mouth hung open. "Hey! I never get to have my pie before lunch."

Lois made a kissing sound with her lips while reaching up and patting her son's cheek lovingly with her open hand, "I know, darlin'." Then she walked toward the house, followed by the group of visitors and a still grumbling Jack.

Damn. Hank knew he was in trouble. What he didn't know was what to do about it.

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A few hours and one huge southern meal later, the males of the group all lay around the

living room like overfed pigs. Just being on the farm had Hank thinking in 'farm-isms', as Trey called Jack's colorful pastoral sayings.

The females were all off preparing the sunroom for Lia's shower. Hank found if Lois wasn't in the same room with him, he could actually push thoughts of her out of his head – if he worked hard enough at it, that is.

"So what's on the agenda for tonight, Jared?" Matt asked rubbing his hands together. "Where are we going? Will there be naked dancing girls?"

Jack snorted out a laugh. "In Pigeon Hollow? Not unless he's imported them from the city."

Jared smirked and cocked his head to one side. "Ya'll will see tonight. But to answer your question, Matt, the festivities will take place at the bar next door to The Hideaway."

"Isn't that the motel where we're staying?" Bull asked, his long legs stretching out so far from the chair he almost reached the couch across the room.

"Yup. Conveniently located just a drunken stumble from the door of our local honky tonk," Jimmy laughed.

"Should we run over there now and check in so they don't give our rooms away?" Hank asked.

By Jack and Jimmy's burst of laughter he could tell it was a stupid question, but Jared answered him anyway. For the supposed troublemaker in the family, he'd been polite so far. "Nah. The Hideaway hasn't been full up since the TV crew of the reality show moved into town and stayed there for two months during filming last year. Most days, it's totally empty. Besides, I talked to the owner. He knows to expect us later. We can get you all checked in on the way to the bar."

Jared seemed to be organized enough. Hank respected that in a man.

"So we figure just for tonight, the girls will all stay here in the house with Mama since they'll be drinkin' their champagne punch or whatever and shouldn't be drivin'. And we'll all stay over at The Hideaway since we definitely shouldn't be drivin' after the bachelor party," Jared explained further. "Then tomorrow mornin', or actually more like late mornin' depending on how we feel, we'll meet back here for some of Mama's country ham with red-eye gravy, homemade biscuits, cheese grits and eggs."

"Do you people always eat like this? How come you aren't all fat?" BB asked in amazement.

"Yeah," Bull agreed.

The three Gordons shrugged.

"I don't know. Mama's always cooked like this," Jimmy said.

"I guess unloadin' and stackin' two hundred bales of hay every few weeks tends to keep you in shape. On top of carrying the fifty pound sacks of feed and muckin' out the stalls and hikin' out to fill the water trough in the far paddock." Jared shrugged again.

Hank supposed that would keep a person in shape. Being a farmer sounded as demanding as being in the military. No wonder Jack and Jimmy took to it so naturally.

"Well, you have fun with your muckin', little brother, but I like to burn my dinner off in another way. If we are stayin' at The Hideaway tonight, I'm goin' to fetch Nicki and burn off that pie right now." Jack winked at them all and left.

Matt shook his head and laughed. "You people always so up front and open about your sex around here?"

"That comes from makin' a livin' watchin' horses screw all day." A strange man wearing, what else, cowboy boots strode into the room.

"Bobby Barton! How the hell are ya'?" Jimmy jumped up and slapped the dark haired, blue-eyed man on the back while giving him a half hug.

Hank remembered the comment Jack had made while driving through town, about deputy sheriff Bobby Barton being a friend. This must be the man himself.

Bobby grinned back. "I'm good. But not as good as you, I'll bet. Congratulations."

Jimmy smiled. "Thanks. You already know Trey and Matt. This here's my commander, Hank Miller. The pretty boy is BB Dalton and the big one is Bull Ford. They're here for the weddin'. You're comin' right? To the weddin'?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world, Jimmy."

"More importantly, you're comin' to the bachelor party tonight at the bar, right?" Jared asked. "I want the law on our side in case things get rowdy."

"Course I'm comin'. That's why I'm here. That and to drop Christy and Lizzie off early for Lia's party so they can help set up. Christy's my girl and Lizzie's my sister," Bobby explained to the strangers in the group before continuing. "I'm leavin' them the car, so I'll get a ride to the bar with you guys. But I certainly hope what you got planned for tonight, Jared, doesn't get out of hand." Bobby glanced around at the group of men.

Hank had to hope that himself.

All Jared did was smile like a devil and say, "We'll see."

At that point, Hank couldn't worry about the bachelor party anymore because Lois, aka Mama, walked in to the room and all of his attention went directly to her. "Bobby. Good to see you again, darlin'."

Bobby grinned at her. "Evenin', ma'am. I ... uh ... saw a piece of sweet potato pie on the counter on my way through the kitchen..."

Lois smiled. "Go on. But eat fast, I want all you men out of my hair so I can finish setting up. Understand?"

Bobby inclined his head. "Yes, ma'am. I'll eat fast. Although, that seems like a sin when it comes to your pie."

Lois shook her head. "Go on, you flatterer."

Bobby turned and paused in the doorway. "Is there coffee, too?"

She laughed. "Yes, the big urn is already plugged in for the party. Help yourself."

"Thanks, Mrs. Gordon." Bobby grinned and practically sprinted down the hall toward his pie and coffee.

Hank couldn't help himself. He'd been craving a cup of coffee and could definitely use the caffeine if he was going to be awake enough for whatever festivities Jared had planned. He rose, "Um, do you think I could grab a cup?"

Lois treated him to a smile so sexy – whether she meant it as such or not – that his heart began knocking against his ribcage again. "Sure, Commander. Help yourself."

"Thank you, ma'am."

Lois followed him into the hall as the boys back in the other room continued to grill Jared about the bachelor party. She laid one hand on his arm to stop him before they reached the kitchen. He paused and turned toward her, more than interested in what she wanted from him.

"Can I ask you for a favor, Commander?"

Hank nodded. "Sure, and I thought you were going to call me Hank?"

"Oh, I will, when you start calling me Lois."

He smiled. Point taken. She could ask him for just about anything, including blood, and he'd probably say yes.

"Could you keep an eye on the boys for me tonight and keep them from gettin' into too much trouble?"

"I always do, ma'am."

Lois got serious for a moment. "I know you do and I thank you for it." Then she grinned and started toward the kitchen as she added, "I hope you're prepared for Pigeon Hollow's finest and only honky tonk and whatever Jared has up his sleeve. Tonight may test even you, Commander."

Chapter 3

The members of Task Force Zeta invaded The Hideaway Motel as boldly as they infiltrated any assigned target. Although, to Hank's chagrin, this incursion was a hell of a lot less quick and efficient than usual. The overwhelmed look on the desk clerk's face said it all.

Trey and BB both booked their own rooms in anticipation of having their girlfriends with them the following night. For tonight, they would each share with one of the two younger Gordon brothers who were planning on being too drunk to go home to the farm to sleep.

That part of the check-in went smoothly enough. The problem arose when Bull and Matt booked one room to share for the duration of the stay and Matt insisted that if he 'got lucky' at any time during the trip, at either the bachelor party or the wedding, Bull would have to find someplace else to sleep. Bull was not at all happy with that idea. In his opinion, he was paying his half for the room, why should he be the one to leave if Matt got lucky? At that point in the confrontation, Jack reminded them all that since Matt hadn't 'gotten lucky' anytime since the dawning of the new millennium, Bull had nothing to worry about. This

elicited a heated response from Matt, which Hank, after booking his own room that he would share with the groom just for the night, stepped in to play referee.

Hank used his commander voice — deep, firm and barely above a whisper — to regain control of the situation. He found that speaking softly, and sometimes carrying a big gun, was often more effective than yelling.

"Enough."

The six team members — the two local men Jared and Bobby had already gone over to the bar — turned and silently waited for him to continue. Hank suppressed a smile of satisfaction that even while on leave and on their way to a drunken bachelor party, the actions of his men could still be swayed by his command. "There are a dozen rooms in this motel and all appearances indicate ours are the only ones booked. If Coleman discovers the love of his life tonight at this bachelor party and feels compelled to spend the night with her, he will book himself his own room and Bull will stay in their original room, and visa versa. Got it?"

Hank's decree was met with a consensus of "Yes, sirs."

That dispute settled, they all moved across the parking lot to the bar, where they got the first hint of what Jared had planned.

The six stopped as one just outside the entrance. Jimmy read the sign suspended next to the doorway aloud. "*Wet T-shirt Contest Tonight. Special Celebrity Judges.* Oh, crap."

Jack laughed. "Oh crap is right, big brother. Your bride Lia is going to be madder than a wet hen when she hears about this."

"Lia? You think your girl Nicki is going to be any more understandin'? Judgin' from what she did to that mobster who held her hostage last year, I wouldn't be pissin' her off if I were you, little brother. Not if you ever want little baby Jacks runnin' around." Hank firmly ignored any further information about 'New York Nicki' and the mobsters as Jimmy grabbed the front door handle and pulled it open. "I need to get in there and talk to Jared about this."

BB hesitated in the open doorway. "Who do you think the celebrity judges are?"

That question was answered by a scream of "It's BB Dalton!" followed by a mob of women, all clad in barely there white t-shirts, running for the doorway screaming as they attacked BB.

Without instruction, the team instinctively moved like a well-oiled machine and blocked the onslaught of scantily clad females from getting to BB, who in his shock could do nothing more than sputter.

There were further shouts of "Oh my god! It's the guy from the underwear ads!" and "Will you autograph my breast?" from the women. It would have been amusing if BB hadn't looked so stricken.

Hank knew BB had quit modeling long ago to join the military and that he had resisted his current assignment, the one Hank had forced on him. Hank was starting to understand why. He had a brief moment to regret ordering BB to be the poster boy for the recent military ad campaign. But he pushed the guilt aside when he reminded himself it was BB's girlfriend Katie, not Hank, who tacked the underwear-modeling gig onto the special ops recruitment assignment for more exposure.

"That's enough, ladies. Let Dalton through." Hank had had enough of this himself; he could only imagine what BB felt.

"Who are you?" a high-pitched voice asked.

"We're his body guards," Hank said on the fly. It wasn't exactly a lie. They protected their own.

Shouts of "I'll guard his body" and the unexpected "You can guard my body, Mister!" followed.

Hank raised a brow. Maybe he should hang around with BB more often if the attention his pretty face inspired in hot horny women rubbed off onto anyone near him. Although, did Hank really want any one of the females involved in this display of insanity? The answer to that question was a resounding *no*.

Young Jared, the organizer of this mess, came up behind the hoard. "Okay, ladies. I promise, you'll all have a chance to speak with him later. You have to go line up and get your numbers for the contest now."

The women, ushered along by Jared's deputy friend Bobby and the bartender, finally cleared the doorway.

"I'm sorry, BB. When we advertised we would have celebrity judges, I meant Bobby and me because we were both on that TV reality show my girl Mandy filmed here last year. I never even thought of you, but the girls here all sure seem to think quite a lot about you. Would you mind sittin' up with us at the judge's table? It might be safer for you there than out in the crowd anyway."

"You advertised this?" Jimmy interrupted from behind his brother Jared before poor shell-shocked BB could answer.

"Sure, how do you think we got such a huge turnout? The bar owner ran ads on the local college radio station."

"And what does your girlfriend Mandy think of your little contest?" Hank asked, genuinely curious. When he met the blonde that afternoon, the former Los Angeles television producer seemed like the type who didn't put up with any shit.

Jared grinned. "Hey, I only planted the suggestion in the ear of the owner and agreed to be a judge when he asked. Other than that, I'm an innocent bystander. It's just a coincidence that he planned it for the night you guys are all here and we're havin' big brother's bachelor party. Right?" He winked at Hank.

Hank sucked in a deep breath and let it out. This guy did make Jack look like the calm one. On top of that, keeping the boys safe, as he'd promised their mama, might not be as easy as he first assumed. The amorous crowd of girls was nothing compared to the local males he glimpsed inside who came out en masse to watch the contest.

Hank turned to Matt and Bull, who stood still gape mouthed from the initial assault on BB. "Looks like you two may be needing that second room after all, judging by all these girls."

Matt's eyes opened wide. "Nuh, uh. I like my women sane. These chicks are just plain scary!"

Even Bull, who towered over them all, looked a little afraid. Hank laughed. He'd seen his guys face down a room of insane and armed terrorists and not show an ounce of fear, but throw a few dozen hormonal women at them and they were useless. Hank would remember to be alert on any future assignments that might include females if this was the response he could expect from the team.

"So what do you say, BB? Will you do it?" Jared prodded.

BB sighed deeply. "I guess so. But you guys will all back me up if it was under protest if Katie gets here tomorrow night and freaks out, right?"

"You got it!" Jack agreed and smacked BB on the back as Hank thought how having Jack vouch for him would probably not do BB any favors.

As far as bachelor parties went, Hank had experienced worse. Sure there were literally dozens of girls who might as well have been topless after their thin white t-shirts were wet down. But they were kept mostly at a distance while they lined up for their fifteen minutes of fame during the contest, and while they anxiously waited to hear the winner announced.

It was after the competition ended that worried Hank most. Then the sodden girls would be released on a crowd of over-excited local redneck males, most of who looked like they had more hormones than brains and far too much alcohol flowing through their veins.

He made sure he sipped on the same longneck bottle for most of the night. He was drinking piss-warm beer, but he was sober in case all hell broke loose. He wished he could say the same for his men. They were sucking down the alcohol while cheering for the show. Hank expected Jimmy to get drunk since it was his bachelor party. What he had not expected was the rest of the team following suit, and so quickly.

Even BB, usually a non-drinker, was throwing them back from the stress of being up with the judges as women flung their cold, wet, breasts in his face. Hank had to give him credit, though, BB did refuse to autograph the suddenly naked tit that was shoved at him along with a permanent marker. BB wasn't far enough gone to do that. He did make the mistake of agreeing to sign the t-shirt for the girl instead, which meant every female in the competition lined up to get the same treatment.

Hank glanced over and noted that Bobby the deputy was nursing the same beer himself. He could tell because the deputy had absently peeled the label off the bottle earlier. It was still the same label-less bottle in front of him. Good man. He would have made a good soldier.

Hank counted Bobby and the bartender as his only sober backup. He would need them if either the drunken men in the audience or the horny wet girls in the competition got out of hand. Three men against a hoard. Not an ideal scenario, but at least it was a plan.

As it turned out, what saved them all from impending disaster was one phone call from an unexpected source. It was right after the competition had ended. Jared, Bobby and poor abused BB joined the team at their table.

Drunk though they were, the team shoved the three new arrivals in close to the table and formed a protective ring around them with their chairs and bodies to prevent the girls from getting too close.

"You havin' fun, big brother?" Jared asked once he got settled near the soon to be married Jimmy.

Jimmy raised his beer. "Yes, I am. And the more I think about it, the more I realize that if Lia gets mad, I can just blame the whole thing on you! Thank you, little brother."

Jared grinned and raised his own beer in a salute. "I live to serve."

Jared's cocky attitude melted when his cell phone rang and he looked down at the caller ID. "Holy moly. It's Mandy. Everyone keep it down."

Hank snorted at that request. The jukebox was squawking a loud and annoying country tune in the background, and at least a dozen obviously female voices were squealing in the foreground. Their little party of men keeping their voices down wouldn't do Jared much good at this point when it came to his girlfriend Mandy.

"Hey, darlin'. How's the party goin'?" Jared did his best to sound casual and sober. A few snickers from the guys met his futile attempt.

Jared listened for a moment and then defended himself to the obviously unhappy girlfriend on the phone. "It's just an innocent little contest. There's no need to get so upset ... No, darlin', I swear. She's not here ... Mandy, darlin', listen to me now. As god as my witness, Sue Ann is not here at this bar."

Bobby mouthed an explanation for the visitors. "Sue Ann is his ex."

There was a round of nods from the group as Jared thrust the phone at Bobby. "She doesn't believe me. You tell her."

Hank watched, amused, as Bobby took the phone and listened for a moment before saying, "I swear on my badge, Mandy. Sue Ann is not ... um ... hold on a second." Bobby's eye's opened wide as he covered the mouthpiece on the phone.

"What's wrong? Tell her Sue Ann isn't here," Jared cried.

"Take a look at the doorway, Jared," Bobby suggested.

Every eye turned toward the entrance as a trashy, spandex clad bleached blonde entered the bar.

By the collective round of swearing from the three Gordon brothers, Hank assumed the woman in the doorway was the infamous Sue Ann that Mandy was so worried about. Though she was not Hank's type, he supposed she'd appeal to some men who liked them fast and cheap. She'd obviously had to Jared at one point.

"What do you want me to do, Jared? I can't lie to Mandy. Sue Ann is here."

"Fuck! Mandy's going to have my hide. I have to get out of here, now!" Jared stood and swayed slightly as he flung the chair back, clipping his brother Jack in the knee and earning him a loud 'ow' in response.

"Hold up a second, little brother. First, you shouldn't be drivin'. None of us should. Second, calm down. So you 'dated' Sue Ann for little while a year ago." Jimmy used air-quotes, leading Hank to believe that 'dated' wasn't the word he'd really meant. "So who cares? Mandy can't be mad about that."

Jack agreed but used a more colorful euphemism. "Yeah, you stopped exchangein' bodily fluids with Sue Ann before you ever met Mandy. Right?"

Jared scowled. "You guys don't understand the level of hatred between those two. Sue Ann is really pissed at how Mandy edited that reality show. She'd love to get me in trouble with Mandy."

"Well, in Sue Ann's defense, Mandy did make her look like a bigger bitch than our old blue tick hound," Jack pointed out.

"How can you defend Sue Ann in this? Mandy didn't start this fight. Sue Ann did that when she lied to Mandy and told her she was pregnant with my baby so Mandy would break up with me."

"Shit. She did that? And why didn't you use a condom when you were with Sue Ann?" Jimmy accused.

"Yes, Sue Ann did that. And I did wear one. Which is how I knew Sue Ann was lyin'. And I don't need you lecturin' me two days before you marry your pregnant girlfriend, Mr. Safe Sex!"

Hank was starting to think the fight he'd been anticipating was less likely to be between his men and the locals and more likely to be between the Gordon boys.

"Um, guys. Angry girlfriend holdin' on line one." Deputy Bobby held up the cell phone, still blocking the speaker with his hand.

Hank stood up and held out his hand. "Give me the phone."

Bobby raised a brow and handed the cell phone to Hank. "Good luck to ya'."

Hank scowled. Great, just what he needed, to get yelled at by a girl probably not much older than his daughter. "Mandy? This is Commander Hank Miller."

"Hank. It's Lois. I had to take the phone away from Mandy before the neighbors called the sheriff on account of all the yellin'."

Hank was more than relieved to hear Lois' voice, for so many reasons. He let out a breath.

"Hi, Lois. Let me get outside so I can hear you better." He made his way to the back door where a few people stood around smoking since it was illegal to smoke inside the bar.

"What's happening over there that's got Mandy in such a state?" he finally heard Lois ask.

Hank briefly related the story of Sue Ann's arrival at the bar. He concluded with, "I'm probably the only one sober enough to drive besides Bobby. I figure one of us will bring your three boys home so they can deal with their women and the other will stay and keep the rest of the guys out of trouble."

"May I make a suggestion?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"I think you should drive my boys back here and leave Bobby in town with your men. He knows the locals. If there is any trouble, he'll be more likely to smooth it over and he has the law on his side."

Hank nodded. "Agreed. I'll see you as soon as I can round them up and herd them into the van."

"*Round them up?* Why, Commander. I do believe we southern farm folk are startin' to wear off on you."

Hank grinned. "It could be you are."

Chapter 4

Lois Gordon disconnected the call and blew out a long slow breath, partly because that northerner made her blood run a little too hot for a woman of her mature age, but mostly because she was stalling the confrontation with the three irate women her sons had chosen to share their lives with.

Oh, she liked the girls, each and every one of them. She wouldn't mind if all three boys slipped a gold ring on their fingers. But the three females, each as different from the other as summer was from winter, had yet to learn and accept that Gordon males have a mind of their own and a will that can't be broken. If the three couples didn't end up killing each other over this bachelor party, she figured they would all eventually end up like Lia and Jimmy, headed down the aisle and providing her with grandchildren.

At fifty, she supposed she was ready to be a grandmother, as long as she didn't start to look like one. And if her eldest son, who'd nearly been killed last year while on some assignment he wouldn't speak about, decided to give up risking his life everyday and took a safer assignment for the sake of his new wife and baby, even better. She could handle that, too. Gladly.

What Lois wasn't prepared to handle was the way her heart sped every time her sons' commanding officer stepped into the room and looked at her with those steely gray eyes of his. And she had caught him looking, quite a few times, when he thought she wouldn't notice. She noticed, all right.

Lois let out a sigh. Hank would be there soon enough. Then she would be looking into those intense eyes for real and, like it or not, she would probably get tongue-tied like a teenage girl. She figured she better go deal with the girls now while she still had her wits about her.

The bridal shower had wrapped up and most of the guests had left. Remaining were her sons' three girlfriends Nicki, Lia and Mandy, who would all be spending the night in the boys' rooms and Carly, Trey's girl, who'd be sleeping in the guest room just for tonight.

Bobby Barton's girlfriend Christy and his sister Lizzie had offered to stay and help clean up. That was when the trouble began. Lizzie Barton, who was attending classes at the local college, had mentioned she'd heard about a wet t-shirt contest at the bar where the boys were. Poor Lizzie hadn't thought it would be such a big deal, but Jared's girl Mandy sure did. Mandy had immediately called Jared and all hell broke loose, leaving Lizzie utterly appalled that she'd said anything that could cause such trouble.

Lizzie Barton was the sweetest girl you would ever want to meet. Lois had felt a kinship to the girl since the day Lizzie turned up unmarried and pregnant just after high school

graduation. Lizzie's story was awfully close to Lois' own life.

Lois had let the handsome, charming, seventeen year old James Gordon get under her skin, and her skirt, when she was only fifteen years old. That encounter had yielded her first son, Jimmy Junior. But instead of raising her baby without a father the way Lizzie had, Lois married Jimmy's father and had a total of three children with him before his drinking, cheating, lazy, no good ways finally got to her.

The time came to choose between losing the farm, which had been in her family for three generations, to support the now abusive James' gambling or raise the three boys alone. Lois made the only sensible decision. She had filed for divorce and taken out a restraining order.

Lois had never looked back or regretted that decision even once. Nor could she regret the marriage, since it gave her the three precious boys she loved so much.

She loved them, although right now, she wasn't sure she liked them very much. With that thought in mind, she steeled her nerves and went to face the music.

"Alright. They are on their way back home. All three of them," Lois said upon entering the sunroom where it seemed all clean up had stopped in favor of ranting and raving.

Mandy let out a loud breath. "When I get my hands on that Jared..."

"Mandy, I'm not goin' to interfere and get between you and my son, but let me tell you one thing. I spoke with Hank, the boys' commandin' officer. You may not feel like trustin' Jared right now, but Hank had no reason to lie to me. He said the bar did hold a wet t-shirt contest tonight..."

When Mandy just sat there with her arms crossed, Lois continued. "I'm not saying Jared is blameless, chances are he had somethin' to do with it, but Sue Ann was *not* there for the contest. However, Hank said she did walk in just after Jared talked to you on the phone. But he said the minute Jared saw her, he got up to leave so you wouldn't be upset."

Mandy scowled. "I don't know if I believe Hank."

"You can believe him," Lia said. "I've never met a more honorable man, aside from Jimmy, of course. Jimmy can't speak highly enough of the commander. He'd give his life for that man."

Lois decided that Hank being honorable was a good thing to know, but wasn't as thrilled about the talk of her son giving up his life for anyone.

"How do we know he wouldn't lie for the boys? If they'd die for each other, they'd lie for each other, too," Mandy pointed out. Being from LA, Mandy didn't naturally trust people the way Lois, born and raised in Pigeon Hollow, did.

Nicki shook her head. "I don't think he'd lie for them. Jack has told me the commander is really tough on his guys as far as discipline goes."

Trey's girl Carly nodded. "Besides, even if he would lie for the team, which I doubt he would, but anyway ... we're talking Jared here. Jared's not one of his team. Hank owes him no loyalty."

Mandy scowled. "I just hate how Sue Ann gets under my skin."

Lizzie stepped up to her. "Then don't let her, hon. If you do, she wins."

Mandy nodded and ran her hands over her face in frustration. "I know I shouldn't. I'm better than this."

Bobby's girlfriend Christy, Mandy's closest friend, stepped up to her. "And you are way better than her. Besides, you know if there is something to be found out, I'll get it out of Bobby and I'll tell you."

Mandy smiled sadly. "You'd do that for me?"

Christy nodded firmly. "Damn right. I love Bobby, but we girls have to stick together."

Mandy raised her eyes to Lois. "I'm sorry for causing a scene."

Lois smiled and shook her head. "Don't be. I for one know exactly how exasperatin' the Gordon men are. But I do believe I warned you way back when you first came to Pigeon Hollow wantin' to make that reality show how tryin' Jared can be."

Mandy smiled. "I guess I thought I could change him."

"Oh, darlin'. Trust me. Men don't change. You got to love 'em as they are or not at all." Lois put an arm around the shoulders of Mandy's extremely expensive designer suit jacket, thinking how you could take the girl out of LA, but not the LA out of the girl. "If it helps any, I know he loves you more than life itself. I also happen to think that he wouldn't mind walkin' down that weddin' aisle with you himself."

Mandy looked up. "You really think so?"

Lois nodded but couldn't elaborate since Lia suddenly put a hand on her stomach and said, "Oh, no."

"Morning sickness?" Lizzie asked. Lizzie's son may be ten years old now, but the sympathy on her face showed she still remembered morning sickness.

Lia nodded and swallowed hard. "Only it's not just in the morning."

Lois was about to offer Lia some crackers to settle her stomach when Lia jumped up from her seat and ran from room.

"I'll go check on her." Carly leaped up and followed.

Lois watched Lia go, thankful she was past that time in her own life. Although it seemed children never stopped giving you grief, no matter how old they got.

She turned her attention back to the state of the room. Piles of gifts, a garbage bag full of torn wrapping paper and a box of some samples her friend left that she would pick up in the morning. "I guess with the guest of honor upstairs sick, the party is officially over. Lizzie and Christy, you two go on home before it gets any later. Nicki, Mandy, Jack and Jared's rooms are all cleaned and set up for you. Go on to bed. The food is all put away. We can deal with the rest of this in morning."

"Are you sure, Mrs. Gordon?" Lizzie asked. Being a Barton, she'd been raised right and proper.

"I'm sure." Besides, Lois was hoping to avoid any fallout from the Jared/Mandy/Sue Ann situation, and the best way she could think of to do that was to not be in the vicinity at the

time. They could duke it out privately up in Jared's bedroom while she was safely elsewhere. But it sure wouldn't hurt for Lois to putter around downstairs in the kitchen for a bit, maybe brew a cup of tea, perhaps see if a sexy commander happened to wander through the back door ... Lois grabbed the garbage bag and headed out the sunroom door for the trash pail.

* * * *

"It must have been a hell of a party," Jack commented as the three Gordon men and Hank stood in the doorway of the sunroom and surveyed the damage.

Young Jared started to poke around in the piles of gift boxes. "Look at all the booty! Let's check it out, maybe there is some slinky lingerie."

"If there is, you better be keepin' your hands off of it," Jimmy growled.

"Jeez. Relax, Jimmy. It's not like Lia's wearin' it or..." Jared stopped mid-sentence with his hand in a large brown box. "Holy crap."

"What? I swear, Jared..." Jimmy stalked over to his little brother angrily, peered into the box and went deathly pale.

"What the hell is in there?" Jack joined his two brothers across the room and Hank watched his eyebrows shoot up to his hairline. "What the hell kind of party was this, anyway?"

Just as Hank was about to go take a look for himself, two things happened simultaneously that stopped him. Jared pulled his hand out of the box and held up a huge and frighteningly realistic-looking dildo and Lois walked into the sunroom and answered Jack's question.

"It was your average bridal shower/bachelor party, darlin' ... until one of my sons got his girlfriend mad at him and caused all the fireworks." Lois stood with her arms crossed over her chest and gave Jared a meaningful look.

Jared had the sense to look contrite but Jack didn't let it rest. "I may not know much about female stuff, but I don't think this," he indicated the object still in Jared's hand, "is average. Mama! What the hell?"

Lois frowned. "Oh, calm yourself. A friend from my book club sells personal pleasure devices at home parties, is all. She made a truckload of sales tonight. The ladies loved her stuff. Those there are her sample line, so don't you be messin' with anything before she picks it up in the morning. She had to leave the party early tonight to baby sit her grandchild."

Judging by the stricken look on his face, the news that the sex toy saleswoman was a grandmother nearly did Jimmy in. "My mama hostin' a sex toy party. I think I'm goin' to be sick." Jimmy put a hand over his stomach and seemed unable to take his eyes off the giant rubber penis his brother still bravely held.

Hank bit the side of his mouth to stop from laughing as Lois rolled her eyes at her obviously appalled sons. She strode forward, grabbed the dildo from Jared and placed it securely back in the box. "You'll get over it. And speakin' of bein' ill, you might want to check on Lia. She's upstairs havin' a bad time of it. And you and you," she turned from Jimmy to the two younger boys, "had better get up there and make peace with your girls over this wet t-shirt stunt. I don't want any fightin' tomorrow at the rehearsal. Not with both the preacher and the

governor here. You got it?"

There was a collective bowing of heads and three 'yes, ma'ams' as the room cleared, leaving Hank and Lois alone in the sunroom with a box full of sex toys looming like an elephant in the middle of the room.

Thank god Lois broke the awkward silence, because Hank had no clue what to say and didn't trust his voice at the moment anyway.

"Thank you for bringin' the boys home."

"No problem." His eyes met hers and he smirked. "It sounds like you had a hell of a party."

"You, too. The only difference is none of the women here were wearing wet t-shirts." She raised a brow in challenge.

Hank grinned. "Touché. Although, I'm thinking it might have been more interesting to be here."

Lois smiled. "It was a good party. Trey's girl Carly whipped us up the best pomegranate martinis. It's handy havin' a bartender for a guest. I've never tasted a drink so good and they went down so smooth..." Lois shook her head. "Let's just say I couldn't be drivin' over to get the boys from the bar, so thanks again."

Hank's breath caught in his throat when a very ungentlemanly thought about what potential pleasures a drunken Lois and a box full of sex toys could hold crossed his mind. He cleared his throat. "As I said, it wasn't a problem. And now, I think I'll be getting back to town and the other boys."

Lois was suddenly next to him. She laid a hand on his arm. "Can't I make you some tea or coffee? Or a martini?" She grinned at that final suggestion.

He swallowed, very tempted. "No, but thank you. I, uh, better get going. Bobby has his hands full over there."

She reached up, touched his face gently and then planted a light kiss on his cheek. Lois's eyes held his. "Good night then, Hank. See you in the mornin'."

His resolve nearly broke. He cleared his throat. "Night, Lois."

Hank turned back toward the hallway. He realized they were now *Hank* and *Lois* rather than *Commander* and *Ma'am*. It felt as if they'd reached some new level of understanding. He found her attractive and she knew it. And if he wasn't totally crazy, the feeling was mutual. They had crossed some sort of bridge from polite strangers to something more.

Hank strode determinedly from the house before he did something crazy, something that would blow the damn bridge they'd crossed to smithereens and make going back to being just casual acquaintances impossible – the problem was, he didn't want to go backwards.

Chapter 5

Cooking was good. It kept Lois' mind off of Hank Miller and his sexy cropped graying hair and those pectoral muscles that bulged from beneath the black knit polo shirt he wore today

with fitted butt-hugging khaki pants.

Yup, it was a good thing she could throw together breakfast for a crowd without even thinking about it ... or that's what she thought anyway. She soon learned she was wrong. It was about the time Lois noticed she had put the coffee up to brew without any grinds in the filter that she realized Hank's presence in her home was distracting, to say the least.

On top of that, for some unexplained reason her three boys were at each other's throats for the first time since they were kids. Of all the times for that!

Lois corrected the near coffee disaster and somehow got through serving the late breakfast to her guests. But she did not need the added duty of refereeing the boys all day in addition to supervising the set-up of the tent, chairs and tables for tomorrow's wedding reception, all while cooking for the rehearsal dinner at the same time.

Getting the dinner together was Lois' current challenge. The girls tried to help but, with the exception of Jack's Nicki, not a one of them seemed to have natural talent or much experience in the kitchen. Mostly, they just got in the way, and Lia ran for the toilet every time she came near food, so they decided it would be best if she stayed out of the kitchen.

At least the girls seemed to have gotten over the wet t-shirt contest and were on their best behavior.

Somehow, it would all work out, it always did. The dinner would get on the table and the guests would never know Lois was ready to rip her hair out. In the meantime, Carly played bartender and kept everyone happy with a steady flow of alcohol and Jared's Mandy kept them occupied with DVDs of the reality show series she'd produced about Pigeon Hollow. This left Lois and Nicki alone in the kitchen to get the last minute dinner preparations finalized. An Italian grandmother had helped raise Nicki where she'd grown up in New York, so besides the fact that she tried to put garlic in everything they made, she was a darn good cook and Lois was happy for the help.

Hank, god bless his heart, was sent immediately outside to set the table when he offered to help. That was all she needed, Hank underfoot in the kitchen. She was distracted enough as it was.

The time absolutely flew by and before Lois knew it, the preacher was knocking on the door, and the governor, his wife and their niece, Lia's maid of honor, were pulling into the driveway in their limo. Ready or not, it was show time, and as mother of the groom, she could no longer hide in the kitchen, distracting commander or not.

Lois stood in her place in the front row of chairs and blinked the tears back as she watched her son and his bride-to-be holding hands while the preacher instructed them on tomorrow's service. As a stand in for her bridal bouquet, Lia held a small bouquet of wild flowers Jimmy had picked for her that afternoon. The way her son looked at Lia made Lois' heart clench. It had been a long time since a man had looked at her like that.

Mandy whispered next to her, "They are quite a sight all together like that, aren't they?" Jared's girlfriend had never met his two older brothers or their teammates. She was suitably impressed, and Lois couldn't blame her.

Lois smiled and gazed at the groom and his seven groomsmen made up of his team plus

Jared. Knowing Mandy, she was probably planning her next television production, a reality show about military men or something. Knowing her sons, and now their commander, Lois figured Mandy didn't have a chance in hell of getting that show made. But she agreed with the sentiment, they were quite a vision. "Yes, they are, darlin'. It's like a buffet of beautiful men."

Lois was glad Lia's family was across the aisle so they wouldn't hear her naughty comment.

Nicki giggled. "Yeah. As many times as I visit Jack at the base, you never quite get used to them being all together like that."

They did look as perfect as a row of life-sized GI Joe dolls, all muscled and tough. Lois quickly pushed aside the thought that, unlike the toy, Hank would be anatomically correct.

"I can't wait until they're all in their dress uniforms tomorrow," Trey's girl Carly added.

"Phew. I bet there won't be a woman here, young or old, who'll be able to breath."

Great. That's all Lois needed, Hank to look even more tempting than he did already. She let her eyes travel to Hank, which proved to be a big mistake when he looked over and caught her. He smiled and she felt her face grow hot. Damn she was in trouble. Big, big trouble.

Luckily, the preacher wrapped up the rehearsal and Lois had a good excuse to run back to the kitchen and away from Hank. She immersed herself in southern hostess mode and somehow managed to stay focused through the meal and dessert.

When the second round of coffee had been poured and drunk, and the last slice of pie reduced to mere crumbs on the plate, the preacher, never one to leave even a single piece of Lois' pies uneaten, left. He was followed shortly by Lia's family, who took the bride with them for the night. They would all stay an hour away at a hotel in the city instead of at the motel right in town. That really wasn't a surprise, just the thought of the governor at The Hideaway made Lois have to smother a giggle.

By the time Lois finished clearing the kitchen, loading the dishwasher and setting up the coffee for the morning, it was getting dark. Lois figured it would be safe to go outside by now. She knew BB had to get back to The Hideaway to meet his date for the wedding, who was getting in from New York tonight. And judging by the looks Carly was giving Trey all evening, it wouldn't surprise Lois a bit if they'd already gone back to the motel for some loving.

Speaking of loving, she hoped Hank had driven back to The Hideaway with them, since she was finding herself much too tempted by him at the moment. With the stress of having her eldest son getting married the following day and finding out that she was about to be a grandmother just a few weeks ago, she didn't trust her self restraint. A nice tumble with Hank would surely remind her she was not an old lady quite yet. That temptation was exactly what she was afraid of.

Lois found the group in the sunroom—the bugs must have driven them inside. She was right, half of the guests were already gone to The Hideaway, but half still remained. Matt, Bull, and yes, Hank, along with Nicki and Mandy all stood, staring at her three sons.

Jared and Jimmy stood chest to chest and angrily glared at each other as Jack stepped between them. Lois watched in shock as her youngest and her oldest turned on Jack, which of

course angered him, too.

"What in god's name is going on with you three this weekend? I raised you better than this." She glanced around the room. As bad as it sounded, she felt embarrassed at that moment to be their mother.

Jimmy turned to her, then back to his brothers. "Stay out of this, Mama. It's not your concern."

Hank watched the shock register on Lois' face. She opened her mouth to respond, and he was sure what she had to say wouldn't be pretty. This was a family dispute and he was not family. But he did consider two of those boys his, so what the hell...

He laid a hand on her arm. "Let me talk to them?"

Her eyes met his, and then she nodded.

"Coleman. Ford." He didn't even have to look at Matt and Bull. They knew what he wanted.

Matt was smart enough to take it a step further. "Nicki. Do you think you and Mandy could run Bull and me back to the motel? We want to be bright-eyed for tomorrow."

The two Gordon girlfriends looked immensely relieved to have an excuse to leave the battleground and both jumped at the chance.

"Sure, Matt." Nicki glanced at Jack's reddened, angry face. "We'll be back later."

The four left the room as quickly as they could without running for the door.

Hank squeezed Lois' arm gently. "I'm sure you have things to do for tomorrow. We'll be fine here alone."

She held his gaze for a moment and then nodded. "Alright. Holler if you need me."

He nodded and waited to hear her footsteps on the stairs.

Hank let the silence hang long and heavy in the air. Jack broke first. He dropped to the couch and ran his hands over his face, frustrated. Jimmy followed and sat next to Jack, looking embarrassed. Jared let out a long slow breath and threw himself into a chair.

Hank took a step forward and loomed over the three seated boys. He chose to address the eldest. "Jimmy. What's going on?"

Jimmy looked immediately defensive. He pointed at Jared. "Commander. He..."

Hank held up his hand for silence. "No. I don't mean what started this particular fight and you know I've never stood for passing blame. This is exactly what I'm talking about. You and Jack both haven't acted like yourselves since we arrived. What is all the fighting about? I've never seen you two argue like this. I've never heard you say a bad word about Jared, but you've done nothing but fight with him, too. Your mother has enough to do with the wedding, she doesn't need this from you three."

It was a low blow, throwing in their mother to play on their guilt, but it worked. All three looked ashamed.

Jimmy swallowed. "I guess I'm worried."

Now they were getting somewhere. Hank let him continue.

"I'm afraid that once we're married and the baby comes, Lia is going to want me to quit the team. Hell, it's worse than that. I'm afraid I'll lose my nerve and have to quit."

Hank was a little worried about that himself but kept that thought silent. He nodded to acknowledge Jimmy's confession, then turned to Jack. "Your turn. What stick is up your butt since the drive down here?"

Jack scowled. "I do not have a..." he paused at Hank's raised brow. He took a deep breath and then said, "I guess his gettin' married is gettin' to me." Jack tilted a head in Jimmy's direction.

Jimmy scowled. "Sorry to inconvenience you by marryin' the woman I love."

"You know that's not what I meant!" Jack made a move to stand up again.

Hank nipped the next fight in the bud. "Enough." He looked from one man to the other until they settled down again. "Jimmy, let your brother talk. Jack, explain yourself and try not to piss off your brother."

Jack glanced at Hank and then at Jimmy. "I'm afraid Nicki is goin' to get ideas about marriage. I don't want to get married, not yet, anyway."

Jimmy's eyes opened wide. "Christ, Jack. You don't still have feelin's for Carly?"

Jared piped in and made things worse. "Carly! Trey's cute little bartender girlfriend? Jack, what about Nicki? Are you just fuckin' around with her, killin' time and waitin' for this Carly chick to be available?"

Jack scowled at Jared. "You shut up, you don't know what you're talkin' about." He turned to Jimmy. "And no, I don't still have feelin's for Carly. Jimmy, don't you remember how bad things were between Daddy and Mama near the end? So many things can go wrong in a marriage. What if that happens with Nicki and me?"

Jimmy spoke more gently now. "I was fifteen, Jack. I remember. Nothin' like that will happen with you and Nicki because you are nothin' like Daddy."

"Is no one going to tell me what happened with Jack and Carly?" Jared crossed his arms and waited.

"Nothin' happened. Jesus, Jared. Let it go!" Jack looked more agitated.

Hank had wondered exactly what had or had not happened himself but moved the subject along before Jared stirred up trouble again.

"Jack, you can't live your life based on your parents' marriage." Although Hank did wonder exactly how bad things had been for Lois and her husband. "And Jimmy, you said yourself, so far Lia is okay with you being on the team. Don't go looking for trouble where there is none. So, you two boys better now that everything is out in the open?" He looked from Jack to Jimmy and when they both nodded, he rose to leave. "Well, I'm glad we got things straightened out between you..."

"Hold on a second! Doesn't anyone care what's wrong with me?"

Not knowing the youngest Gordon all that well, Hank hadn't realized there was anything

wrong with Jared besides his innate ability to get himself into trouble with the women in his life. Hank sat again and nodded. "Go on, son."

Jared looked at his brothers.

"Of course we care. Go ahead, little brother," Jimmy said and Jack nodded in agreement.

Jared appeared even younger to Hank as he stared down at his hands and gathered his words. "Well, Jimmy is getting married and I know Nicki pretty well so I think if Jack asked, she'd say yes to him. My problem is Mandy's got this job with a production company in the city and I only see her on weekends and sometimes not even then. I want her here with me all the time. I want to ask her to marry me but I'm afraid she'll say no."

Hank didn't know what to say. He barely knew Jared, but he knew his television producer girlfriend even less. He looked to the other two Gordons for an answer.

They all stared blankly at Jared. Finally Jack shrugged, "You won't know until you ask, I guess."

Jared scowled. "Thanks, Jack. That's real helpful." He shook his head and stood up.

"What? I'm tryin' to help." Jack stood, too.

"Yeah, some help."

"Jared. Jack was tryin', he can't help it if he's clueless sometimes," Jimmy said from his seat on the couch.

Jack frowned down at him. "Hey!"

Hank sighed and stood up himself, ready to play referee for the Gordon brothers yet again. He'd thought having a daughter was work, but it looked like having sons might be worse. A daughter tended to cry and slam doors a lot, but boys could bloody each other over their problems.

"Listen up! Jimmy. Jack. What do we do on the team if one of us has a problem?"

"We work as a team to solve it," Jimmy answered.

"And how do we solve it?" Hank asked Jack.

"We formulate a plan to employ each of our individual strengths."

Hank nodded at Jack's answer. "Then that is what we will do here." He turned to Jared who was standing slightly apart from them. "Get over here. You are a member of this team, too."

Jared raised a brow and smirked. "Sorry, commander, but I'm not enlisting." The word 'commander' dripped in sarcasm.

Hank smothered the comment that Jared would have to learn a hell of a lot more discipline before he'd get within in a mile of any team Hank was commanding. "I'm not talking about my team. This is team Gordon."

Jack raised a brow skeptically. "Team Gordon?"

This night had already dragged on too long. Hank's gaze circled back to Jack. "You got a better name?"

"No, sir."

"Good. Now sit down, all of you. We're going to construct a plan."

Chapter 6

The moon was rising over the treetops and miracle of miracles a cool breeze actually blew. It ruffled Lois' hair as she sat in the dark on the steps of the front porch.

She leaned her head against the thick white porch column and sighed. The raised angry male voices had finally lowered to a level where she could no longer hear them. She took it as a good sign. Hank must have calmed the boys down. Either that, or they'd all killed each other.

The wind carried the scent of jasmine. Lois breathed in deeply and closed her eyes. It felt good turning them over to Hank to deal with. She didn't think she missed having a man around anymore now that the boys were grown but tonight, it had been a relief knowing Hank was there beside her to handle things.

At the sound of the gravel on the driveway crunching softly, she opened her eyes and found a tall shadow leaning against the parked black van. She smiled. "Glad to see you made it out alive."

Hank chuckled and moved toward her. The moonlight fell across his face and her heartbeat kicked up a notch. "Yeah, it was touch and go there for awhile." He grinned. "I thought you went upstairs. What are you doing sitting out here in the dark?"

Thinking about you...

"I couldn't settle down. I kept making lists of things I have to remember to do for tomorrow and I'm worried about the boys." *And every time I closed my eyes I pictured you...*

"The boys shouldn't give you any trouble tomorrow. That's one less worry for you."

"How did you manage it?"

He laughed. "Let's just say my battle training helped."

She smiled. "Well, however you did it, I owe you. Thank you. It seems like I've owed you a lot of thanks since you've arrived."

She pulled the collar of her silk pajamas closer to her neck with one hand. She hadn't expected to see anyone when she had slipped down the back stairs and out onto the porch. Hank's eyes dropped as his gaze followed her hand. What she was wearing wasn't revealing by any stretch of the imagination, but still Lois realized exactly how inappropriately she was attired considering she was alone with a man.

She watched his eyes rise back up to her face and saw him swallow. "You don't owe me a thing. You're, ah, going to want to get to bed, I'm sure. I mean, so you're rested for tomorrow."

He seemed almost nervous ... because of her?

It had been a very long time since she'd felt this way about a man. An even longer time since she'd made one nervous. Braver than she knew she could be, she reached up squeezed his

hand. She tugged lightly. "I'm not tired. Come sit with me."

He hesitated, but then sat next to her, so close his thigh pressed against hers. She didn't move and just quietly enjoyed the feel of him, warm and solid. Lois leaned her head back against the column again and stared at the moon.

"This is nice," she said softly when she finally broke their mutual silence.

He turned his head to look at her. "Yeah, it is."

She tilted her head to him. "Are you married, Hank?"

In the moonlight, she saw his look of surprise. "I was once. Not anymore."

"Kids?"

"One girl."

"That's nice." Lois sighed. "I always thought I wanted a girl. I was convinced I was having one when I was carrying Jared, but as you can see it didn't quite work out that way."

Hank laughed. "He's definitely not a girl. Do you still regret not having one?"

She shook her head and smiled. "No. Lately, it's as if I've got three daughters and now I realize girls are a lot of work. Even more than the boys."

Hank laughed. "Inside before, I was thinking how much harder sons would be compared to daughters."

Lois smiled and laid her hand on his knee. "I guess the grass is always greener as they say."

His eyes dropped to her hand and he swallowed hard. "I should get going."

If Lois had been from Los Angeles like Mandy, or New York like Nicki, or even from a rich, powerful, political family who wrote their own rules like Lia, she would have kissed Hank and made sure he didn't leave that night.

But she wasn't. Who she was, was Lois Grant Gordon, past president of her chapter of the Daughters of the Confederacy, founder of Pigeon Hollow's only book club, and winner of the county fair pie-baking contest for six years running.

So instead of kissing him, instead of telling him not to go, she swallowed her own needs and gave Hank's knee a gentle squeeze. "Good night, Hank."

Then she stood, went into the house and up the stairs to bed, alone. Damn southern values.

* * * *

Hank parked in front of his room at The Hideaway and felt very alone. A new rental car sat in front of BB's room, meaning Katie had arrived from the airport. BB wouldn't be spending the night alone. He'd be making up for lost time with Katie. Hank had some making up for lost time to do for himself.

The feel of Lois' hand on his knee was still so fresh in Hank's mind, he could barely think of anything else. But Lois wasn't the kind of woman a man could be with for one night. Besides the fact she was the mother of two of his team members, she was also a lady.

He sighed and struggled to get his key into the lock in the dark. Hank flipped on the light

inside. The room wasn't bad, just empty, very, very empty and he wasn't talking about furniture.

Trey and Carly occupied the room next door and he could hear soft voices through the wall. If they started having sex and he had to listen to it, he knew he would absolutely lose his mind.

Hank made his way across the small bedroom, around the big vacant king sized-bed and into the tiny bathroom. He turned on the hot water in the shower full blast. The pounding of the water on the tiles drowned out all other sound. Maybe by the time he got out, his neighbors would be asleep. He could only hope.

Eyes closed, Hank braced one arm on the tile wall and let the hot water beat against his back. God, he'd wanted to kiss Lois so badly tonight it hurt. He could still see her, seated in the moonlight, dressed in nothing but pajamas that left all sorts of things to his imagination. He remembered the mingled smell of jasmine and Lois' perfume. He pictured her, totally at ease, striding up to the box of sex toys the night before.

Aroused, Hank reached for the soap, lathered his hand, and then grabbed himself. He stroked hard and fast until he shuddered with the release he sought. Finally opening his eyes, he stared at the mint green tile on the wall in front of him. He would give just about anything to open his eyes and see Lois instead. That could never happen, but damn, he was tired of getting turned on just looking at her and even more tired of pleasuring himself.

He quickly washed his short cropped hair with the tiny bottle of shampoo provided, soaped and rinsed the rest of his body and shut off the water. He'd shave in the morning before the ceremony. Only one more day and night, then he could go back to the base and his routine and forget all about Lois Gordon.

As if that was really going to happen. While sliding between the cool sheets and imagining how soft Lois' pajamas would have felt had he had the nerve to reach out and touch her tonight, Hank had a bad feeling she wasn't going to be easy to forget. He ignored the twitching he felt once again between his legs and flipped over onto his stomach. He punched the pillow into shape and then heard the rhythmic banging and soft moans through the wall. Hank groaned himself, for a different reason, and covered his head with the pillow to drown out the torturous sounds. But the pillow couldn't drown out his torturous thoughts and he tossed and turned until nearly dawn and fell asleep just about sunrise.

The banging on his door woke Hank out of a fitful sleep. "Commander?"

Hank groaned and glanced at the clock, then down at the tent his morning hard-on made in his briefs. "Yeah?" he called. No way he was opening the door to anyone like this, even one of his own men.

"We're all heading to the diner for breakfast and then over to the farm to see how Jimmy's doing. You coming?" It sounded like Matt's voice coming through the door.

"No, thanks. You guys go. I'll meet you before the ceremony at the farm."

"Okay, we'll take the van and leave you Katie's rental car. Keys will be in it."

Only in Pigeon Hollow could you leave a brand new rental car unlocked and with the keys in

it. Jersey boy Hank didn't question it, however, and just felt relieved he'd have another hour or so alone to get his hormones in check before he had to see Lois again.

Hank rose stiffly, no pun intended, and headed for another session of jerking off in the shower. He was going to be water logged after this trip. He only hoped distance would dilute Lois' affect on him, or he was in for many more wet lonely hours when he got back home.

Chapter 7

The string quartet, Lia's father's influence, began the first strains of Pachelbel's *Canon in D* as the groomsmen rolled the white satin runner down the aisle between the rows of chairs filled with the seventy-five guests.

The country band, Jimmy's choice, was set up under the tent for the reception later. The disparity in the music choices pretty much summed up the differences between the two families.

To further illustrate the dichotomy, on Lia's side of the aisle sat politicians, including the state senator and his wife, rich businessmen and the patriarchs of old southern families whose names graced the state map for the towns named after them.

On Jimmy's side sat local townspeople, including the deputy sheriff and his family and girlfriend, Jimmy's teammates' dates, and a few Gordon family relations and friends.

Lois saw the look on Jimmy's face and realized all the dissimilarity in the world didn't matter. He loved Lia and she loved him and that was enough. She thought briefly back to her own failed marriage. God, for Jimmy's sake and the sake of his new child, let it be enough.

From her position on the aisle of the front row, Lois was aware of the caterers quietly setting out the hors d'oeuvres for after the ceremony. It was very unnerving having strangers in her kitchen. It was all she could do to stay out of their way when they very politely suggested they could handle things and she should go outside and enjoy herself. Judging from the tiny trays of even tinier food she could see from her seat, she still wasn't convinced there would be enough to eat for all the guests. Good thing she had a few pies set aside in the pantry, just in case.

The sun shone brightly, but it remained cool for a southern summer day. Thank goodness for that, she thought as she watched the uniform-clad groomsmen line up next to Jimmy and face the aisle in anticipation of Lia's grand entrance. Trey's girl Carly had been right, the sight of them all in their various dress uniforms was breathtaking. BB and Trey in their Navy whites, Matt, Bull and Hank in their Army dress blues, and Jack and Jimmy in their Marine uniform, dark blue with red detailing. Jared, the only civilian, was in a navy blue suit but still held his own amid the others in the looks department.

Lois allowed her eyes to roam to Hank again. He was a fine looking man in a uniform. Probably out of his uniform, too. Lois nearly made herself have a hot flash with that thought, and it had nothing to do with menopause.

She tore her gaze away from the tempting man before he caught her. About to be a grandmother and Lois was standing at her son's wedding mentally undressing Hank. She

was sure her mother, god rest her soul, would be properly appalled.

She caught Jimmy's eye and gave him an encouraging smile. He beamed back at her, happier than she'd seen him in a long time. The expression on his face softened as he suddenly stared past her, and Lois knew immediately Lia had come into view.

Lois turned to face the aisle. Behind the maid of honor, she saw Lia looking more beautiful than ever. Then she didn't see much more as her eyes filled with tears, which continued right through the preacher's announcement, "You may kiss the bride."

The bride and groom led the way back down the aisle, followed by the maid of honor, Jared and Jack and then the team, although Lois was far too busy wiping her eyes with her now saturated tissue to see clearly. She was searching for another one in her purse when she felt a hand on her arm.

"May I escort the mother of the groom to the reception?"

She didn't need to look up to know it was Hank. A tearful half laugh escaped her. "Are you sure you want to be seen with me? I'm a mess."

"Happy tears only make a woman more beautiful," he whispered, leaning in close to her ear. Her breath caught in her throat before she recovered enough from that close contact to joke, "You are quite the liar, Hank Miller, but I thank you, anyway."

He brushed a thumb over her wet cheek. "I never lie." He straightened up and offered her his arm. "The bride and groom are about to have their first dance. Shall we?"

Lois looked up at the handsome sincerity apparent on his face and nodded.

"Oh, and just a warning, I intend on having the second dance with you." Hank said it matter-of-factly and led the way to the reception.

Lois wasn't sure how she would be able to dance. At the moment, she had all she could do to simply breath.

The first song changed seamlessly into a second ballad as the band invited the guests to join the bride and groom on the dance floor. Hank barely noticed the others as he held Lois in his arms. Her, however, he noticed everything about. Particularly how she kept glancing nervously up at him. Maybe he was mistaken and the attraction wasn't mutual. Then he reminded himself that it didn't matter because mutual or not, his wanting Lois was totally inappropriate under the circumstances.

The last thing he wanted to do was make her nervous around him. Hank forced himself to loosen his hold on her a bit and not press his body against hers, no matter how good it felt to be near her.

Hank glanced around at the other dancers surrounding them and watched as three couples subtly changed partners halfway through the song. Operation Female Recon, the plan he'd formulated with the three Gordon boys late the night before, seemed to be in full swing. They were all tasked to glean information and hoped to come out of this weekend knowing if pregnant Lia secretly wanted Jimmy to quit the team, if New York Nicki was expecting a proposal immediately or willing to wait until Jack got his nerve up and if Mandy the career

city girl would accept a marriage proposal from Jared and be willing to move to the farm.

They would divide and conquer with the three boys casually feeling out each other's women, as well as the other female guests who might hold the answers, like Trey's Carly and Bobby's Christy. So far, it appeared to be working. Hank watched Jack smiling as he guided his new sister-in-law Lia over to Deputy Bobby and casually made another switch, swapping her for Bobby's date Christy. Hank couldn't suppress a smile. Special op training came in handy at the strangest times.

"What in blazes is going on?" Lois, dry-eyed now, demanded.

Hank's grin disappeared immediately. "What?"

She pulled slightly away from him. "Don't give me 'what'. I've raised three boys alone. I know when something is up. What have you men got up your sleeves?"

Hank broke out laughing which made Lois frown. "I'm sorry. I should have known we couldn't get anything past you. How did you know we're up to something?"

She raised a brow. "First, the boys are swappin' girls out on the dance floor like it's a square dance instead of a weddin'. And second, you are grinnin' like the cat that ate the canary ... or a proud papa, I can't decide which. So would you like to tell me what you have goin' on here?"

The boys hadn't sworn him to secrecy, and she was their mother, so he answered. "I got the boys to talk last night about what is bothering them."

He went on to explain all their individual fears. When he'd finished, Lois rolled her eyes. "Men."

Hank saw Lois shake her head as she watched another big switch on the dance floor. The youngest brother Jared now steered Jack's girl Nicki across the room as Jimmy bowed his head low to listen to something Trey's bartender girlfriend Carly was saying.

Lois was unhappy with him. Jack and Jimmy may be his men, but all three were her sons. He'd overstepped his bounds with her boys. "I'm sorry. You're right. This is your family. I apologize. I shouldn't have interfered."

Lois sighed. "I wasn't reprimandin' you, Hank. I thank you for trying to help and for stoppin' them from fightin'. I'm only sayin', why is it that men always go about things the hard way? This could have been handled much simpler."

As if to illustrate her point, Jack passed Bobby's Christy to Jimmy in a complex dance move that exchanged her for Carly. Hank raised a brow and looked down at Lois. "What would you have suggested?"

"You could have simply asked me what the girls want."

That halted Hank in mid step. "You know?"

She smiled at him. "You can get a lot out of a girl after a few martinis."

He was sure. Hank pushed aside a nasty thought about him, Lois and a few martinis.

"Really? And would you like to share your insight into these girls."

"Gladly. Lia, over a bout of morning sickness, confided to Trey's girl Carly that she is scared to death of Jimmy going off with the team and not returnin', but she will never ask him to quit because it is who he is and she knows that. Without the team, he wouldn't be the man she fell in love with. Nicki's parents were divorced in New York years ago, too. She is a little gun shy about marriage herself so no, I don't think she's lookin' for a ring from Jack just yet. And in my opinion, if Jared asked Mandy to marry him and move to Pigeon Hollow, I believe she'd say yes. She's had it with the city and the TV business, but she's too stubborn to give up. I think she would, though, if Jared gave her a good enough excuse."

Hank watched Lois wide-eyed and she laughed. "See, wasn't that easy?"

He looked up at the sky then back to her. "Yes."

She grinned. "A man who can admit he was wrong. Hank Miller, you may have proved you're perfect."

Her comment sobered him immediately since he'd nearly leaned down to kiss her before he stopped himself. He smiled sadly. "No, Lois. I am far from perfect."

Chapter 8

Hank leaned back in his chair and sipped on his beer. He had managed to avoid any contact with Senator Dickhead during the reception. He'd also managed to control his hormones around Lois for the most part. The day was an overwhelming success.

He watched as the wait staff cleared the last of the dishes from the now empty tables, noting Lois directing them where to put the leftover food. It was good she was busy as the band announced their last song of the night. It would have been too tempting to pull her into his arms for one more dance. His resolve to be hands off with her waffled tenuously as the evening wore on.

The Gordon boys led their women out onto the dance floor, but this time there was no swapping. Hank had relayed the info he'd gotten from Lois earlier, so Operation Female Recon was complete and the boys were happier than he'd ever seen them.

He sighed, glad they were happy, wishing he was.

A hand softly touching his shoulder nearly made him jump. He took a moment to be amazed that Lois had been able to sneak up on him. So much for him being the tough special operative with superhuman senses. Had he been on an op, he'd be dead now. There was some truth to the saying 'a distracted soldier is a dead one'.

He pushed that thought aside and smiled up at her. "Hi. Did you get everything put away?"

She shrugged. "It seems I'm in the way in my own kitchen at the moment."

He rose from his chair. "Good. That means you have time for the last dance."

Dancing with Lois as the red sun set behind the trees seemed so much harder than their one other dance when it had been broad daylight. Hank wasn't even certain what they were doing could be called dancing. They barely rocked as he held her close. He let his hands run up and down the back of her silk dress.

Damn it. He shouldn't have pulled her so close. And when she rested her head on his shoulder, he really should not have laid his chin against her hair and inhaled the sweet scent of her. He paid for doing both when he felt his body react to her closeness. He knew he was really in trouble when he didn't force himself to move away. Then the song ended and he still didn't let her go. She raised her head and their eyes met.

"Lois..." He swallowed. What the hell was he going to say? *Come back to my motel room at The Hideaway?* Real romantic. Or maybe he could bring her upstairs to her bed and hope no one noticed. Sure. Six trained men with eagle eyes, two of them her sons, not notice them running upstairs for a quickie. There were too many problems with that scenario to even contemplate, not the biggest being Hank did not want only a quickie with Lois. She was the kind of woman a man wanted to spend time with, both in and out of bed ... and he was leaving tomorrow.

The music had stopped, the dance was over and yet he didn't let her go. Didn't want to. She watched him and waited patiently as all these thoughts careened through his head.

Jimmy walked up to them with his bride and Hank dropped his arms and took a step back. *Guilty? Who me?*

"Mama. Lia and I wanted to say good night and thank you. We're headin' to the city with Lia's family in the limo." Hank could have kissed Jimmy for the interruption. Jimmy turned to him. "The governor booked us a suite at the hotel."

Hank smiled, remembering how much Jimmy liked hotel suites. "Very nice. Enjoy." He watched Lois tear up again as she kissed Jimmy and Lia goodbye. They would leave for their honeymoon the next day straight from the hotel and although Lois had said goodbye to Jimmy as he left for far more dangerous trips, Hank supposed this departure was different. Jimmy was now Lia's husband, not only Lois' son.

Hank itched to put an arm around her shoulders, but Jack crossed the dance floor. He hugged his brother and new sister in law along the way and then came to Lois and Hank. "Mama. Commander. It's early still so the rest of us are headin' on over to the bar for one last drink. You all wanna come?"

Lois answered her middle son. "Thanks, Jack, but I think I'll stay here and see what the caterers have done to my kitchen."

"Commander?"

This was it. The moment of decision. Hank could agree to go to the bar, the last thing he wanted to do, but also the safest. Or, he could remain behind, alone with Lois.

His heart thudded in his chest. "Thanks, Jack. But I think I'll help your mother clean up a bit and then head back to the motel."

Jack nodded. "Alright, then. We'll take the van and leave you the rental car, if that's okay with you, sir."

Hank nodded, barely able to focus on Jack's words.

A few goodbyes and then they were alone and walking toward the kitchen.

Lois paused just inside the back door, keenly aware of Hank's closeness. She swallowed

nervously. All the time she'd spent since his arrival, imagining what it would be like to be alone with him, now that they were, she was so nervous she was shaking.

"This house has been so full of people lately, it's strange it's so silent now." She glanced up at his face and found him watching her.

He raised his hand and trailed it lightly down her bare arm. "Would you rather I left?"

"No, Hank. I don't want you leave." She turned to face him and smoothed the lapel of his dress uniform, concentrating on staring at the fabric, the buttons, his medals, anything to avoid his face.

With one finger, Hank raised her chin and she had no choice but to look up. Her gaze skimmed his lips and finally rested on his eyes as his head lowered toward hers.

His hand strayed to cup her cheek, his lips barely a breath away from hers. "Lois, if I'm about to make a fool of myself, stop me now."

She shook her head. That they had waited until the night before he left was the only thing foolish about their kissing now. "You are many things, Hank Miller. But a fool is not one of them."

A small smile graced his lips before he closed the distance and she felt what she'd only dreamed of since his arrival. His hand cradled the nape of her neck as he tilted his head and pressed his lips to hers.

With both hands splayed on his broad chest, Lois leaned into Hank's kiss. She undid the buttons on his coat, slipped both arms under it and clasped them behind his back. He groaned softly and pulled her closer, his hand kneading her waist through the thin silk of her dress.

She parted her lips for his tongue and was lost. Her mother's southern gentlewoman morals be damned. She wanted this man. Hadn't she been the model mother for thirty-four years? Often at the cost of her own happiness.

He backed her up against the wall of the pantry as both of his hands ran up her torso, his thumbs brushing the sides of her breasts. Her breath caught in her throat as she pulled away. "Hank."

He took a step back, dropped his hands and ran them over his face. "I'm sorry."

She shook her head and fisted her hands on each lapel of his jacket, pulling him back toward her. "No, you're not and neither am I. Let's go upstairs."

His eyes grew wide and she laughed. "I know my dear sainted mother, god rest her soul, is rollin' in her grave but I don't care. We don't have the time for flirtations, Hank."

Lois wasn't sure if she meant they had to hurry because the boys would be home soon. Or that she'd realized today she'd dedicated her entire life to her children and now she was fifty and alone. Either way, Hank was leaving for the base tomorrow and the one thing she knew for sure was she wanted him tonight.

"I don't know what you're goin' to think of me, but I'm goin' to break every rule I've ever been taught and invite you up to my bedroom." The last time Lois had broken the rules she

ended up fifteen and pregnant. Luckily, she was too old for that now.

She watched Hank smile. He ran a thumb over her cheek and leaned in for another too brief kiss. "Lead the way."

Lois took Hank's hand and swung it like they were teenagers on a first date. They were far from teenagers. She realized that was kind of freeing ... and frightening. She hadn't been with a man in a very long time, having neither the time nor the inclination after her divorce.

At the top of the stairs, she paused at the door to her room. Hank squeezed her hand gently. When she raised her eyes to his face, he said, "We don't have to do this if you don't want to."

She smiled. "I want to." Wanting to was not the problem.

He pulled her closer and kissed the top of her head. "You're shaking, you know."

She was very aware of that. There was probably a good chance she'd pass out, too, a speculation Lois kept to herself. Lois took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, realizing how shaky it sounded. Might as well just get it out in the open. She bit her lip and then launched into her confession. "I haven't been with anyone since my husband ... and he was my first."

She dared to look at his face and saw the surprise. She parroted what he'd said to her earlier. "We don't have to do this if you don't want to." Oh, lord. What if he said no?

He smiled and held her closer. "Oh, believe me. I want to." Hank laughed and glanced up at the ceiling before looking down at her again. "Now I'm shaking."

Lois reached out and turned the doorknob. "Then let's put all this nervous energy to good use." She grabbed his hand again and watched his eyes narrow as she pulled him into her bedroom.

Hank was concentrating on controlling his rapid breathing and heartbeat as he watched Lois slowly open his shirt one button at a time. When she parted the fabric and lowered her mouth to his chest, he decided control was a lost cause. Besides, he didn't want to be in command right now, not even of his own body. He wanted her, needed her, far too much.

She gasped as he picked her up and carried her to the bed. Had the staircase been wider, he may have been tempted to do a Rhett Butler imitation and carry Lois up the stairs. Instead, they'd had to walk. It didn't matter how they'd arrived there, as long as they ended up exactly where they were—in a bed and together.

Hank slid out of his jacket, toed off his shoes and knelt next to her on top of the quilt. Her skin was as soft as her dress as his hands started at her ankles and roamed up her legs, under the hem to end at her thighs. He was feeling nervous himself. He hadn't been with anyone since his wife, either. He should probably tell Lois, but it was complicated.

How could he explain that after twenty years of marriage, they'd divorced and then continued, for a year after the papers were signed, to have more and better sex than they'd ever had during their marriage? Right up until the day his ex-wife had gotten out of his bed and informed him, on her way out the door, that she was getting re-married to a co-worker who didn't leave the country and try to get himself killed routinely. Hank had been far too shocked to say he never tried to get himself killed. Why bother at that point?

He felt like a horny teenager with his hands up under Lois' skirt. He wanted her underwear off and her legs spread wide for him. But Hank was faced with the realization that this woman had confessed to him she'd only been with one man her entire life, and that — he quickly did the math — was nearly two decades ago.

That thought froze his hands in mid stroke as they caressed her thighs, until a different image filled his head — Lois striding matter-of-factly toward a box of sex toys.

"What's wrong?" Lois' voice broke into his worrying.

"I was afraid I was moving too fast for you."

Lois laughed. "Darlin', you aren't movin' nearly fast enough for my likin'."

That was really all Hank needed to hear. Lois' underwear landed on the floor seconds later.

Hank was contemplating his next course of action when Lois' fingers made quick work of his belt and fly and snaked their way into his briefs, grasping the length of his hard as steel erection. Lois definitely was not having a problem with moving fast and if she continued stroking him, he'd come immediately and this encounter would be over much, much too soon.

He pulled his pelvis away from her. "We'll get done a little too fast if you keep that up."

"Then you better distract me, darlin'."

That he could do. Hank slipped Lois' dress up and pulled it off over her head. She was filled out and well rounded in all the right places. A woman's form should be shapely, not like those skinny girls in their swimsuits in the magazine Matt had given him during the HALO exercise.

Hank showed his appreciation of Lois' body with both his hands and his mouth as he pushed the lace of her bra aside and scraped his teeth across her nipple. She shuddered, which he assumed was a good thing. He let his hand slide lower, found the warm heat between her thighs and did as he was told — distracted her.

Lois moved her legs further apart and raised her hips to press her clit harder against his hand. Hank shuddered himself. He slid a finger inside her and heard her breath quicken to match his manipulations. Lois' fists gripped the quilt, her eyes closed, and she cried out as she came with a body shaking orgasm. He didn't let up until she was a quivering mass on top the covers and Hank realized he was the one distracted, clear out of his mind.

He ran his hands back up her body and braced himself above her, wanting to sink his cock into her so badly he could barely control the urge.

In the dim light from the lamp across the room, he saw her face was flushed, her eyes barely focused as she whispered, "You're overdressed."

He couldn't argue, so he corrected the situation, figuring it would bring him one step closer to the desired outcome. His socks, pants and shirt landed next to her dress on the floor. His briefs did nothing to hide the massive erection but he kept them on anyway, call it a security blanket. Yes, he was forty-six and nervous as hell about making love to a woman. It was ridiculous. His only explanation — Lois was no ordinary woman.

Chapter 9

Lois trembled half with the aftershocks of what Hank had done to her with only his hands, half with anticipation of what else he could do to her. She may have not been with a man for many years, but she did have a supply of toys from her friend's line of merchandise. Lois realized one thing that night, though; sometimes there was no substitute for the real thing.

Hank stood next to the bed, wearing only white cotton briefs and an expression of uncertainty. He was one of the most handsome men she'd ever seen. Given that gorgeous men had surrounded her all day at the wedding, that was saying something.

His body was all lean muscles and hard angles. There was one hard angle she'd like to get to know better, but even though he'd given her a hell of an orgasm already, he still looked nervous.

She reached a hand out toward him. "Hank, darlin'."

He smiled and sat on the bed next to her. "I like when you call me 'darlin'."

She laughed. "Then you are really goin' to love this." Lois sat up and ran her tongue lightly over his ear. She watched the shiver run through him. "Make love to me now, darlin'."

Lois soon found out Hank's muscles weren't just for show. He lay on the bed next to her and pulled her on top of him. Supporting her with two large hands on her hips, he lowered her onto his erection, sending tingles from the point of entry all the way up her spine until she could swear fireworks exploded in her brain.

She may have started out on top, staring down into those steely eyes but somehow, mid-way through, he flipped her to the bottom. He hovered above her, watching her face through every stroke of his body into hers. They eventually ended with her legs wrapped around Hank's back while she was pressed up against the headboard as he knelt and supported her weight in his hands.

Clinging to him through her second, and rather loud, orgasm of the night, she felt him plunge once, twice, three times into her before he let out a strangled breath, came with a shudder and slumped against her.

Her arms and legs trembled when she tried to move them from around him and she realized she wasn't going anywhere for quite a while. She laughed. "Just when I thought I was in pretty good shape for my age. I can't even move after a little sex."

She felt Hank's laugh vibrate through her. "That, *darlin'*, was not 'a little sex'."

Lois swatted his arm. "Are you makin' fun?"

He shook his head. "I know better than to do that. Especially if I want another go." He pulled back so he could see her and winked.

She realized he was still very hard inside her. Her eyes opened wide and he grinned.

He cocked a brow. "Unless you're too tired."

She suddenly felt a second wind coming on. "Not if you aren't. But I don't think my limbs can

take this position anymore."

"Agreed." Hank scooped her up like she weighed nothing and carried her across the room. He laid her on the big old wooden desk in front of the window.

"On my great grandfather's desk?" she gasped.

Hank smiled. "Don't fool yourself, sweetheart. I'm sure this isn't the first time this has happened on this desk over the last hundred years. It's big and sturdy and the perfect height."

He rested each of her legs on his shoulders and plunged smoothly into her to demonstrate his point so convincingly, there was no way to argue it. She grasped the well-worn wood along the edge as every one of Hank's strokes continued to send waves of pleasure through her.

Lois knew she would never look at the desk the same way again.

* * * *

Lois opened her eyes as the sun, and visions of the night before, swept over her. Some mornings, things just felt right with the world. The sun shone, the birds sang, she was sore in all the right places...

The only regret was she was alone. Hank had stayed as long as he could, but they knew the bar would be giving last call and her two boys would be on the way home. Before leaving her, he had kissed her thoroughly enough that she'd nearly not let him go. The kiss definitely made certain she couldn't fall asleep for quite a while.

It was a good thing he left when he did. Not ten minutes later, she heard the boys along with Nicki and Mandy trying to sneak up the stairs, none to quietly.

She'd had sex with a man she hardly knew on most of the family heirlooms in the room, and she was knowingly allowing Jack and Jared to have their girls overnight in there bedrooms again. Yup. Both her mother and her grandmother, maybe great-grandma too, were not only rolling in their graves, Lois would be shocked if they hadn't popped right up out of them by now.

She glanced at the clock and slipped out of bed. The team and their dates, and most importantly Hank, would be at the farm for brunch in an hour. Then they would leave for the drive to the military base. Lois stifled the sadness caused by Hank leaving so soon after she'd found him.

Most days Lois would wash her face, throw on some face cream and lipstick and be out the door. This morning, she found herself staring into her reflection in the bathroom mirror, tempted to apply the full face of makeup she'd worn to the wedding. Simply because she'd be seeing Hank again. She was in deep trouble. She was falling for Hank – no, she'd already fallen, as hard as a one-winged bird.

Tearing herself away from the mirror, she forced herself to throw on jeans and a simple cotton shirt. She would not change her routine over one night of sex. Just as she wouldn't miss him when he was gone and wonder what he was doing every minute.

Hell, lying to herself wasn't even working, and she'd had lots of practice doing that during her marriage. She pushed all thought of saying goodbye to Hank out of her mind and jogged down the stairs to start the coffee and pull together brunch from the prior day's leftovers.

Good old southern hospitality always did keep her mind occupied when all else failed. Today she even remembered to put coffee grinds in the filter.

She was doing just fine until her sons and their girls came into the kitchen. Usually oblivious to everything, Jack suddenly looked at her a little too closely – or was it her imagination? Even the smirk that almost always graced Jared's face seemed to be directed at her this morning. Thank goodness Jimmy was already gone on his honeymoon or she'd imagine he knew about her night of wild sex with Hank, too.

She couldn't continue to feel paranoid and cook so she took matters into her own hands. "Outside! All of you. I had my kitchen taken away from me yesterday and I'm takin' it back today. Shoo! I'll bring the food and coffee outside to you when it's ready and the others get here. Hear me?"

"Jeez, Mama! We're going." Jack looked at her more closely now. And was Jared grinning at her?

Darn it. Fifty years old and divorced for nearly twenty years, and she was worried what her adult sons would think about her having sex. No wonder she had avoided it for so long.

Whatever she was feeling, however, it was nothing when weighed against how good she felt as Hank snuck up behind her while she was inside the pantry.

He kissed her neck and whispered in her ear, "Good morning."

She jumped. "Gracious, you scared me."

He nuzzled her neck and wrapped his arms around her. "I wouldn't think you'd be so tense after last night. Maybe I need to work on my relaxation technique with you." He turned her in his arms and grinning, slid his hands down her back to cup each jean-clad cheek.

"You are going to get us caught, Hank Miller. They are going to be in here any minute looking for breakfast."

"Mmm, this is all I need for breakfast." He nibbled on her lip. Pressed against her, she felt exactly how happy he was to be there.

She knew she should pull away, but she didn't. Up against the shelves of canned goods, she leaned her head back and enjoyed his kisses, his tongue tasting of toothpaste. She was determined to remember everything about this kiss. The memories might have to last her a very long time.

Chapter 10

Hank sat bouncing the rubber end of a pencil rapidly against his desktop while listening to the ringing of the phone through the handset. It had been a week since he'd left Pigeon Hollow and Lois. Seven long days of evaluating his feelings and reevaluating his life. Seven long nights in his bed alone thinking of her.

He remembered how he left her. She'd fed the crowd and said the goodbyes, he'd gotten everyone and everything that was going loaded into the vehicles, then he'd run back into the house with the excuse of using the bathroom one last time before hitting the road. She'd

kissed him as if it would be the last time, and then she'd smiled when he asked her if it would be alright if he saw her again.

He'd spent the last week working out how to do just that.

The incessant ringing was finally replaced by his daughter's voice. "Hello?"

"Hi, Pumpkin."

"Hi, Daddy. How is everything with you?" His daughter always answered his calls sounding reserved. She felt him out, knowing he could never tell her where he was going or why. Thinking that it might be the last time she'd speak to him.

He sighed. It hadn't been easy being his daughter but he was about to make things easier in one respect, and possibly harder in the next.

He had no idea how she'd react to his news so he tried to sound upbeat. "Everything is great. I have some news for you."

"Okay." His daughter Mary waited silently.

"I've ... uh ... met someone."

"Really?" Mary squeaked. "Oh my god, Daddy. I am so happy for you. It's about time, you know."

Hank let out breath he'd been holding as he waited for her reaction. "I'm glad you're pleased, I was a little worried how you'd react. It hasn't been that long since your mother and I broke up."

"Daddy. It's been over three years since the divorce was final and she's already gotten remarried. So who is she? Where did you meet?"

"We'll get to all that. Don't you want to hear the other news?"

"I don't know. Is it good news or bad news?"

Good question. Hank considered how he was feeling about it himself and realized, though it would be a big change in his life, it was definitely good news. He only hoped everyone else involved felt the same.

* * * *

"Sir. Why are we driving two hours to see Jimmy at the farm when he and Lia will be back at base in two days?" Jack sat in the passenger seat of the van frowning.

"You'll find out when we get there."

"Not even a little hint?" he grinned.

Hank had to laugh at Jack's persistence. "Has being annoying ever gotten you what you want from me in the past, Gordon?"

"No sir." His smirk never faltered. "I wonder if Mama made a pie."

"Blueberry."

Jack raised an eyebrow. "Sir?"

Shit. He couldn't admit he'd called Lois to tell her he was coming. "I ... uh ... called to talk to Jimmy and he told me. She picked the blueberries this morning." Hank breathed a sigh of relief that after he and Jack arrived at the farm, there'd be no more lying.

"Woo hoo! Fresh blueberry!" Jack seemed far more concerned with pie than Hank calling the farm.

Hank prayed for the rest of the trip, right up until when he pulled the van up to the house, that Jack and his brothers would react just as well as his daughter had to the news.

It was all he could do to not pull Lois into his arms when she stepped out of the house. He watched as she hugged Jack and then extended her hand formally to him. It didn't matter they were forced to shake hands because her son was there since she was absolutely beaming when she said, "Hank. It's really good to see you again."

He smiled just as Jimmy came out the back door, looking concerned. "Commander. What are you doin' here? Is everythin' all right at the base?"

Jack frowned and looked from Jimmy to Hank. "I thought you talked to him this mornin'?"

"Do you think we could all sit down together and talk? Jared, too."

Three sets of hazel eyes watched Hank closely.

"I'll get him," Jimmy offered.

"I'll go with you." Jack followed, looking like he was anxious to confer with Jimmy on what was going on, since Hank wasn't spilling anything.

Left alone, Lois raised a brow. "What do you have up your sleeve?"

He hadn't told even Lois his plans. He hoped that had been wise. Hank dared to take a step closer and trail one finger lightly down her arm. He watched her shiver. "I want to be with you, Lois, as a couple. Is that what you want, too?"

She smiled and nodded.

"Then we have to tell them, and the sooner the better. Now."

Lois sighed and bit her lip nervously. "Alright, but you are doin' all the talkin', darlin'."

Hank smiled. "You keep on calling me *darlin'* and I'll do anything you want." He saw the three boys coming out of the barn and took a step back.

The boys joined them and judging by the looks on their faces, he better tell them what was on his mind and quick.

"Let's sit down in the kitchen. I don't see why we can't talk over some pie," Lois offered.

Hank smiled. She was buttering them up to make it easier for him. "Pie would be great. Thanks. Shall we sit, boys?"

Hank received 'yes, sirs' from his two men, and a strange grin from Jared.

"So, Hank. What have you got to say to us?" Jared asked with a crooked smile on his smart-ass face. Hank ignored the cocky attitude and Jared's use of his first name.

"Well, first of all, Jack, Jimmy. You need to know I'm leaving the team."

He heard Lois' sharp intake of breath from next to him.

"What the fu ... , sir?" Jack censored himself with a quick glance at his mother. Jimmy looked struck dumb.

"It's time," Hank told them.

"So you're just going to quit? Just like that, sir?" Jack asked.

Hank smiled and shook his head. "No. I'm taking a job teaching newbies. I've got nothing left to teach you guys, but I can do some good training new operatives."

He smiled at Lois. "The new job means no more going wheels up on twenty minutes notice, or being OCONUS for months at a time. It won't be exactly nine to five, but it'll be as close to a normal schedule as I've ever had. And that will leave time for other things in my life. Jared, this part is for you, too ... I'm going to start dating your mother."

Jack and Jimmy had twin looks of shock on their faces. Jared's had its usual smirk. "Well, it's about damn time."

Every eye in the room turned to Jared. He looked from one to the other. "What? Don't tell me you all didn't notice? They've been makin' googly eyes at each other since they met and Mama's been walkin' around like a school girl with a crush the last week."

Hank glanced at Lois and saw her blushing. He reached down and grabbed one of the hands clasped tightly in her lap. He smiled encouragement at her, then looked back at the boys. "I want your blessing, but I'll be perfectly honest with you. Even if you don't approve, I won't rest until I change your minds. I don't give up easily."

Jack made a rude noise. "That's an understatement ... sir."

Hank smiled. "In a few weeks, Jack, you won't be required to call me sir anymore. You'll have a new commander."

What Hank didn't tell them was he'd contacted Central Command and recommended Jimmy as his replacement. Commanding Task Force Zeta was still a dangerous job, but a hell of a lot safer than going deep undercover as a terrorist, which had been Jimmy's last big assignment, the one that nearly got him killed.

"I think maybe Mama needs some time alone with her beau."

Hank turned and saw Jared stopped halfway out the screen door smirking back at him.

"Thank you. I think Lois and I do have a bit to talk about."

Jimmy smiled and laid a hand on Hank's shoulder. "I'll miss you in command, sir. But I'm real glad the way things worked out."

Jack followed behind him, pie, plate and fork in one hand. "Me, too, sir."

When they were alone, Hank stood and gathered Lois in his arms and finally got to kiss her the way he'd wanted to since he'd arrived.

She pulled back, looking concerned. "Tell me you didn't quit the team because of me."

"I didn't quit the team because of you."

She breathed in deeply and tilted her head. "Now tell me the truth."

"Staying stateside and having more time to spend with you is just a fringe benefit, sweetheart. The truth is I'm forty-six years old. I took an informal poll. I'm at least three years older than any other team leader. A few weeks ago during a HALO exercise, the safety officer thought I was another instructor. He thought I was too old to be a part of the team, even as their commander."

"You're in as good a shape as any of the young guys and you know it."

He held her closer and raised an eyebrow. "Oh, really?"

She smiled. "Really. Although, my memory might need refreshin'."

Hank lifted her so she was level with him. "I think that can be arranged."

The End

BULL

Chapter 1

"Go, go, go!" Bull Ford heard the order through the communications implant in his ear and took off running. Acutely aware of the location of his backup, the members of his team, he headed for the shelter of a natural rock formation. He flung himself flat on his belly, hidden from view of the bad guys by both the night and the black clothing and greasepaint he wore. From his position Bull could see the goal, a bomb duct-taped to a live hostage. His task, to disarm the bomb and get the hostage out alive, preferably without getting himself killed in the process.

"What info do we have about the bomb?" he hissed.

Matt Coleman, who manned the communication console, answered him. "Nothing. You're on your own."

"Shit," Bull swore softly.

"Shit is right, Bull," Jack Gordon's cocky southern drawl invaded his ear.

"What're you plannin', Bull?" Jimmy Gordon asked.

"Where are the tangos?" he asked in return, wanting to know the location of the bad guys who represented the targets or 'tangos'.

"I see two by the hostage. Two more walking the perimeter," BB Dalton supplied from his vantage point on the ridge.

A plan formed in Bull's mind. He opened the black duffle he carried and pulled out what he needed, running over his plan aloud for the team at the same time. "We need a diversion. I'm going to put together a bomb for a phony explosion. It will look and sound like a real one, but without the kick, just lots of noise and smoke. Trey. Do you have a bead on the hostage?"

"Affirmative."

"Good. When I say three, you fire as close to the hostage as you can without hitting him. While the two tangos by the hostage are shooting back at the source of the incoming fire, meaning you, I'll lob my fake bomb near the hostage."

"And the tangos will think the hostage was hit and their bomb blew. They'll run like hell and you can grab the hostage, bring him to safety and diffuse the real bomb," Jimmy finished for him. "Good plan, Bull."

"What's your ETA on the fake bomb?" Trey asked.

"Thirty seconds." Bull estimated, his fingers working quickly but surely. "Correction. I'm done. Ready, Trey?"

"Affirmative."

"One, two, three." On *three* the dirt around the hostage jumped and flew with dozens of tiny percussions. The hostage jumped also and Bull heard him scream as the bomb flew to within a few feet of him and detonated in an explosion of noise and thick black smoke. He felt bad scaring the hostage, but there was no way to communicate the plan to him safely.

As anticipated, the tangos took off running away from the explosion. Bull ran in low, grabbed the hostage's arm and dragged him to safety.

Bull held the pen flashlight in his teeth and shined the beam on the bomb. He whipped out a knife to cut the duct tape so he could remove it from the man.

The hostage's eyes went wide. "Don't! There's a trip wire under the tape. You'll set it off."

Bull sighed. He hated duct tape. He despised homemade bombs even more. This one looked like the typical homegrown version, the kind you get when the how-to instructions came off the internet, which meant it was unstable and could blow at any moment.

He evaluated what he could see of the bomb and the wires attached to it. With hands as steady as a brain surgeon's, he selected one wire, held his breath and snipped. When he didn't blow up, he let out the breath. "Bomb disarmed," he said for the benefit of the team and the hostage.

"Get yourself and that hostage back to home base and we'll call this mission complete. Good job, Bull," he heard Jimmy's voice say.

"Thank you, sir." It was taking some getting used to, calling his teammate 'sir'. Since Hank Miller had very recently retired as commander, Jimmy had been put in place as probationary commander pending approval. The success of this mission would go a long way in convincing Central Command Jimmy could effectively lead this team.

Bull rose on one knee and said to the hostage, "Come on. We're outta here." Then he felt the hit strike his flack jacket directly over his heart. The force knocked him off balance. He found himself flat on his back staring up in the darkness into the face – and the gun – of a grinning black-clad figure. "Not so fast, dog face."

Bull helplessly watched the gun swing to the side and take out the hostage with a single shot. He closed his eyes and let his head fall back to the ground. "Shit."

* * * *

"The plan was good and solid. Just don't get yourself and the hostage killed next time. Okay, Bull?"

Bull hung his head, shaking it from side to side. "I'm sorry I fucked up, Jimmy. I made you look bad."

"You didn't." Jimmy leaned forward in the red vinyl booth at the back of the bar near base and slapped Bull on the back encouragingly.

"Bull sure wasn't looking too good a little while ago, with that pink crap all over his flack jacket from the paint ball gun. What kind of man uses pink paint balls anyway?" Trey asked.

"A sissy Marine jarhead kind, that's who!" Matt commented. He'd been recruited for Task Force Zeta from the Army's Delta Force Tech Unit. Matt glanced apologetically at Jack and Jimmy, who'd both been Marines prior to joining Zeta. "No offense."

Jimmy raised a brow. "Sure."

"We're never going to hear the end of this, you know. Getting beat in a simple training exercise by Task Force Kappa." BB shook his head while playing with the condensation on his glass of soda. BB, who'd come from the Navy SEALs, didn't usually have much to say in the Army vs. Marine debate, but don't get him started on the subject of the annual Army vs. Navy football game.

"I know. I'm sorry." Bull scowled. It had been only a training exercise, but it could have just as easily been real, in which case, he'd be dead. It didn't matter what Jimmy said. Bull was disappointed in himself.

"Bull, dammit. Stop apologizin' and lookin' like your favorite hound just died. We're a team. You weren't out there alone. It's as much BB's fault for not seein' the fifth tango on the infrared sneakin' up on you. Or any one of the other guys for not havin' your back and takin' out that guy before he took you."

"Yes, sir." He knew he didn't have to call Jimmy 'sir' when they were out at the bar, Jimmy had already told them that, but it was easier to fall back on his discipline training when he felt like such a failure.

BB nodded. "He's right, Bull. I should have had your back. I guess we all got a little cocky thinking the exercise was over once you disarmed the bomb. We forget it's not over until we're all home safe."

"Besides, Bull, you're a really big target. I mean, who could miss ya?" Jack added with a crooked grin.

That made Bull feel tons better. He took another slug of his beer.

Jimmy shot Jack a look that said 'shut up' and then said, "Tomorrow mornin' at the team meetin' we'll go over the scenario again step by step, ascertain what went wrong and come up with alternate actions we could have taken. Losin' an exercise is more valuable than winnin' if you learn from your mistakes."

"Jesus, Jimmy. You really sounded like a commander just then," Jack said.

"No shit!" Trey agreed. He mimicked Jimmy, "*We have to ascertain what went wrong.* Jeez! Do

they give you a book or something on how to talk like a commander?"

Jimmy rolled his eyes. "No. But they do give you a book about how to court martial insubordinate soldiers."

That was met with a round of laughter from everyone except Bull. Jimmy didn't hold the loss against him, but Bull always had been harder on himself than others were on him.

He stood. "I'm gonna head out, guys."

Jimmy pursed his lips and watched Bull closely. "You goin' home?"

He forced a smile for Jimmy's benefit. "Nah, I think I'll swing by Lana's." It was bad enough he might have single-handedly ruined Jimmy's chances of getting the command position of Zeta, Bull didn't want Jimmy concerned about him all night, too. If the team thought he was going to get laid, they'd stop worrying about him.

Hell, maybe he'd even actually do it.

He made the decision amid the cheers and jeers that followed him out the back door of the bar and into the parking lot. He would head for Lana's warm bed instead of his own cold empty one.

Hell. Hadn't Bull held Lana all night long while she cried when her cat was missing? Surely, she'd reciprocate by cheering him up. Sinking into her would go far to get him over tonight's disastrous loss. That's what relationships were about, weren't they? Being there for each other. That, and not having to hook up with a stranger when you wanted some loving.

There were no spots closer, so Bull pulled his truck up to the curb in front of a house two doors away from where Lana lived. He turned off the ignition, pulled out the key and sat for a second in the dark. He was beat. He needed a hot shower, some sweaty sex and a good night's sleep. All three could be gotten at Lana's house. Hopefully things would look brighter in the morning.

Bull rubbed his hands briskly over his face in an attempt to wake himself up. He was as mentally tired as he was physically. He took a deep breath and got out of the truck, locking the door behind him.

About to knock on the side door, he heard the sounds of Lana's hot tub jets bubbling away on the back deck. That was an idea, a soak in the hot tub. Perfect! Exactly what he needed. Imagining how good it would feel to strip down naked and slide into the steaming water, he made his way around the house to the back deck. Picturing peeling off Lana's bikini and sitting her in his lap had him walking even faster.

He rounded the corner, about to pull his shirt over his head, when he stopped dead in his tracks. There were two heads bobbing close together barely above the waterline. One of them was definitely male, judging by the buzz cut. They didn't hear him over the bubbles so it came as a complete surprise when they both looked up and all six foot four inches of Bull towered over them.

"Entertaining?" he asked in a strangely calm voice.

Lana's eyes betrayed her even as she lied, "Bull! I thought you'd be gone all night at your

exercise so I invited a friend over."

He raised his eyebrow as the 'friend' looked ill. "Really. Why don't you introduce me to your friend?" Bull didn't miss how they both remained sunk as low as they could get beneath the water without drowning. He'd bet he knew why.

With his best imitation of politeness, Bull extended his hand to the turd in the water with his girlfriend. When the ass took it, Bull pulled until the guy was standing, exposed and yup, just as he suspected, naked. He dropped the bastard's hand and wiped away the wetness and imagined slime on his black pants.

Having no doubt Lana would be equally un-attired, he could do nothing but stare at her in shock and disgust. His eyes strayed back to the guy, who probably weighed one twenty-five soaking wet. Bull outweighed him by a good hundred pounds of solid muscle. The look on the guy's skinny face proved the asshole also realized he was out-manned. He would have been shaking in his boots if he'd been wearing any.

Bull shook his head. "What the hell are you doing, Lana?"

She turned on the tears and grabbed at his hand, still hiding under the water. He didn't know why she was still hiding. He'd seen her naked and apparently so had scrawny boy. "Bull. I don't know. I just get so lonely and you're away all the time."

He frowned at her pitiful excuse. "I've barely been away at all for the past month." Shaking his head, he realized it just didn't fucking matter. "Forget it."

Bull turned and flung the sliding door that led into her house so hard it crashed against the metal frame, not breaking but sounding close to it.

"What are you going to do?" she called from behind him, sounding a little frantic but not enough to haul her naked cheating ass out of the water.

Worried, was she? And she'd never even seen him really angry. "I'm getting my stuff," he said, and that's exactly what he did. He flung open drawers, getting his army t-shirt and sweatpants. Cabinet doors crashed open as he got his bottle of Wild Turkey — he'd need that when he got home. He flung open the entertainment center as he retrieved his DVDs. On the way out the front he noticed stick boy's tiny sneakers by the door. He picked those up and left the house for the last time. He dropped the expensive looking running shoes casually down the sewer and walked the rest of the way to his truck, whistling.

Chapter 2

Bull crawled into the o-eight-hundred team meeting the following morning feeling, and looking he was pretty sure, like shit. He had gotten his hot shower the night before, but as for the sweaty sex and good night's sleep — that just wasn't in the cards.

He made his way directly to the coffee pot and poured himself a steaming mug full. Jimmy's first unofficial act as interim team commander had been to install an industrial-sized coffee maker in the meeting room and instruct the entire team to each bring in a mug. "A real mug," Bull remembered him saying, "*drinkin' coffee out of paper or styrofoam is sacrilege.*"

The way he felt this morning, Bull would gladly vote to make Jimmy permanent team leader for the coffee alone.

"You look like you had an eventful night," Matt commented while filling his own mug that read '*The probability of someone watching you is proportional to the stupidity of your action*'.

Bull usually found the saying extremely funny. Not today.

Matt continued, "Although, I would think you'd look a little happier after being up with Lana all night." He grinned. "No pun intended."

Bull picked up his mug. "Do yourself a favor, Matt and take my advice. Leave me alone today."

The low warning tone in Bull's voice wiped the smile off Matt's face. "You need to talk?"

"No. I need to drink this coffee, get the fuck out of this meeting room and go shoot at something."

Matt pursed his lips and nodded. "Okay, then. Good plan."

Jimmy came out of the commander's office—it was still jarring to see the door open and not have Hank Miller step out—and the assembled team took their seats.

"Alright. Before we go over the events of last night, I have an actual assignment to hand out. It's a cakewalk, so I'm putting it out there on a voluntary basis. The gig is solo, no team back up."

Bull raised his hand. "I volunteer."

"You don't even know what it is yet." Trey turned to him in surprise.

What the assignment was didn't matter; that he would be busy and away from his team so he wouldn't have to answer questions did. Bull looked up and found Jimmy watching him. "It doesn't matter. I'll take it," he said.

Jimmy nodded his head. "Okay then. It's yours." He shuffled the papers in his hand, walked to the white board on the wall and grabbed a marker. "Alright. Let's go over yesterday."

Bull watched him, and when it was obvious no more information was forthcoming, interrupted. "Um, aren't you going to tell me what my assignment is, sir?"

Jimmy turned, brow raised. "You said it didn't matter."

Bull heard Jack snicker at the other end of the table. He did his best to ignore it. "Yes, sir."

"Don't you worry your head, Bull. I'll tell you where to be and when. Now, back to the exercise. Somebody hit the lights. Matt, flip on the overhead projector with the course layout from yesterday..."

Maybe Jimmy did have what it took to be commander, besides the free flowing coffee. He'd just effectively taught Bull a valuable lesson, never volunteer until you're told what the assignment involves.

He stifled a sigh and did his best to concentrate on the review of yesterday's debacle, which, no matter what Jimmy said, Bull took full responsibility for. Bull deserved whatever this

unspecified assignment turned out to be, no matter how bad.

Bull tried to remember that fact later that morning, when he sat opposite Jimmy in the commander's office and wondered if he'd made a big mistake.

"Excuse me, sir?" he asked, hoping he'd heard what Jimmy had just asked wrong.

"I asked if you own a tuxedo?" Jimmy's grin didn't bode well.

"No, sir. Just my dress blues."

"That's fine. I'll get you one." Jimmy added with a mumble, "I hope the big and tall shop rents tuxedos." He picked up a pencil and scribbled something on a pad of paper.

"I'm afraid to ask this, sir, but why do I need a tuxedo?"

Jimmy's grin widened. "You're goin' to a party."

Bull groaned. The last party they'd worked undercover together entailed the team playing wait staff at a fancy black tie event for a bunch of rich snobs. Bull was good at many things, but serving hors d'oeuvres off of silver trays wasn't one of them. "Do I have to pretend to be a waiter again?"

Jimmy smiled. "Nope, this time you get to be a guest."

Bull raised an eyebrow. Hmm. Maybe this mission wouldn't be too bad after all. Good food, served to him by someone else this time. Pretty women, hopefully in low cut dresses. Bull remembered Jimmy had met his new wife Lia during the now infamous wait staff assignment. Although Bull wasn't looking for a wife, in light of recent events he wouldn't mind a distraction for a night. This assignment might be exactly what he needed.

He nodded and couldn't suppress a smile. "Okay. What are the particulars?"

Jimmy went into detail about an unverified internet threat against a number of high profile events across the country, one being tonight's party.

"So Homeland Security isn't taking it seriously?" Bull asked. That was obvious since he was going in alone.

Jimmy shook his head. "No. They consider this right up there with that guy who recently made the threats about the dirty bombs in those seven football stadiums. You know the one, when they found him, he was some nerd who still lived with his parents and got his thrills by scarin' a bunch of innocent people. This threat has no more validity than that one did in the eyes of the higher ups."

"Then why am I going in at all?"

"Senator Dickson is concerned for — let me see if I remember it right — *the physical safety of himself and that of his son.*"

"I'm going to be a personal body guard for Senator Dickhead?"

Jimmy lips twitched as he smothered a smile. "Yup, 'fraid so."

Dickhead was a friend of Lia's father the governor and had attended the recent wedding. Bull figured Jimmy was attempting to restrain himself from enjoying Bull using the nickname,

even though the senator earned it when he tried to shut down the military base in the name of budget cuts.

"So will you and Lia be at this thing, too?" Bull asked hopefully.

Jimmy smiled. "Nope. Lia's bein' pregnant has kept us from havin' to go to quite a few things. I think I might just keep her pregnant for the next few years or so." Then Jimmy sobered. "I *am* sorry, Bull."

"What do you have to be sorry about?"

Jimmy shook his head. "I can't help thinkin' Dickh ... Dickson is tryin' to take advantage of his association with my new father-in-law. He wouldn't be doin' that if I wasn't the one in command at the moment."

Bull smiled. "Don't kid yourself, Jimmy ... I mean, sir. Dickson would try to take advantage of anyone, not just you."

Jimmy smiled sadly. "But I bet the commander ... Commander Miller wouldn't have let him."

"Don't sell yourself short, sir. I believe Commander Miller would have weighed the cost against the payoffs and ramifications and made the best decision for the team, as I'm sure you did. In this case, the cost is low, just me in a tux for a night, but the payoffs could be big. Dickson now owes you a favor."

"Or, he'll view me as a pushover and keep askin' and expectin' more and more," Jimmy pointed out.

Yeah, there was always that. One never knew when dealing with slimy politicians. "Well, if I land me a pretty party guest for the night, I'll be Dickhead's date for as many parties as he wants."

Jimmy smiled. "I'll keep that in mind."

Chapter 3

Marly Spencer blew out a breath of frustration as her fingers struck an errant harp string. The sound of the dissonant note filled the air. Why did mistakes always sound so much louder than the rest of the piece of music? One of life's great mysteries, she guessed.

The other mystery of the day – what was she going to do about her gig that night? Songs she knew like the back of her hand were coming out sounding like musical torture.

Marly ran her shaking hands over her face. She had to get a grip of herself and stop being so distracted.

The phone rang and interrupted her. The way she'd been playing today, it was a welcome interruption. "Hello."

"Hi. It's me."

Her heart thudded in her chest. It was him, all right. Oh, god, she didn't need this right now. "I know it's you. What do you want? We discussed everything last night."

"I want you back."

"No."

"Let's at least talk about it."

"There's nothing to talk about. Look. I have to go. I have a gig tonight."

"Where?"

This was typical behavior on his part. "You know where. You got me the job." She wearily reminded herself this was one reason she'd ended it. There was no reason to get angry over his inattentiveness and self-absorption any longer.

"Ah, yes. I remember. Good. I will see you there then."

"No, you won't..."

"Of course, I will. You said you are playing, and I will be attending..."

"I mean I want you to stay away from me tonight. I'm there to work, and although it is unfortunate you will be present, too, it's unavoidable."

"Fine. I'll stay away while you are playing, especially since I recommended you and it wouldn't behoove either one of us if you didn't perform well. However, afterwards, we *will* discuss this." He always tried to order her around, too. Yet another cause for the breakup, although not her main motivation.

"I don't think so."

He was silent for a moment and she knew him well enough to know he was getting angry.

"We'll see."

She shook her head. "I gotta go. Bye."

Dammit, she was such a sissy. She hung up the phone and watched her hand shake. Under no circumstances would she take him back. There was no doubt she didn't want to, but what if she did anyway? Weak and afraid of being alone, she might do something that crazy. If only she didn't have this job tonight. Being that close to him was going to be the hardest thing she'd done, right up there with finally having the guts to end it last night.

Marly took a deep but shaky breath. She couldn't worry about him now. She had to get dressed and do her hair and makeup. Since she would not be dazzling the party guests with her musical ability tonight, she figured she better at least distract them with her looks. She didn't know which she dreaded more, playing badly at the gig or seeing her ex-boyfriend John.

At the job an hour later, convinced she was going to suck, Marly thought it was probably a good thing she made the extra effort to look good.

She had no doubt people's opinion of her playing rose in direct proportion to the extravagance of her outfits. It was a phenomenon she'd often observed but didn't exactly understand. Thank god for it tonight.

More times than not, while she tuned the instrument—which sounded far from melodic—the party staff and management continuously complimented her on the beauty of the music. She

always wondered first, if they were tone deaf, and second, if they'd think she was so talented if she'd worn the sweatpants she practiced in.

She glanced down at the full ball-gown length black and white checked taffeta skirt she wore. She'd modernized the traditional skirt with the addition of a tight black low-cut short-sleeved top that showed just enough cleavage. The combination of the long skirt and tiny top was demure and sexy at the same time.

Of course, she'd had to hike up the floor length skirt by rolling it very unattractively at the waist in order to lug the forty-four pound harp without tripping. Meanwhile, she had to keep assuring the more than helpful staff she could manage the instrument alone. It wouldn't be the first time nor the last she'd carry it.

Ground floor gigs, like tonight, were easy. It was stairs that gave her trouble. The weight of the piece wasn't the issue, its height – or rather her lack of height – was. The harp was taller than she was, all five foot of her, plus a few inches more if she added heels. She'd taken her shoes off to carry the instrument inside.

Marly definitely hadn't been looking glamorous upon arrival, barefooted with her skirt bunched up, when she first spotted the tall hulk of a man in a tuxedo watching her. Funny, he was the biggest guy present and the only one who didn't try to wrestle the harp out of her hands and carry it for her. Interesting. She wasn't exactly sure how she felt about that.

He wore a tuxedo – vest, bowtie, cufflinks and all – but he was early for a guest and somehow just didn't seem as though he was there for the party. Marly didn't know who the mystery man was. What she did know, however, was that she had better right herself before any other guests showed up. She'd pulled down the skirt to proper length, slipped her shoes back on, and then set about divesting the harp of its canvas bag. She threw it and her big purse in a closet in the corner.

This wasn't the first time she'd been hired to entertain here, so she knew her way around. The mansion was used for more political fundraisers and hoity-toity parties than she could count. The rich may stay at the expensive suites at the Hilton in town, but they partied in the historic Lynwood House. Since it had once belonged to a turn of the century robber baron, she figured the forty thousand square foot house had seen its share of parties over the past century.

By the time she'd grabbed a folding chair from a passing waiter, set up her music stand and laid out her music, the man had moved on, so she could concentrate all of her nerves on the impending confrontation with her ex. No matter John had assured her he would leave her alone during the party, there was still after the party to worry about.

* * * *

"I want you by my side at all times. Do you understand?"

Senator Dickhead was tall, but Bull was taller, so when he stood next to the man, he felt like an overgrown child being lectured.

"Sir. I will be far more effective standing apart from you where I can see a threat coming from any direction. If I'm next to you, there will always be a blind spot."

Hadn't Bull learned the hazards of ignoring the blind spot when he got shot during last night's exercise? The problem here was, anyone shooting at Dickhead would probably not be using paint balls, and as much of an idiot as the senator was, it was still Bull's job to protect him.

Dickhead considered this for a moment. "Alright. But no further than ten feet. And when my son arrives, you'll have to keep an eye on both of us."

Great! Why didn't Bull just go get some rope and tie the three of them together? He decided Jimmy should be apologizing for sending him on this crap assignment. Not only was Dickhead a ... well, dickhead, but Bull's bowtie was strangling him and his leg holster was starting to chafe when he walked. Give him his flack jacket and an automatic weapon strap around his shoulder any day.

The senator turned and strode from the relative privacy of the foyer where they had been discussing the safety issue, to the main room. Bull paced ten feet, rolled his eyes and then followed in Dickhead's wake. He stopped and took the opportunity to look around when the older man paused to speak with a rich looking couple. Bull thought it doubtful that the man and woman posed a risk. He doubted anyone invited to this party presented a danger, Matt and his magic computer had run an in depth search on every name on the guest and staff lists. Bull had arrived early and swept the building top to bottom for explosives. And if the threat came sometime during the party from outside, such as a missile, or from a car bomb, Bull was helpless to stop it anyway. Especially if he remained tied on an invisible ten-foot leash to the senator.

So all he could do was stand around in his uncomfortable shoes and wait for the unlikely event that the little old man and his much too young date speaking with the senator might whip out a knife and stab Dickhead, not that he could blame them if they did. Oh, he'd stop them, but he'd definitely understand their motivation.

At least there was one upside to the evening. His eyes swept the room and settled on the cute little thing he'd seen effortlessly hefting a harp bigger than her. It seemed she wouldn't have had any problem at all if she wasn't wearing that ridiculously long skirt. He did like her top, though. Low and tight in all the right places, and she had the assets to show it off right, too. She played the harp like an angel but had a body built for the devil. Just like he liked them.

Mmm, mmm. He'd have to volunteer for babysitting duty more often if this scenery came with it. Maybe after Dickhead left for the night, Bull would help her carry the thing out to her car. She might even thank him with a kiss. Wouldn't that be nice...

"Bull!" Matt's voice seemed to explode out of his eardrum.

He jumped nearly out of his skin and turned toward the wall so the other guests in the room wouldn't see him talking to himself. "Jesus, Matt. You scared the crap out of me. What?"

"The threat's been bumped up. It looks like it's fucking real. We're on our way to you now."

Bull's heart kicked into high gear. "Where's it coming from?"

"It's right up your alley, buddy. There's a bomb."

"I swept the building..."

"It's somewhere inside the walls."

"What? How?" He'd said that rather loud and got a few stares.

"There were workmen there six frigging months ago repairing the plaster, one of them has terrorist ties. I was bored and started to check back just for fun."

Bull never did understand Matt's idea of fun, but he was sure glad he'd decided to have some fun tonight.

Matt's voice continued. "Now the original threat makes sense. It was some sort of riddle about the walls of Jericho coming down. No one took it seriously until I found the record of the crew that worked on the walls."

"What do you want me to do until you get here?" He didn't want to start a panic and he really didn't want to tip his hand. If the bomb was built to trigger with a detonator, that device could be on any person inside or out of the building. Letting that person know they'd discovered the plot would force his hand.

He looked around. There was barely anyone there. It was still early. The terrorist would want the biggest bang for his buck and wait for a full house.

"Get the senator out, first of all. We'll never live it down if we let him get killed. But don't let him know anything. Don't let anyone know anything yet."

"Affirmative." Bull moved closer to the senator. "Sir. Excuse me for interrupting. I need to speak with you immediately."

When Dickhead looked annoyed, Bull added, "It's urgent, sir."

His eyes went wide with panic. Bull grabbed his arm and pulled him out of the room before he could speak. He made up some cock and bull — Jack always loved when he used that expression — story about it just being a routine precaution that he should leave since the threat had been upped. He told him to quietly go elsewhere until the situation was re-evaluated. Luckily, the senator was a chicken shit and all in for saving his own skin. He didn't blink an eye at leaving a room full of guests and staff behind as he high-tailed it out the front door, cell phone in hand. Hopefully he'd call and get his son before he arrived so Bull wouldn't have to worry about the junior dickhead, too.

He turned his head toward the wall again. "Dickhead's clear. We've still got civilians inside, Matt. About two-dozen."

"I know, but until I recheck everyone, we can't clear them out. One of them could be our tango."

"Understood." Bull heard the harpist begin a new song and asked, "Can you check the harpist, Matt." He'd find a way to get her out unobtrusively.

"Do you think she's our tango?"

"No." He did think it would be a shame if she accidentally got blown up though.

"Give me a ... Shit, Jack. Stop speeding and take it easy on the turns. You nearly just dumped the laptop onto the floor. I'm sorry, Bull but I'm doing the best I can in the back of the van with Gordon up there driving like he's on the NASCAR circuit. Hold tight. We'll be there

soon. It could still be nothing..."

"Should I try to find out where the crew worked on the walls? It might give us a clue of where to start looking."

There was dead air for a moment and then Matt was back. "Jimmy says no. Sit tight."

Bull sighed. "Roger." The one thing Bull was not good at was waiting while doing nothing. He glanced around the room again. Pimple-faced boys comprised the wait staff, old men and cleavage baring women the guests, and one petite harpist with reddish brown hair pulled into a sleek, surprisingly sexy ponytail rounded out the full compliment of those in attendance. He'd bet his life—he was betting his life actually—that not one was the terrorist.

He'd start his search again now that he had the all-important information from Matt to look at the walls. He remembered a closet on this floor. It used to be an old bathroom, the tub and fixtures were disconnected but still there. It was obvious one wall had been freshly plastered recently. He'd start there. If he was wrong ... well, they'd know soon enough.

Chapter 4

Marly played for forty minutes straight. Her back hurt, her butt was sore and she was thirsty. The only good news was that her ex had never shown up. Thank god for small miracles.

Her contract allowed for fifteen minutes off every hour she played. She didn't always take it, but tonight, she needed a break. She gently leaned the harp away from her and rose. There was always a bottle of water in the big bag she brought with her to gigs, and an apple and granola bar, too. She'd barely eaten before she left the house. Right now, she could probably down all three items, no problem.

Holding her skirt up in one hand as she worked her way through the slowly thickening crowd—people always arrived late for these things—she accepted the compliments from the guests and headed for the closet where she'd stashed her bag.

She opened the door and slid her hand along the wall looking for the light switch. It was there somewhere, but she'd be damned if she could find it. She went further into the darkness, using the light coming in from the room behind her to locate the bag she'd left on the floor with her harp cover.

Quicker than she could scream, a hand covered her mouth, and an arm slammed the door to the main room shut. Breathing was nearly impossible as an arm that felt like steel pinned her to a body that felt as hard and big as a brick wall. She struggled, for all the good it did her, but the man—it had to be a man, women just weren't that big—held tight.

"What are you looking for, sweetheart?" The deep voice vibrated through her back and into her chest. He pulled them both to the wall and flipped on the lights with one elbow. A small high window interrupted one wall and reflected in its glass she saw the hulk of a man she'd noticed before.

He spun her around and the hand over her mouth moved and grabbed her chin painfully. She stared up into angry blue eyes. He was big. She'd dated men who were six feet tall before,

her ex one of them. Tall guys tended to like petite woman, she didn't know why. Maybe it made them feel even bigger, who knew? But this guy, he was well over six feet tall and wide, too. From the feel of him, it wasn't fat, either. He was solid muscle. If he didn't seem to want to crush her, she'd say he was attractive. She was having trouble getting past the murderous look on his face, though. It kind of took away from her admiration of his overall physical appearance.

He shook her. "I asked you a question."

"I came to get my bag."

She watched his gaze fall on the bag on the floor. "Really. Why don't we see what you've got in there?" He pulled her with him toward the bag, her feet barely dangling on the floor the way he held her tucked under his one arm. With his free hand, he dumped the contents of the bag out onto the canvas tarp cover.

She hissed as she watched her brand new forty-dollar electronic tuner fall out and bounce. "Careful!"

His eyes opened wide and he drew in a sharp breath of his own. "I bet you want me to be careful. Shit. Matt, I think I've found the detonator."

"Matt? My name's not Matt. What the hell are you talking about?" There was a good chance she was being held in a closet by a madman and all she could think about was if her harp tuner was broken. When she got out of there, she was seriously going to reevaluate her priorities. She reached for the tuner to make sure it was all right and he grabbed her wrist hard enough she figured it was going to leave a bruise.

Her heart began to beat faster. She was in real danger here. But the bruiser had made one mistake; he had uncovered her mouth. She intended on taking full advantage of that fact. She pulled in a lungful of air and...

His hand instantly covered her mouth, even harder than before. His other arm squeezed her until all the air she had taken in came out of her nose and mouth in a whoosh.

"I don't like screaming," he informed her.

Always nice to know your killer's preferences. She sincerely hoped she would not offend him if she screamed while he murdered her or, suddenly aware of his impressively large appendage pressing into her lower back, worse.

She made a sound in her throat and pulled her pelvis as far away from him as she could get. He chuckled in her ear, not an encouraging sound.

"Don't flatter yourself, sweetheart. It's from the adrenaline. I get a hard-on when I kill people, too ... or even when I diffuse *bombs*."

He said the last word with too much emphasis. Was she going to end up blown to bits by this crazy who got sexually excited by killing people?

Marly suddenly felt faint as blackness appeared on the edge of her vision. Her last thought was, better to be unconscious for whatever was about to happen anyway.

"Shit. Matt? Do you copy?" Matt hadn't answered Bull when he told him about the detonator

and he wasn't answering him now.

In fact, he had not heard from Matt since he'd informed him there was no record of the harpist on any list. She was so damn cute, Bull hadn't wanted to let the fact she was not on record make him suspicious, but when she came sneaking into the closet in the dark looking for the ominous looking little black gadget, he had no choice but to believe the bomber could be her. And a girl who looked this innocent and all-American would not be working alone. Chances were high she'd been recruited by a boyfriend to do this.

Bull needed Matt now. "Matt! Where are you?"

Nothing. What did that mean? Were they maintaining radio silence so the tango couldn't monitor them? If so, no one had bothered to tell him. Had Matt relocated the equipment and hadn't set up again yet? What the hell did Bull know? He didn't understand half the magic Matt pulled off anyway. He only knew now more than ever he wanted to hear that annoying voice in his ear because the possible – probable, dammit – tango had either fainted or was pretending to faint in his arms.

He stared at the small black box on the floor that she had been so interested in. He couldn't dissect it while holding her and he preferred to do any analysis of the device far away from the bomb hidden in the walls anyway.

He had to locate the bomb and diffuse it. There could still be a second tango with a backup detonator.

Bull glanced down at the seemingly limp body of the girl in his arms. As much as he would like to be enjoying the view down her ample cleavage and her body pressed up against his dick, he had more important things to do. Having to hold her was seriously cutting into valuable search time. Looking around the room, he found the solution.

Barely a minute later he had her trussed, hand and foot, with an industrial length extension cord. Looking around for a gag and not finding one he had a brainstorm and whipped off his bowtie. The damn thing was uncomfortable anyway. Just as her big green eyes opened wide he shoved the bow in her mouth and tied it behind her head.

She mumbled and struggled while he began knocking holes as quietly as he could in the wall with the handle of a broom he had been lucky enough to find. Sit around and wait for backup? Hell, no. He'd have the thing located and diffused before the team even got damn communications back in place. And he'd make it up to Jimmy for fucking up the exercise at the same time.

"Bull. What's your location?"

Finally! "About damn time, Matt. I'm in a closet on the first floor directly off the main room. I'm dismantling a wall that's been recently plastered, and I think I've got one of the tangos and the detonator."

"What?"

"The harpist who wasn't on the list..."

"Shit, Bull. No. It's not her. Listen to me carefully. That list was incomplete. The tangos are the fucking valet car parkers. They weren't on the list because they're not on the payroll. They

fucking work for tips. And I checked with the manager, the harpist works there all the time, she gets paid in cash so she wasn't on the payroll list, either."

Matt's voice – and the fact that he'd just informed Bull he'd made a huge mistake regarding the harpist – was overshadowed by the sounds of automatic weapon fire and screaming from the other room. "Was that gun fire?" Matt's shocked voice asked.

Things had just gone from bad to worse. Bull's weapon was already out of the leg holster, although next to fucking machine guns, a .45 caliber handgun wasn't going to do him much good. "Yes."

Jimmy's voice replaced Matt's. "Bull. Listen to me. Stay hidden. You're our ace in the hole. The bastards now have hostages as well as a possible hidden bomb, but they don't know you're there and that's a point for us. Hold tight. Okay."

"Yes, sir," he whispered. He crept to the door, gun out and peered through the keyhole. It seemed funny but old doors had big keys and therefore, really big keyholes. It served Bull's purpose, he could see pretty damn well. Three men had the hostages lined up against the far wall, in perfect position to be mowed down with one burst of fire. And the only person Bull had gotten out was Dickhead.

He leaned back on his heels with a sigh, took one more look to make sure all eyes were turned away and then flipped the light switch off. There was no way to lock the door from the inside without the key and if the bastards made the mistake of opening the door, Bull and his one gun wanted the element of surprise. Bull couldn't risk the noise of searching in the wall for the bomb with them right on the other side of the door anyway so he didn't need the illumination for that.

He really didn't need the light to see that he had scared the crap out of a perfectly innocent young thing. If the situation weren't so dire, he'd be very relieved to know she was as guiltless as she originally seemed. Although, the chances of his getting the goodnight kiss he had imagined were probably slim to none.

The one window – too small to crawl out of – allowed in some dim light from the streetlamps outside. His eyes adjusted and he made his way silently to where she lay bound on the ground. It really wasn't safe to talk but he had to tell her what was happening. He sat on the ground and pulled her into his lap.

Gun still out at the ready in his right hand, he used his left to move the hair that had slipped out of her ponytail out of the way. He whispered as softly as he could right up against her ear. "I'm sorry. I know you're not guilty now. The terrorists have taken hostages but they don't know we're here. We're safe for now but we have to be quiet and stay hidden. Do you understand?"

She nodded and her hair tickled his cheek.

"I'm going to untie you. Don't make a sound."

She nodded again and he untied the gag. Once he was sure she wasn't going to scream again, he began working on her bindings. He'd tied them well, too well, and in the dark, it was taking some time to undo them.

His head was bent low in concentration over one particularly tough knot when she raised her mouth to his ear. "Who are you?"

"Jesus, Bull. Was that the harpist? Her voice just gave me the shivers all the way over here."

Bull didn't answer Matt's nosy question. The warm air from her mouth had sent a tremor down his spine, too. That combined with the scent of her, part perfume and part fear mixed with woman, and the fact she was pressed tightly between his legs nearly drove him wild.

He put his mouth to her ear and resisted the urge to let his tongue run over it. "I'm..." What could he tell her? *I'm a member of a secret elite anti-terrorist task force*? Nope, couldn't tell her the truth, that's for sure. Just minutes before he'd thought she was a terrorist herself.

"Homeland Security," Matt supplied in his ear, as annoying as he was helpful at times.

"Homeland Security," Bull repeated softly in her ear. It was a good cover, everyone knew of the department, but no one really understood what they did.

She nodded again and he forced his concentration back to freeing her. Finally, the extension cord slipped free and she rubbed her wrists as if they hurt. Feeling bad, he searched for and found her feet in the dark under the hem of her skirt. Gun still out he began rubbing her ankles where they'd been bound with his free hand.

He heard her breathing change, felt her start to shake and knew she was crying.

"Shhh." He pulled her closer against him with his left arm. "Don't cry."

"I'm scared."

"I know. I'll protect you."

He tightened the one arm across her waist and it wrapped all the way around her with room to spare on the other side. Damn, she was tiny. He'd always dated big girls, Lana included, figuring they'd make him look smaller. After years of teasing, starting in middle school, about being so big and nicknames like Lurch, he'd done anything he could to look smaller. He didn't mind the name Bull so much though, maybe because his first commanding officer when he was an Army Ranger had given it to him. The name stuck through his time on the Delta Force, right into his days with Zeta.

She finally quieted and he realized he didn't even know her name. He was about to ask when the sounds of another burst of gunfire and screaming filtered through the door. The girl between his legs yelped and he slapped his hand over her mouth and tightened his grip on his weapon.

"I'm going to look. Stay here," he hissed and slid out from behind her, making his way silently to the door. He pressed his eye to the keyhole. No blood, good sign. The hostages were sitting on the floor now, but no one was lying looking dead. The tangos, however, seemed to be arguing among themselves in hushed but animated tones.

Bull crept back to the girl and said more for Matt's benefit than for hers, "The hostages are all still alive."

That set off another round of shuddering from his companion. Shit, he probably should have used a better word than 'alive'. It only reminded her that the alternative was dead.

He sat back against the wall, his right hand toward the door and pulled her back against him again between his legs. But this time, instead of leaning back against him, she practically curled up in a ball in his lap and buried her head in his chest.

It was really quiet in the room and for the first time he realized how loud her puffy skirt rustled every time she moved. Before, it had been only him moving, but with her new fetal position in his lap, she was making a shit load of noise.

He lowered his head to hers. "Your skirt is really loud. Try not to move."

She froze except for the shaking, which got worse. He'd frightened her. He sighed and kissed her softly on the top of the head. She burrowed closer to him and he wrapped his arm around her tightly.

They needed to get out of there, and soon. While he was toying with asking her to take the damn noisy skirt off, his body reacted in a way that had nothing to do with adrenaline this time. Pressed up against him this way, she wasn't going to miss it, either. He was a big man and he came with big parts, another reason he didn't date small girls. He'd probably rip her apart. Damn, why was he thinking about this with armed gunmen and hostages in the next room?

"Matt. What's the status," he hissed softly.

"Who's Matt?"

He put one finger over her lips.

"Hang tight, Bull. We're going over blueprints of the building. Don't worry, the FBI hostage negotiator is here talking to the head tango and stalling until we get in place."

Blueprints and the FBI. Jesus, this was going to take all night.

Chapter 5

"We're going to die, aren't we?" Marly asked against Bull's ear.

"No."

"I don't believe you."

"Why not?"

"Because you keep talking to yourself and to someone named Matt who isn't really here. It's nice I'm not alone in this, but you are obviously crazy."

She felt rather than heard him laugh. "Matt is the guy at the other end of the communicator in my ear."

She stiffened. "So they know we're in here? The police or whoever know about the terrorists."

"Yes."

That made her feel a little better. Unless he was really crazy and making things up.

"Let me talk to Matt."

Another soft laugh. "You can't."

Um, hmm. Just as she thought. She sighed. Oh, well. Better with a crazy than all alone.

He leaned close to her ear again. "You can't hear Matt because the communications device is implanted surgically in my ear. It's kind of like a cochlear implant. He can hear you, though. He hears whatever I can."

Jesus, Homeland Security had some serious spy stuff going on. "Wow."

He leaned closer. "Matt says to tell you, he thinks you are very pretty."

Now she knew he was crazy. "What, can Matt see me through your ear, too?"

"No, but he popped up your FBI file on his computer."

"I have an FBI file? Why?"

"You work a lot of high profile events. You've been cleared."

"Wow." *Again.*

"We shouldn't be talking this much. They could hear," he warned.

She turned toward him more fully to ask more of the many questions his latest revelation raised and he hissed at her, "Shhh. Jeez. Stop moving. Your skirt is too loud."

Damn it. If she got herself killed over a taffeta ball skirt, she would feel really silly. She reached behind her, undid the button and the zipper, braced herself against his shoulder and stood. She rose, but the skirt remained in a giant puff on the ground. Stepping out of it, she waited for him to gingerly and slowly slide it to the side. She sat down again in between his open legs. It was close quarters, but they had to be close enough to whisper.

"Better?"

She felt him swallow before saying, barely audibly, "Yes."

Squashed against him, she felt pretty much every part of his body in detail, one part in particular. His *adrenaline* was raised again, and so were her curiosity and interest.

"Do you have a girlfriend, Bull?" They'd exchanged names about an hour earlier, at the beginning of this confinement, right after he'd finally untied her. Might as well get to know a little bit more about him since she already knew the size and shape of his penis. Hard to miss since it was ground into her at the moment.

"No."

"You hesitated."

"We broke up last night."

"Why?"

"Why are you asking?"

"Because your hard-on is crushing into my back. Since I am pretty sure we are going to die, I'm thinking about taking advantage of it. It seems pretty impressive."

That shut him totally up for a bit; he was silent except for a quick sharp intake of breath, and

then he finally said, "I found her naked in the hot tub with another guy."

"I'm sorry. Are you okay?" What a time for a counseling session, whispering in a dark closet twenty feet from mean men with machine guns.

"Yeah. What about you? Boyfriend?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I broke up with him."

"Why?"

"He's a dick." That explained it simply enough. She couldn't begin to go into all the many reasons he was a dick here and now. Maybe later. She realized she liked the thought of seeing Bull again later since he most likely wasn't crazy.

"Marly."

"Yeah." All the close up ear whispering, tightly pressed bodies and true confessions were getting her so turned on she could barely think.

"Were you serious?"

"Yes. He was a dick."

"I mean about ... never mind."

Knowing what he was asking her, she turned toward him. Without the skirt, it was much easier to move and a lot less noisy. She took a deep breath and ran a hand down his chest, all the way down to the fly of his pants. "You mean was I serious about this?" She touched the bulge in his pants lightly.

He shivered. "Yes."

She nodded in case the stroking didn't give him the answer. "Why do you ask?"

"Because Matt just told me the terrorists have given the FBI ten minutes to meet their demands or they're going to detonate the bomb hidden somewhere in this building."

She stopped her hand in mid-motion. "A bomb? Here? Where is it?"

"Possibly in this room."

"So go get it and throw it out the window." That seemed easy enough. Let it explode outside. The window wasn't big enough to crawl out through, but the bomb would fit. How big could it be?

"It's not that simple. It's buried in the walls somewhere. If they hear me tearing the wall apart looking for it, they will either shoot us or detonate the bomb immediately. They are suicidal. They don't care if they die, too."

"So we are just going to sit here doing nothing and wait to blow up?"

"No. We are going to sit here and wait for the rest of my team to take out the terrorists, save the hostages and come get us."

"And what are the chances of that happening?"

"My teammates will get us out of here."

"Bull. Please be honest with me. What are the odds?"

She felt him take in a deep breath before he murmured, "Fifty-fifty."

She sat for a second and considered her life and her impending death. "In that case, yes. I was very serious."

Marly turned so she was kneeling, facing him fully while his long, muscular legs extended on either side of her. She ran her hands down his arms, feeling the bulges of his biceps through his tux jacket. Reaching his hands, she paused. "You're holding a gun?"

He nodded.

"Just don't shoot me by accident. Okay?"

She felt him smile at that just before her mouth softly brushed his. He drew in a sharp breath at the contact before parting his lips and deepening the kiss.

Marly was having trouble breathing as his left hand cupped the back of her head while his warm tongue tickled her lips and slid into her mouth. Unbuttoning his shirt, she slid her hands inside and felt his hard chest. "Take off the jacket," she whispered against his ear.

"Can't. The white shirt is too visible if they come in, black is better."

Good thing she herself was now in only her black tights and black top. If she got out of this alive, she'd start wearing black to all of her gigs in case this situation ever arose again.

She broke into her own thoughts, realizing there wasn't time for them. Bull had said the terrorists had given the FBI ten minutes or they'd blow the house. She knew enough about the FBI to know they didn't negotiate with terrorists. They might be able to stall, but for how long?

Marly nipped at Bull's mouth, then worked her way to his ear. She did what she'd wanted to throughout all their whispering, she brushed the whorls of his ear with her tongue and felt him shudder. Then she said softly, "Bull, make love..."

He grabbed her hair and covered her mouth before she could finish the request, but by the intensity of the kiss, she didn't have to complete the thought. He knew what she wanted.

In Bull's ear, Matt's irate voice sounded annoyed. "God dammit, Bull. I am getting pretty damn tired of listening to every one on this team get laid during ops while I'm trapped here in the van with nothing but computers. We're coming to get you out. Can't you wait?"

Bull ignored Matt as best he could while Marly straddled his lap. He ran his free hand down over her back, down to cup her very cute, round little ass. It struck him again how tiny she felt in his lap. He wanted to whisper things to her, but Matt would hear. He really wanted to have both of his hands on her, but he had to hold the gun, not that he was paying all that much attention to where the tangos were and what they were doing at the moment.

If the tangos came through the door while he was sunk deep into Marly, how accurate would his aim be? The team had never practiced that particular scenario in training.

Her hands slid into his pants and grabbed him and his next thought flew directly out of his head. As surreal and ridiculous as the entire situation seemed, this was really going to happen and he was going to not only let it, but enjoy it. He'd told her the truth, his team would get them out. The question was would it be a rescue mission or a recovery of their bodies.

She was correct about one thing. They didn't have much time. He pushed down the neck of her top and covered her breast with his mouth, but still couldn't totally turn off his brain. If the ten minutes expired and the tangos went for the detonator, would it be better to come out of the closet shooting and make a run for it than sit there and get blown up? No. What if they were lying and there was no bomb? Most likely, they'd be shot in an attempt to escape.

That left Bull with one option of which he was sure, he was going to have Marly now before all hell broke loose.

He tried to wiggle his hand into her stockings but they were so thick and unyielding, he couldn't move. "What are you wearing?"

"Tights."

They were tight, all right. It was bad enough he was restricted to the use of only one hand because of the gun, he at least wanted free range of motion. "Take them off," he instructed. Of course, that would mean she'd be naked from the waist down when they were either rescued or killed. He considered if that really mattered or not.

Luckily she had a better solution as she pressed closer to him. "Tear the crotch."

That command nearly made him groan. He easily plunged his fingers through the weave and continued to push until they were inside her. He heard her make a small noise in her throat when he entered her. "Shhh. No noise. Remember."

He felt her nod but had to think to himself that it was easier said than done when her fingers pulled his erection out of his pants and angled it toward her entrance.

"Not yet, baby. You're not ready yet."

"I'm ready."

He smiled at her enthusiasm. "Believe me. You're not." She was already wet, but not nearly wide enough to house him yet.

That he could remedy. Bull knew his hands were as good with women as they were with bombs. At least he'd been told so by more than a few happy females. He fucked Marly thoroughly with two fingers to open her wider. Curling them, he found her G-spot, applied pressure and rubbed. He heard her breath catch in her throat as she started to tremble. Bull used his thumb and circled her clit at the same time and her breathing became more rapid against his ear.

She was getting close, he could tell even before she shuddered out an, "Oh, god."

"Bull. Man. Listen to me. We are almost in place and ready to go. Please wait to be rescued, get yourself a nice suite at the Hilton and fuck her there where I don't have to hear it. Hell, I'll even pay for the room," Matt begged in his ear.

"How much time do we have left?" Bull hissed.

At the same time that Matt said, "Five minutes and counting," Marly said, "I don't know. Hurry."

Then she pulled away from him. He felt her stiffen and then heard her ask, "Matt can hear us, can't he?"

He regretfully pulled his fingers from her and immediately missed her warmth. "Yes. Is that a problem?" Ready to explode, he was willing to do a little begging himself if she said it was.

He nearly cried with joy when she shook her head and began to lower herself over him. His tip was nestled barely inside her and she was already having trouble accommodating him. He covered her mouth with his and distracted her with his tongue as his hand spread her and he pushed inside slowly, not even an inch at a time as her body started to stretch to contain him. The struggle was exquisitely agonizing. Finally, he reached the end of her.

In as far as he was going to get, his hand guided her hips into making small circles against him. In moments he felt her start to shudder as the pleasure built. She began to pulse around him and he felt her come with a long, powerful, silent orgasm. Once he was convinced she could stay quiet, he allowed himself to close his eyes for a moment and enjoyed the feel of her muscles gripping him as her mouth pressed into his shoulder to stop herself from crying out.

When the spasms within her finally calmed, she stilled in his lap and whispered, "You didn't finish."

He shook his head. No, but he really, really wanted to. She rested both hands on his shoulders and started to very slowly move up and down his length. "God, Bull. You are huge."

"Dammit, Bull! I hate you, do you know that?" Matt hissed. "FYI, you better finish what you're doing. Two minutes and counting. The team is ready to go in if the FBI can't stall them. Stay hidden until we say to move. Don't run out and get yourself killed. That's Jimmy's order. Copy."

"Yes." Two minutes, great. "Faster, baby."

Marly did as he asked and just as he felt the pressure building inside about to explode, a tremor went through her. She clung to him as she convulsed again and this time, he went right along with her. He came deep inside of her without a second thought to the fact he didn't wear a condom. Good chance they'd be dead so it wouldn't matter. Maybe she was on the pill.

"Shit. Take cover, Bull. They said they're gonna blow it!" Matt yelled.

Bull didn't think twice, he picked up Marly, dumped her into the big old cast iron bathtub and flung his body on top of hers. He had a second to grab her canvas tarp cover off the floor and pull it over him before the explosion rocked the building. And then there was nothing.

Chapter 6

"Well, well. Lover boy is awake. About time."

Bull's eyelids fluttered open and he finally focused on Matt and his laptop sitting in a chair next to his bed. "Why am I in bed?"

He glanced down and saw the IV tube taped to his arm. "Where am I?"

Matt put the computer down and leaned forward in the chair. "You're in the hospital, big guy. Do you remember what happened?"

Bull took in a deep breath and realized it hurt to breath. Broken ribs he guessed, or at least badly bruised. He'd felt that enough times before. He forced his brain to function. "Um, the last thing I remember we were about to leave for that night training op against Kappa. What happened? Did we get in an accident with the van on the way there or something?"

Matt's eyes opened wide for a moment. "Um, not exactly. You know. I think I'll go call Jimmy. He's going to want to know you're awake."

"Sure. You better call Lana, too. She'll be worried that I didn't call after the training."

Matt's face registered shock. "All right. I'll take care of all the phone calls. You just sit here and don't worry about a thing."

Matt left and Bull glanced around the room, wondering how long he'd been out and what the extent of his injuries were. It must have been a hell of an accident. But Matt looked fine. Why didn't Bull remember any of it?

He glanced longingly at the end of the bed. His chart was probably down there somewhere. If he could only reach ... lifting his head caused enough pain that he let it fall back down against the pillow, but in his quest for his chart, he noticed something else. There was a huge red, white and blue bouquet of flowers on the windowsill and next to it, a card and a small stuffed bull.

He was still squinting, trying to read the card from the distance, when a nurse came in, smiling. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I was run over by a truck," he answered and realized it was a definite possibility.

The nurse laughed. "Glad to see your sense of humor is working fine."

"How long have I been out?"

"Three days. The doctor will be in soon. He'll answer all your questions."

She was about to leave when he said, "Wait. One more. Who are the flowers and the stuffed animal from?"

"I'm not sure. I wasn't here when they were delivered. Would you like me to read the cards?"

About to nod, he realized that would only hurt. Instead he said, "Please."

She made her way to the window and plucked a small white card out of the gigantic arrangement. "This is just a signature. It looks like John Dickson III."

Bull frowned. "The senator's son?"

She shrugged. "Could be. Do you know him?"

"Not really, no. What about the other things."

She picked up the card and read, "*Bull, I owe you for my life. Get better. I couldn't stand it if I owed you for yours, too. Marly.*" The nurse looked up and smiled. "You're girlfriend?"

"No. I don't know any Marly. That's all it says?"

The nurse glanced down again. "There looks like a phone number written here." She carried the card to him and he grunted in pain as he raised his arm to take it. He tried to turn his head to see the side table but decided the effort wasn't worth it. "Do I have a phone?"

She smiled her happy nurse smile and pushed a bed table with a phone in front of him. He grimaced as he raised his hand to dial.

"Want me to dial for you?"

He leaned back heavily against the pillows. "Please."

The nurse dialed, put the receiver against his ear and then left the room.

Bull listened anxiously to the ring, and then a woman's voice said, "Hi. You've reached Marly Spencer. Leave a message, I'll get back to you." That was followed by a beep. Bull nearly got stage fright and hung up. He probably would have if the phone table didn't seem so far away.

"Um, this is Bull. I just wanted to say thank you for the card."

He struggled to get the receiver back in the cradle and then leaned back heavily against the pillows, exhausted from that small effort. This recovery was going to suck, he could tell already. He only wished he knew exactly what he was recovering from.

* * * *

Marly arrived home in quite a funk. The insurance company was going to fork up the cash to replace her harp. *That* had been an interesting form to fill out. *Cause of damage – terrorist bombing.* That required a bit of explaining.

The problem was, her new instrument wouldn't arrive for weeks and until then, she had to rent a piece of crap from the music school in town.

Harp woes aside, the other issue remained that her ex was practically stalking her. Apparently getting nearly blown up had made her even more desirable in John's eyes. She glanced at her answering machine and noticed the light blinking. Sighing, she figured it was him again.

She took a deep breath and punched the 'play' button and Bull's voice filled her apartment. The sound made her knees weak. He was calling her. Even better, he was alive. She'd barely been able to get any information out of anyone about him or his condition. She'd even had to call in a favor from her ex and have him find out where to send the card and gift she'd gotten him.

She remembered that night. John had been outside and frantic for her safety. The emergency team took Bull's limp body away and then checked her over for injuries. Thanks to Bull's quick thinking, she'd walked away with her ears ringing, but not a scratch. Marly told everyone within hearing distance how Bull had saved her life, but all John wanted to do was take her home and comfort her.

She let him drive her home, but there was no comforting that night, nor since.

Of course, Marly couldn't tell her former boyfriend she'd had sex with Bull and was pretty sure she'd fallen in love with him during that one night. Was it Stockholm Syndrome? She wasn't exactly a hostage, nor he her captor. But he had saved her life by covering her with his own body at great risk to himself.

It didn't matter that it was crazy. She wanted to see him again. She scrolled down the list of incoming calls in the caller ID. He had called from the hospital, so that's where she would go. She grabbed her purse and flung open the door, only to find her ex-boyfriend, John Dickson the Third, standing there.

"John. I'm sorry. I'm on my way out."

"I see that." He stepped inside anyway.

With a sigh she closed the door and crossed her arms over her chest. "What do you want?"

He smiled. "You know what I want."

Marly rolled her eyes. "We broke up."

"No, you broke up. I didn't agree to it."

"Are you kidding me?" She couldn't believe his nerve. "Are you crazy, because it is really starting to sound like you are. Every time I pick up the paper, I see you with that other senator's daughter and everyone is speculating when you'll get married. And before her, it was the governor's daughter. What the hell do you want with me? I'm a lowly musician who barely makes the rent."

John stepped forward and held her arms. "You didn't seem to have a problem with the silly tabloid rumors before when you were letting me wine you and dine you and take you on expensive vacations." He leaned forward as if he would kiss her.

"Oh, no. You have gone too far now. Why don't you just say what you really mean? I'm you're whore, except instead of money, you've been paying me in gifts and trips and fancy dinners."

He dropped his hands with a sigh. "Look, Marly. I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. I can't help it if my father's second goal in life, right after making it to the White House, is to marry me off to a powerful southern family. There is nothing I can do about that. But I do know I'm happy when I'm with you." He raised his hand again and caressed her cheek. "Both in bed and out of it."

She decided to play along with his delusion. "What happens to us when you finally do marry one of Daddy's picks?"

He took a step closer. "You will always be a part of my life. That will not change. We just have to be discreet. My daddy's been with the same woman for over twenty years."

The senator and his wife had been 'happily' married for thirty-five years so she knew John wasn't talking about his mother. Her stomach turned at the thought he'd be so willing to place her in the role of long-term mistress without a second thought. She wanted – she deserved – so much more than that. She wanted Bull.

Marly took a step back. "I'm truly sorry for you, John. You feel you don't have a choice in

how you live your life and that's sad for you. But I do have a choice, and I would never be happy being what you are asking of me."

She turned and opened the door. Looking back at him with a sad smile, she said, "Good bye. Please don't call or try to see me again. You can let yourself out."

Still shaking from the encounter, Marly drove way too fast and swung her car into a space in the hospital lot. She ran into the lobby and stopped only for the guard at the security desk. "I'm looking for Bull Ford's room."

The guard was still searching the list – probably because it was doubtful Bull was his real name – when a hand rested on her shoulder. She turned but didn't recognize the man. He however, knew the guard. "That's alright, Joe. I'll handle this." He took a few steps back from the desk, pulling her with him by the arm. "Marly Spencer?"

She nodded.

He smirked. "Nice to finally meet you in person. I'm Matt Coleman."

She frowned, trying to place him. She met so many people out on gigs, they often remembered her but she rarely recalled them. "I'm sorry, I don't..." Then it hit her. She drew in a quick breath and felt her face heat up. "*That* Matt?"

He looked a little shy as he cocked his head to one side. "Yeah. I'm afraid so."

While she was processing that this man had listened to her and Bull during a very intimate moment, he continued. "We need to talk before you see Bull."

"Is he all right?"

Matt frowned. "Physically he's healing. That's not the problem. Marly, he doesn't remember anything about that night."

"You mean the explosion."

"No, I mean absolutely nothing. Not the party, or the terrorists ... or you."

For the second time in an hour, Marly felt sick to her stomach. "Maybe once he sees me."

Matt nodded. "Our commander is talking to his doctor now to see how to proceed."

How to proceed? Marly knew how to proceed, she would march right into his room, tell him what they'd shared, throw her arms around him and kiss him until he remembered her. "I want to see him."

Matt smiled. "You don't care what the doctor says, do you?"

"Yes of course I care and I would never do anything to harm Bull, but..."

"But you still want to see him."

He was still grinning at her and she felt her face blush hotter. "Look. I know you heard everything."

"Don't worry. No one else knows. But that isn't necessarily a good thing. You go up there and as far as everyone else is concerned, you are just the girl he saved that night. That's it. How are you going to explain when you freak out because he doesn't remember you or ... you

know ... what you two did?"

"I'm not planning on freaking out." Besides, she knew once he saw her, he'd remember. He had to. "Can you take me to his room now?"

Matt nodded and got her a visitor badge from the guard.

They reached the room and found the door open, but the curtain drawn around the bed. She could hear a man's southern drawl animatedly telling the tale of that night. She stopped in the doorway. Matt stayed behind her in the hall, watching her.

"So the friggin' tangos rigged this bomb with instructions they found on the damn internet. So, yeah, it made a hell of a noise and it was powerful enough to blow out the wall between the closet where you were and the room where they were, but it's not takin' down the building. The sprinkler system did the biggest damage, the water ruined all the plaster walls and antiques and shit."

She heard Bull's familiar voice. "But there were no casualties?"

"Well, no civilian casualties. The tangos didn't exactly walk out of there once we hit the room armed and ready. Although the docs say you probably saved that harpist's life. If you hadn't thought to throw her in that old bathtub and lay on top of her, she would have been at least as bad off as you, if not worse. You really don't remember any of this?"

Marly held her breath and waited for Bull's answer. "Not a thing, Jack." She heard him laugh. "I wish I did. It sounds like a hell of a night. Hey, did anybody remember to call my girlfriend Lana?"

"Here's the phone, Bull. Want me to dial for ya?"

A sob escaped Marly's throat as she pushed past Matt. He ran after her and tried to grab her arm but she shook him off. Rather than wait for the elevator, she barreled down the stairs and out into the parking lot.

Chapter 7

"I have one question." Besides why the hell he still couldn't remember a thing after leaving for the training exercise with Kappa. "Why the hell is Dickhead's son sending me flowers?"

Bull indicated the massive arrangement that blocked half the window.

"Don't know, maybe he likes you." Jack waggled his eyebrows suggestively. "It would explain why Dickhead junior didn't do it for Lia and she had to marry my brother instead."

"I heard that," Jimmy said, coming around the curtain. "Hey, Bull. Glad to see you sittin' up. And I can answer what my brother here couldn't. It seems the harpist you saved is sleepin' with Dickhead junior. He was very grateful she didn't come home in pieces, thanks to you."

Things were beginning to make sense. Bull nodded and immediately wished he didn't.

"Thanks for clearing that up. The harpist must be the Marly who sent me the card and little stuffed bull. Now, one more question. When the hell do I get out of here and get back to work?"

The Gordon brothers both grinned at him. He noticed neither one answered his question, though, but it didn't matter, because a few minutes later, Lana came around the curtain.

Bull smiled. Nothing better than a girlfriend to kiss your boo boos and make them go away. He wondered how quickly he'd be healed enough to do more than kissing.

He shooed his teammates out of the room so they could be alone. The poor thing was so concerned about his memory loss. He couldn't blame her, it bothered him a bit, too. As soon as he assured Lana he was going to live and got her to stop crying, she crawled up on the bed with him and worked her unique kind of magic. He started to feel better immediately.

* * * *

Recovery took a little longer than Bull would have liked. The damn doctors wouldn't let him go home for another week, something about internal injuries, and he was supposed to not partake in 'any strenuous activities' for another week after that. That pretty much ruled out his two favorite things, working out with his team and having sex. When Bull had watched the last stupid television show he could stand, played his final video game and done the very last crossword puzzle he ever wanted to do, he pulled on his sweats and sneakers and headed for Lana's.

She'd visited him as often as she could around her work schedule and brought him food, done his laundry, even organized his damn kitchen shelves. She was acting like the perfect girlfriend. She'd never been like that before. He had no clue what was up. Maybe him nearly dying made her appreciate him. Whatever the cause, her model behavior was making him start to think that maybe he was ready for more than just a casual relationship with her.

He'd have to think on that, but there was one thing for sure, after two weeks of recovery, he was more than ready to get busy with her in the bedroom ... or maybe the hot tub. He could call and she'd come running, but he'd had enough of being stuck in his house. Cabin fever was hitting him hard and he had to get out.

Driving wasn't a strenuous activity, the doctors couldn't even complain about that. Getting up into the truck was another story, cracked ribs hurt like hell for a long time. No way around that. He'd deal. He and Lana would just have to take it easy for a while and he didn't mind the idea of her doing all of the work one bit.

He pulled up to her house and parked along the curb two houses down from hers. Gingerly lowering himself out of the truck, he couldn't get over a feeling of déjà vu, like he'd done this exact same thing before.

Bull cut across the lawn and knocked on her front door. They'd only been dating for a few months, so they hadn't done the key exchange thing yet. Until his injury, he wasn't sure they would. But now...

Lana answered the door wearing her sweetest smile and not much more than a tiny top and shorts.

"Hey, baby. I needed to get out of the house and maybe take a soak in your hot tub. Sorry I didn't call. I knew you'd try to stop me."

"Bull, you know the doctor said..."

He pushed past her into the house. "I know what the doctor said." He headed toward the sliding glass back door and paused. "Are you going to join me or am I going to be naked all alone?"

She smiled and followed him outside.

Something was nagging at the back of Bull's brain as he watched Lana strip out of her clothes and submerge herself down to her chin in the steaming water. He sat on the deck chair and watched her as he reached to untie his shoelace so he could get naked and join her.

Then memories came flooding back. Him lying on the ground as the Kappa team member took out the hostage during the training exercise. Coming to Lana's after the bar for comfort and finding her naked with skinny dude. The terrorists at the party and – holy crap – the feel of coming inside Marly right before the explosion knocked him out.

His heart started to pound and he felt dizzy. Lana swam to the side of the tub. "Are you all right?"

He shook his head. "No, I'm not. I ... um ... I'm gonna go."

She nodded her head. "Do you want me to drive you?"

Now that he remembered her cheating, he didn't want her anywhere near him. No wonder she'd been sweet as pie, she'd gotten quite the reprieve with him not remembering. He hadn't even told any of the guys. If he hadn't remembered, she would have been in the clear.

He had told Marly that night, though. He remembered that, as well as what Jimmy had told him in the hospital, that Marly was with Dickhead's son. That thought really sucked.

Bull drove around for a while, not knowing what to do, feeling uncomfortable in his own skin from what he'd remembered. He'd thought he'd be happy his memory was back, but damn, maybe he was happier before, blissfully ignorant.

He looked up and found himself in front of Matt's house. Matt. The only other guy who knew what really happened that night.

"I remember," he blurted when Matt opened the door.

"Shit. Come in and sit down. You look like hell."

Bull laughed sadly. "I feel like it, too. I can't believe friggin' Lana was going to go on like nothing happened and never tell me I caught her cheating on me."

"What made you remember?"

"Watching her get into the hot tub."

Matt hissed in a breath. "Exactly where you found her with that guy."

Bull frowned. "How do you know? I only told Marly."

"Duh. I heard everything that night. Believe me, I would rather not have."

"Things are still a little fuzzy about that night. Hey, what the fuck. You don't tell me that I don't remember I caught my girl cheating? What if I asked her to move in or marry me or something?"

Matt shrugged. "I know, I thought of that. I would have said something if it came to keys or rings and vows, but I didn't want to traumatize you. The doc kept insisting your memory would come back on its own. But, hey! Look at it this way. Now you remember, you can go see Marly."

Bull scowled. "She's with Dickhead junior. Didn't you see the gigantic thank you bouquet he sent me for saving her life? I guess she only wanted me that night because she thought we were going to die."

Matt frowned and shook his head. "You really don't remember everything, do you? Don't you remember that night she told you she broke up with her boyfriend? She called him a dick, twice. And you weren't just a one night thing, she came to see you at the hospital the day you woke up."

"She did?"

"Yeah, but she didn't get past the doorway because she heard you inside talking about your girlfriend Lana. She ran out of there in tears. I tried to stop her, but she's quick for a little thing and she didn't want to be stopped."

Bull sat up a little straighter and winced when his ribs protested. "So you think they're not still together?"

"Yeah, and even if they were, you're gonna let Dickhead junior stand in your way?"

Bull laughed. "No." He stood, then sat again. "I don't know where she lives."

Matt rolled his eyes. "Please, Bull. You insult me." He made his way to one of the five, yes five, computers set up on a six-foot long folding table and started tapping keys. "You want her date of birth, social security number and last year's tax return, too?" He glanced over his shoulder and grinned.

"Just an address and phone number would be good. And actually, date of birth, if you've got it." When they started dating, he could surprise her by knowing her birthday. That would impress her.

Bull nearly laughed at himself. He already had them dating in his mind. He only hoped it wasn't wishful thinking.

In barely two minutes, Matt returned to Bull and handed him a yellow sticky paper. In Matt's scrawl, Bull saw an address, phone number and a date, February 14th. Valentine's Day. If that wasn't a sign, he didn't know what was.

"Thanks, Matt. I owe you."

"For that? No. For making me listen to yet another one of my teammates have sex, yeah. You owe me big time for that." Matt grinned. "Go on. Go get her."

* * * *

Marly's fingers flew over the strings as she completed the complicated piece flawlessly. She should be playing perfectly, she'd had nothing to do recently but practice, that and mourn the loss of Bull. Although, she supposed she really never had him.

She sighed. Maybe if she'd been the type who typically had one-night stands, she wouldn't be

taking this so hard. Falling for a guy she only knew for one night. It was crazy. She knew that, but it didn't help her broken heart one bit.

The doorbell rang and she jumped. She'd been on edge lately. She supposed nearly getting blown up by a terrorist bomb did that to a person. Hopefully, it would go away. Maybe she could find a terrorist bombing survivors support group on the internet.

Marly stood on tiptoe and could just barely peer through the peephole, but all she saw there was a broad swath of sweatshirt. Whoever was there was tall, very tall...

She flipped the lock and flung open the door. "Bull."

Tears filled her eyes and she silently cursed herself for being so weak and emotional. But still, she could hope he remembered her...

He stepped forward and brushed her cheek with one huge mitt of a hand. She leaned her face into it and closed her eyes.

She heard him sigh. "Ah, Marly. I'm so sorry I didn't remember you when I woke up." He brought up his other hand and held her face. "But I remember you now."

She watched him as he lowered his face to hers while watching her eyes. He stopped just short of her lips. "Do you forgive me?"

A tear slid down her cheek as she nodded. "Yes."

A small smile touched his lips. "Good." Then he closed the distance and kissed her.

She kissed him back and wrapped her arms around his neck as he lifted her up to be even with him.

He pulled his head back but didn't set her down. "You're not still dating John Dickson, are you?"

Marly frowned. "No. Why?"

Bull smiled. "Just wondering if I had any competition to worry about."

"There's no competition for you, Bull. Believe me."

He grinned at her. "Good, because I'd really like to get to know you better."

She smiled wickedly. "The bedroom is right through that door."

He laughed. "That's good, we can start there. But I intend on getting to know everything about you. You okay with that?"

She nodded. "Definitely." Then she realized something. "Hey. I don't even now your real name."

Was she imaging it or was he blushing. "What? What's wrong?" she asked.

Bull sighed. "It's Gerald."

"So, what's wrong ... oh, Gerald Ford. Like the president." She felt her lips twitch as she stifled a giggle.

Bull rolled his eyes and began carrying her toward the bedroom. "My mother was a big fan of

politics. I was nearly Henry Kissinger Ford."

At that she broke out laughing. "Good thing you're big so you could have defended yourself when kids beat you up over that name."

"Yes, I know. Just get it out of your system now before we get into that bed." Ducking through the doorway, he nipped at her lip and whispered in her ear, flooding her with memories of their last night together. "Because I intend on reminding you exactly how big I am."

With his hands supporting her, she wrapped her legs around his back and covered his face with kisses. She remembered. "I'm looking forward to it. But are you sure you're recovered? You aren't still hurt?"

"Hurt? Nope. Not one bit."

The End

MATT

Chapter 1

Matthew Coleman logged into his online account at *Matchmakers Unlimited* and let out a long slow whistle. Fifty-four views of his profile and over a dozen email responses since he'd signed up yesterday only proved single women were out there *and* they were interested in him.

He'd been starting to wonder.

Resisting the urge to do a happy dance over the potential buffet of eligible females who wanted him, he opened the first email and read the message.

Hottie57 sounded nice enough, so Matt searched and viewed her profile ... and saw she was fifty yours old.

Matt was not an ageist. Not at all. He knew fifty-year old woman who were still hot, Jack and Jimmy Gordon's mama being one of them, but at thirty, Matt wanted a woman at least in the same generation. His teammate BB Dalton was dating a woman twelve years older and they seemed really happy. Based on that, Matt placed a twelve-year age difference limit, in either direction, on the women he'd be willing to date. That seemed fair.

He deleted the message from *Hottie57* and moved on to the next one from *Don't Ask Don't Tell*. Hmm. That was an interesting, and disturbing, user name. Matt found the profile and stared at the picture. He enlarged it, blowing it up to maximum size, and stared some more. Yup. There was a definite Adam's apple in the photo of who the profile described as a six-foot tall athletically built 'female' who was 'looking forward to great changes in life soon'. Oh, no. Not with Matt she wasn't. He deleted that message as quickly as he could.

Matt worked his way through all thirteen remaining emails and came up with two viable candidates. The team wasn't expecting any assignments for the next few days so he

responded to both. He set up two dinner dates, one on Friday and the other on Saturday night.

Two seemingly normal, single women. That should yield something, and two dates in one weekend was two more than he'd had in months.

Matt had just logged out of his account when an instant message window popped up at him.

SamIam: Hey! Coleman!

He smiled. It was Sam Foster, computer and communications guru. Sam held the same position on Omega team that Matt did on Zeta. They often compared computer issues, bugs and fixes, new programs, stuff like that. They had never actually met since Omega was based a few hours away. They didn't get to rub elbows with them the way they did with the assholes from Kappa team. Lucky him, he thought sarcastically. But that was the beauty of cyberspace. In spite of the distance, Matt and Sam emailed and IM'd often enough that they had become friends. He liked the guy a lot. Maybe one day they would even meet in person.

He typed his response.

ComputerGod: Sam. What up?

SamIam: Not much. Pulling an all-nighter. Surveillance. Bored. U?

ComputerGod: Bored 2. No action. But got me 2 dates this weekend

SamIam: Woo hoo! Shit. Got 2 go. Tango on the move. Later

Matt typed in *Later* like Sam had and sighed. At least Sam was getting some action.

Matt was feeling sorry for himself when an email popped into his inbox. It was a response from one of his two dates. He smiled.

Hopefully, this time tomorrow night, he'd be getting cozy with *WickedWoman*. Even her user name had potential and her picture, phew! Matt had never seen a woman built like that who wasn't wearing a g-string stuffed with singles and dancing with a pole between her legs.

Of course, he'd give *BabyGirl* her chance, too. Sometimes the ones who seemed the most sweet and innocent turned out to be the wildest. He was definitely looking forward to finding out.

Friday Night

"So what do you do?" *WickedWoman* aka Wanda (as if he believed that was her real name) asked over her drink, a Cosmopolitan.

Matt forced his eyes up from her massive boobs and contemplated his answer. Had Wanda looked like her profile picture, he would have danced along the edge of the rules and hinted at his special operative status. However, Wanda's online photo had obviously been taken at least ten years and fifty pounds ago. Oh, the stripper-worthy boobs were still present and even larger than pictured, but at this point, in light of the rest of the package, they weren't going to do it for him.

Matt didn't mind a big girl. More cushion and all that ... but upon a closer look at Wanda, he noticed crow's feet under the caked-on makeup and decided she'd lied about her age as well.

That made his answer to her question even easier. He'd just have to make himself sound as unattractive as possible. "I'm in the Army."

She looked disappointed immediately. "Oh. That doesn't pay very well, does it?"

It was not a lie when he answered. "Nope." Army starting pay for a private was crap. He just didn't elaborate he wasn't a private.

"So do you at least have a rank?"

"Nope." Again, not exactly a lie. They didn't use their former ranks in Zeta because except for the commanding officer, everyone on the team was considered equal.

She scowled. "Oh. Hey. Do you know any of those Navy SEALs? I'd really like to meet one of them. They're always so hot in the movies."

Matt thought of his teammate BB, a former SEAL. "Nope. Sorry." Okay, so that was a lie. But BB had a girlfriend and she was way hotter than wicked Wanda.

"Oh, well. You know what? I just remembered I have an appointment tonight." Wanda and her boobs got up so fast they continued to jiggle long after her body had stopped moving.

"Would you mind if I took a rain check?"

Matt forced himself to hide his glee. "Oh, too bad. No, I don't mind at all."

She reached into her purse when he stopped her. "Let me get the drinks."

She grinned at that, apparently liking he was willing to pay for things. "Thanks. I will definitely email you again."

Shit. Time for damage control. "Sure." He started to slap at his pockets. "I hope I have enough money. How much do you think the drinks cost?"

Her eyes opened wide and she sputtered, "I don't know. I'll ask the waiter to bring over the bill on my way out. Bye."

Oh, boy! He'd dodged a bullet there. Matt mentally crossed *WickedWoman* off his list of both potential bedmates and life partners. He could only hope tomorrow's date with *BabyGirl* would prove more fruitful.

With a sigh, Matt threw a twenty-dollar bill on the table and went home.

When he saw the inbox full of responses to his profile again, he knew enough not to get excited about it and began the arduous task of searching and reviewing each profile. When had dating become such work? Usually Matt was into computer work. Give him a code to crack or a secure database to hack and he was all over it. But this researching potential dates sucked.

Luckily, Matt was interrupted by Sam popping up on screen.

SamIam: Home from date already?

ComputerGod: Date sucked

SamIam: Sorry

ComputerGod: Thanks. Question. Your guys ever hook up on ops?

SamIam: You mean with each other???

ComputerGod: NO! With women

SamIam: What kind of ops U got? We got dirt, tangos, chemical weapons ... no hooking up with women

Matt sighed. That's what he figured. He was the only lucky comm operator who had to listen to his teammates get laid during operations. Not just once, either. So far, it was three times and counting. He even got to *see* as well as hear Trey and Carly have sex since he had both audio and visual surveillance in place for that op. At least he only had to listen to the sex between Jimmy and Lia, and most recently, Bull and Marly.

He drew in a deep sigh. He was pretty damn tired of watching – and hearing – everyone else get busy when he'd laid his hands on nothing but a computer console in way too long.

SamIam: U there?

ComputerGod: Yup. Sorry

SamIam: Got 2 boogie. Later.

ComputerGod: OK Bye

At least somebody was having an exciting weekend.

Saturday night

"So, Matt. What do you do for a living?" *BabyGirl* aka Lisa asked him over her Cosmopolitan – weren't there any other drinks in the world?

At least she actually looked like her profile picture. Matt had checked her out from head to toe the moment she arrived at the same table at the same restaurant where he had the infamous *WickedWoman* date.

He decided to change tactics for this date. "I work with computers."

"Really?" She sounded extremely interested.

He didn't let himself get excited as he evaluated her closer. Growing up in New York State on Long Island, Matt had been exposed to plenty of spoiled rich princesses. He could spot one a mile away and Lisa had all the signature earmarks – designer handbag, diamond watch, perfect haircut, manicured nails, clothes that probably cost what he made in a week.

She was probably so interested in his being in the computer field because she was hoping he could soon start paying for all of her little gifts to herself when Daddy finally stopped. Matt blamed Bill Gates for the assumption that everyone in computers was rich.

Lisa looked like all the girls who spent summers in the Hamptons – the Long Island summer paradise for rich snobs – the same girls who didn't give him the time of day growing up. He was only a lowly surfer who'd drive the few hours out from his parents' house every chance he got to catch the waves at Ditch Plains. He'd sleep in his car or camp at Hither Hills because back then he couldn't afford the overpriced rooms the tourists booked a year in advance.

Maybe Matt was just being oversensitive after last night's date. He would give Lisa the benefit of the doubt, even when she did order the lobster as well as an appetizer and another

drink.

The date was easy for Matt. He didn't have to do a thing except sit and listen to Lisa talk about herself. That's exactly what she did all through dinner, and dessert and her decaf cappuccino with a side of Grand Marnier.

Matt was just trying to calculate how much this date was going to cost him when she said, "Would you mind coming back to my apartment?"

Mind? Hell no!

He was about to express that sentiment in a more politically correct way when Lisa continued, "My computer has been acting funny lately. I think I might have picked up a virus. I keep getting error messages and crashing. The place where I bought it quoted me two hundred dollars to fix it! Isn't that crazy? I'm sure you could fix it with no problem."

She smiled sweetly at him as he worked to keep his own face blank. Two hundred dollars was probably what this dinner was going to cost him. It only seemed fair she should have to pay that amount to fix her own damn computer.

Matt forced a smile. "I'd love to, Lisa. Oh, hold on a second. My cell phone is vibrating in my pocket. Excuse me."

He turned his back to her and pretended to speak to someone who was telling him about a very bad computer emergency that only he could fix. He made the situation sound horrendous but himself, very good. "Hang tight. I'll get there as soon as I can." Matt flipped the phone shut again, pretending to hang up with the phantom person. "I am so sorry, Lisa. I'm going to have to give you a rain check. There's an emergency. I really have to go."

She looked impressed as she nodded wide-eyed. "I understand. I'll email you."

"Great." He paid the bill at the front and whizzed out the door.

By the time Matt reached home and booted up his laptop, he'd vowed he would delete any email from *BabyGirl* in his inbox immediately before he caught her virus. Dating in the new millennium. Not only did a guy have to worry about catching sexually transmitted diseases, now he had to worry about getting infected with a computer virus.

The familiar chime heralded an instant message from Sam. Matt scowled when he read the message and typed in a response.

SamIam wrote: Home late from date. Good sign

ComputerGod wrote: No, it's not

SamIam wrote: Sorry. More dates for next week?

Matt considered his answer for a moment and then typed.

ComputerGod wrote: NO!

For extra emphasis, he typed a half dozen more exclamation points and then hit *send*.

Chapter 2

Monday morning at o-eight-hundred, Matt strolled into the meeting room happy to be at work after the hellish weekend he'd had in the dating trenches.

He filled his mug from the new coffeemaker Jimmy had bought for the team and plopped into a chair next to Trey.

Trey looked up and raised a brow. "Tough weekend?"

Matt snorted. "You have no idea."

"You should have come by the bar. Jack and I were there pretty much every day hanging out with Carly and watching the baseball games."

It sounded good in theory, but as each one of his teammates hooked up and got serious girlfriends one by one, Matt was feeling more and more like a fifth. "Was Nicki up visiting?"

Something must have shown on his face because Trey looked at him funny and asked, "Why? You don't like Nicki?"

Matt quickly shook his head. "No, it's not that. I like her a lot. And she's from New York like me. Around here, that's pretty rare. The thing is, I feel funny being the only single guy."

Trey rolled his eyes. "You're being oversensitive. Besides, it's a bar. It's full of single guys. And you get used to Jack and Nicki disappearing upstairs for an hour here and there. They always come back. As much as Jack likes sex, I think he may like watching sports while drinking a beer better."

Maybe Matt should take up watching more sports to make up for the appalling lack of sex in his own life recently. He was just considering his plight when Jimmy came out of the commander's office, or rather his office, at least until Central Command got off their asses and decided if they were giving him permanent command of Zeta or not.

The entire team, including Bull, still on light duty because of his injury, was already seated so Jimmy began. "Well, boys. Looks like Central trusts me about as much as a hen trusts a fox near her eggs. We've got another training exercise this week and not much else. On top of that, they're taking Matt away from us."

Matt nearly choked on his swallow of coffee at that. "What the fuck?" He added a quick, "Sir" as an afterthought.

Jimmy laughed but still looked pissed off. "Don't worry. They're not keeping you. You're on loan."

On loan? Like a frigging library book? "Ah, on loan to who?" Knowing Central Command, Matt could only imagine and no scenario his brain came up with made him very happy.

"We'll go over it privately after the meeting. Now, for our next round of fun, how you all feel about helpin' our old commander train some of his green SpecOp recruits by whoopin' their asses in a recon simulation?"

That, at least, brought smiles to the faces of every man in the room, including Matt.

* * * *

"I gotta say, Coleman. This actin' commander gig is pretty enlightenin'."

Matt frowned. What the hell was Jimmy talking about and what was that smirk for? He did his best to act respectful, even though they were alone in the office. "Sir?"

Jimmy fingered a single piece of paper he'd taken out of a manila folder and referred to it. "Well, let's see. For starters, I had no idea you'd developed – wait, let me get this straight," Jimmy read directly from the paper, "the technology for a targeting and guidance program for the military's new missile defense system."

He put down the paper and frowned, continuing. "While you were still in college, *and* you sold it to Uncle Sam for millions. You're a freakin' millionaire?"

That was in his personnel file? Matt had been recruited directly out of college for the Army's Delta Force Technology Unit. He was just hoping Central wouldn't be quite so thorough with their paperwork.

Matt scowled. "I did have a partner in the development, we split the money from the contract."

Jimmy shook his head. "I mean, I always knew you were smart, but you're a friggin' prodigy genius. Graduatⁱn' high school at sixteen, college at nineteen. Three whole years to graduate valedictorian from college, what took you so long?"

Matt shrugged at Jimmy's sarcasm. "The missile program took up a lot of time, and we developed and sold a few computer games along the way, too."

"Sure, in your spare time. Why not? I can understand that." Jimmy took in a deep breath and then laughed before his eyes narrowed as he watched Matt closely. "What's up, Coleman. What's wrong?"

"Um, sir. I'd appreciate if we could keep all this information between us."

Jimmy sobered. "Of course. Mind if I ask why, though?"

"I just don't want to be treated differently. That's all. It's hard enough that I'm usually the one tucked away safely in a van with the comm system while you guys take the fire."

Jimmy drew in a deep breath. "Matt. You and your magic computers have given us advantages and kept us alive more times than I can count. There are more important ways to be a part of this team than just gettin' shot at. But don't you worry, your secret is safe with me."

Matt nodded, satisfied. "Thank you, sir."

"Now, back to business. You're goin' to Dubai."

That news physically whipped Matt's head back. He raised a brow. "Dubai?"

"Yup. It seems as if our ally's base in Dubai is having issues with the guidance system you – ahem – didn't invent and didn't make millions off." Jimmy winked at him. "Central wants you to go over there and give them a crash course. It should be quite an adventure. You'll be staying at a compound often used by a member of the royal family."

"Really?" Wow.

"Yup. I suggest you brush up on local customs. You leave right after our trainin' mission with

the commander's boys."

Matt grinned.

"What?"

"You're going to eventually have to stop calling him 'the commander' someday ... Commander."

Jimmy laughed. "Easier said than done. Although, the way things are goin' at home with him and Mama, I wouldn't be surprised if I had to start callin' him Papa before too long."

Matt raised a brow in surprise. Even the commander had a woman. Maybe when he got home he'd check that Matchmaker site one more time.

Matt managed to stay off the dating site when he arrived home that evening for a number of reasons. First, he had an email waiting in his inbox from *BabyGirl*. The virus threat alone would have made him hit *delete*, but the subject line that read *Need Computer Help!* clinched it. With memories of the disastrous and expensive date, he deleted it unopened. Just because he had money didn't mean he hated spending it on a bad date any less.

After checking his inbox he got distracted by his online research about Dubai – the royal family actually maintained their own website. Go figure. He was just reading about Sheikh Mohammed's Internet City when a message from Sam popped up.

SamIam: Hey, not much time. Going deep under. Can't talk for a while. OK?

Shit. The last time a member of his team went deep undercover, they had to rescue him. They were a little late and he'd come back by way of the military hospital in Germany.

ComputerGod: Watch your ass. OK?

SamIam: Until I find someone else to watch it for me! (Grin) Later

ComputerGod: Home safe. Later

Matt was leaving in a few days to be a guest in a compound used by the royal family and train some British techy how to use a computer program. Meanwhile, Sam was heading into god only knew what. He sat back in his chair with a sigh, seriously hoping whatever Sam's assignment turned out to be, it didn't cost Matt a friend.

* * * *

Sam Foster had just closed the IM window with Zeta team's comm guy Matt Coleman when Task Force Omega's commander stepped up to the desk.

Commander Anderson smiled. "You ready, Foster?"

Sam took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. The communications officers on the various special task forces set in place after the terror attacks of September 11th rarely got to see much hands-on action, let alone go deep undercover. But that was exactly what was happening. Rather than being tied to a computer, Sam was going in, alone.

To say infiltrating without any team backup was frightening would be the understatement of the century, even though the assignment was in a supposed friendly zone. In the Gulf, friendly could become very unfriendly in the blink of an eye – especially for a woman.

Her commander cocked his head toward the door of his office. "Come on inside for a sec."

Sam swallowed and nodded. For the first time in the six months she'd been Omega's comm officer, Commander Anderson was treating her like a woman, and she didn't like it one bit. She'd fought to be equal her entire career in the service. What burned her ass and confused the entire female equal rights issue was that the only reason she was going to Dubai undercover was because they needed a woman specifically for the assignment.

He led the way to his office and sat behind the desk, indicating she should sit in the chair in front. He simply stared at her for a moment.

"Sir?" Nothing like silence from a superior officer to make you nervous.

"Samantha..."

Now he was calling her by her first name. Not good. "Commander."

He shook his head and smiled. "If you weren't a woman I'd be slapping you on the back and sending you off without thinking twice about it."

"I know, sir." She kept her face blank.

"But the fact is, you are a woman and I'm sending you deep undercover into a goddamn harem in the middle of Dubai with no backup and without the knowledge of any of our allies."

That about covered it. She swallowed a nervous impulse to laugh. Now that he put it that way, it did sound pretty damn scary.

Commander Anderson ran both hands over his face. "Maybe we need to bring someone we trust over there into the loop, just to be safe."

Sam shook her head violently. "The reason I'm going in, sir, is because we don't know who we can trust. The transmissions I intercepted originated from somewhere within that compound. We don't know who sent them, it could be a guard or a gardener ... for all we know, it could be the Sheikh himself."

He breathed in deeply. "I know, soldier. And as I said, if I was sending one of the guys, I'd wink and tell them to have fun."

"But I'm a woman," she supplied for him, not happily.

The commander shook his head at her. "I feel like I'm pimping you out, Foster. It's a goddamn harem! There's a chance you may ... the situation may arise..." He obviously found the thought so horrendous he couldn't finish the sentence.

"I'm not a virgin, sir."

He let out a bitter laugh. "Thanks, I hadn't even considered that."

Sam wasn't sure if she should feel insulted or flattered by that comment. She decided to let it go. "What I'm saying, sir, is that I'll do what I have to do, whatever that is, to get the job done. But I'm smart and I'm well-trained and I've even been told by a few people I'm clever. I will get the information we need and get out, hopefully with my virtue intact."

Okay, so maybe she was enjoying the blush on the commander's face at the virtue comment.

You couldn't spend as many hours as she did in such close quarters with all these alpha males without getting a thick skin when it came to matters of sex. But in spite of being surrounded by prime beef all day, every day, she never partook of a teammate herself, nor would she.

Actually, recently she'd found herself fantasizing about a guy she'd never even met. Strangely, her buddy the Computer God had provided her with plenty to think about lately on the nights she'd whipped out her trusty vibrator.

Sam forced her mind back to her red-faced commander, who was speaking again. "Have you ... ah, did you visit the infirmary?"

"Yes, sir."

"And did you get the ... um ... birth control implant?" he rushed through the end of the sentence and his eyes dropped briefly to the desk.

She was glad he'd broken eye contact because she felt herself start to blush, too. Commander Anderson wasn't that much older than herself, not old enough to be her father or anything. But he was her superior, which made it feel kind of like having a conversation about birth control with her father. Which made this entire discussion far different from hearing the guys on the team tell dirty jokes or comment on the waitress' breasts at the local hangout.

Sam composed herself and answered. "Yes, sir. I did."

She'd lost track of how many implants she'd had put inside her since joining the covert team — communications, tracking, etc. — but this was the first time she'd been ordered to get one designed for birth control. Another thing that made her unequal to her male teammates. Although she supposed the infirmary would have handed them a box of condoms instead before they were sent into a harem. Actually, she'd been given that, too.

Finally, she raised her eyes and found her commander watching her again.

"Sir. It's going to be fine. Trust me."

He smiled wryly. "I do trust you, Foster. It's the rest of the world I don't trust."

Wasn't that the truth.

Chapter 3

The compound sometimes used by His Highness the Sheikh was impressive, to say the least. Matt had been driven into the complex past the horse training facility. Arabians took the breeding and racing of their horses as seriously, if not more so, than Americans. Matt took a moment to digest the surreal idea that only a few weeks ago he'd been at the Gordons' horse farm and now he was here. Sometimes his life was just plain strange. Maybe he'd get a tour of the barns, then he could email Jared and tell him all about it.

His guide led Matt through what probably should be called a palace but was only one of many homes used by the royal family. The polite but quiet man, who spoke better English than half the guys on the team, escorted him through marble and stone hallways to where he'd be staying.

The first thing that struck Matt as he passed various security points was that the compound

was outfitted with state of the art computers and internet access. No crawling on rooftops to set up temporary satellite communications, no running wires out of windows. Matt wouldn't even have to work out of the usual cramped van. No way, not on this trip, not when you were the guest of a Saudi sheikh.

Instead, Matt was shown to a collection of rooms that made the Presidential Suite at the Hilton look shabby, not that he'd ever stayed there. But after Jimmy had the pleasure, Matt let himself get obsessed over it a little and looked up pictures on the internet.

Matt noticed the king-sized bed in the bedroom which opened onto a sizable private balcony *after* he finished creaming in his pants over the bank of computers set up in the living area for his use. Once he got over that, he wandered outside and saw his balcony overlooked a secluded garden decorated with water gardens and exotic smelling flowers.

Wow. This was one hell of a set up, and Matt intended on enjoying every second of it. His only regret, he thought, glancing at the huge silk draped bed, was that he had no one to share it with.

He stepped out of the scorching humidity on the terrace and back into the cooler air of the bedroom. On the bedside table Matt noticed an English version of the biography of Sheikh Mohammed had been left for his reading pleasure.

Matt walked past it into the living area, not that he wasn't interested in the life story of Dubai's ruler, but he'd far rather get his hands on all those new toys. Too bad he couldn't instant message Sam. He'd love to brag.

Matt had arrived there mid-morning, but he needn't have worried about not having anything to do for the day because there was an entire itinerary planned for him.

He was kept very busy. First he took a tour of the compound, which was not insignificant. Then he was driven to the British base not far from the compound. There, he spent several hours reviewing the guidance system with the personnel, only to finally figure out the system wasn't working even for him because it had been improperly installed. He got them started on the reinstallation, which would probably take all night, and left them with instructions to call him if anything funky happened. Finally, Matt arrived back at his room mentally exhausted from both the travel and the day.

He'd barely walked in the door when a food tray arrived at his room, served by a girl dressed like the star of "I Dream of Jeannie", bare belly, flowing pants, sheer scarves covering her face and all. He'd have to snap a picture with his camera phone for the guys. If this was what waitresses looked like here in Dubai, it blew away those in the States. The guys would never frigging believe this.

She didn't leave after setting down the tray. Nor did she make a move to after laying out the utensils and napkin and the plate of food on the small table set up in front of a window in the room.

Training and habit had Matt scooting his chair so his back was against the wall rather than the window.

Matt said thank you, wondering if she understood him. He wasn't the language expert like Trey. He had enough Farsi to get by and not starve if he had to, but not much more.

The woman inclined her head in a near bow and spoke, surprising him with her careful English. "I am here to serve you."

He glanced at the table she had laid out so nicely for him. "Yes, and you did it very well. Thank you."

Still she didn't leave. Maybe she was trained like the butlers in old movies and would stand there in case he needed more water or fresh ground pepper or something. Fine. She could stand and watch him eat if that was her job. He didn't want her to get in trouble.

Feeling more than a bit self-conscious, he attempted some small talk about the weather and the beauty of the compound, then ran out of things to say and finished his meal in silence.

When he had, she cleared the table, loaded everything back onto the tray and with another nod, headed for the door. Matt called another thank you at her back and sighed with relief. Now he could finally go play with the computers. But that was not to be.

She handed the tray off to another waiting servant in the hall and came back to him with big brown downcast eyes that occasionally darted up to peer at his face.

Now what should he do? "The meal was really excellent. Thank you and please give my compliments to the chef. But I am so full, I don't think I'll be needing any more to eat tonight. Thank you."

She inclined her head again and didn't move. She did, however say, "I am here to serve you."

Okay. He got that, but dinner was over. Was she going to hang around until his breakfast tray arrived?

He saw her finally raise her eyes and hold his, the boldest move she'd made all night. "Serve you in there."

She pointed toward the bedroom door.

Matt's heart skipped a beat. Holy shit. He read that harems still existed in Dubai but thought it was more like a prostitution kind of deal. Apparently not. He swallowed and tried not to notice the large expanse of her exposed skin and the tempting curves that were so not covered by all that see-through fabric.

Wasn't this ironic? He spent all last weekend on dates from hell hoping to get laid, and here he was on assignment with a harem girl given to him for the night and he didn't want her. Crap. He knew he would risk insulting his host if he rejected this more than generous gift.

The team trained that when immersed in a foreign culture you must go along with all the local customs. So if they considered monkey brains a delicacy and fed that to him for dinner, he would have to eat monkey brains and tell them how good they tasted. But it also meant that if he was handed a harem girl to service his every need, he was supposed to let her.

So why was he having trouble actually taking her up on her offer? This was what he'd wished for, to hook up with a hot chick on assignment like his teammates seemed to keep doing. But they'd just happened to meet the girl of their dreams while on assignment. This seemed more like he was a John, she was a hooker and whoever owned this freaking compound was the pimp.

Matt looked her over again. Was she forced into this life or did she do it willingly? Although, life for a woman in Saudi Arabia could be very tough. Circumstances could make giving your body to strange men in exchange for plenty of food and a safe place to live seem pretty attractive. He couldn't take advantage of her or her situation.

Besides, he enjoyed the thrill of the chase. Going out on a date and trying to hook up. Being handed a girl like this just didn't sit well with him.

Damn. How could he get out of this without single-handedly destroying international relations?

Think Coleman. You're supposed to be a genius. Surely you can get out of this.

"Um. I wouldn't mind a back and maybe a foot massage. Could you do that?" There, that was safe enough.

She looked pleased and nodded enthusiastically. She led him by the hand to the bedroom and he began to wonder if she'd understood him, or rather misunderstood him. Maybe 'massage' had different connotations here.

When she unbuttoned his shirt and reached for his pants he got even more nervous. On instinct, his hands stilled hers at his fly.

She smiled beneath the veil. "Pants interfere with the massage." She nodded as if asking if he understood.

"Just massage, right?" he reinforced.

"Just massage."

Matt hesitated for a moment and then sat on the edge of the bed, pulling off his shoes and socks. He stood again and dropped his pants, diving face down onto the bed in his briefs before she got the idea his underwear, too, would interfere with the massage.

He heard her move and turned his head to see her reach into the drawer of the bedside table and pull out a bottle of oil. Brow raised, he wondered what else was in there and vowed to investigate the minute she left.

She was obviously trained in massage as well as other things he hesitated to think about. Expertly warming the oil in her hands before applying it to his back, she set to working on every travel weary muscle.

Matt was considering he could get used to this, when she said, "If you roll over, I will do the front."

Swallowing hard, Matt mentally checked the status of his penis after all this sensual rubbing and deciding he could safely roll over without embarrassment. He steeled his nerves and did what she asked.

She warmed more oil and began with one arm. Eyes closed, he guiltily enjoyed the feel of the hands of his 'gift'. They glided over him, soothing every muscle, until she slipped, he hoped accidentally, one hand under the elastic of his briefs. His eyes flew open about the same time his cock reacted by getting semi-hard.

Well-oiled fingers grasped him as he watched horrified, realizing he was doing nothing to

stop her. She slid her hands up and down his length until he was now totally aroused and appalled. He took a shaky breath. "What are you doing?"

She looked at him while her fingers never stopped. "Massaging you."

Oh, boy. His mind reeled. He dropped his head back on the pillow, breathing heavy from her manipulations while he argued with himself. Maybe this was just part of a normal Dubai massage. Maybe in her eyes, there was nothing sexual about it, just a massage. Yeah, right! She'd do anything and everything he asked sexually — instinctively he knew that to be true. It was her job. And it was because of that he had vowed to not take advantage of her.

He could just let her finish. He was close. In spite of his thinking he didn't want this, the feel of someone else's hands on his dick besides his own was a really nice change. And if he sent her away now, he could risk insulting the host that sent her, who most likely was a member of the royal family.

Honestly, she already had his dick in her hand. Would stopping her before he came make a difference? It would to him, he decided. He sat up and grabbed her wrist. "Thank you. I'm good. You can go now."

He watched her brow furrow as she nodded slowly. "I'm sorry if I displease you."

"No, you don't displease me. You please me very much," as evidenced by the protrusion tenting his briefs. "But I don't usually have women service me like you were doing. Do you understand?"

She looked relieved and nodded. "Yes. I will leave you."

He breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you. And ... uh ... thanks for the message."

She nodded.

The door closed and Matt flung himself backwards onto the mattress again, considering what he'd just done. He doubted he'd tell anyone about this embarrassing episode, not that they'd believe him anyway.

He sat up with a sigh. Grabbing the bottle of oil she'd left within reach on the nightstand, he slid off the high bed. Matt, his bottle of oil and his hard-on headed for the bathroom thinking how lonely it was up there on the moral high ground.

He'd just finished off his own personal massage when there was a knock on the bathroom door. The sound made him jump. He'd have to remember that privacy here at the compound was really just an illusion. He slipped on a robe and opened the door hesitantly.

Standing before him, head down, was a young dark-haired boy, probably in his late teens. He bowed slightly to Matt. "Jasmine sent me."

Who the hell was Jasmine? "Um. Okay. What did she send you to do?" The dinner dishes had been taken away already. Maybe this kid was supposed to turn down the bed and leave a chocolate on the pillow or something.

"She said you would prefer me to service you, rather than her."

Matt controlled himself from choking. This place gave 'room service' a whole new meaning. Shit! He should have just let Jasmine finish the job. Now what? He definitely wasn't letting

this kid ... he couldn't even finish the thought in his own head. Damn it. They should have covered this kind of cultural political shit better in training. He'd rather eat monkey brains than have to dance around in this sexual minefield the whole time he was here.

The boy was waiting for his instructions, Matt guessed. He stood there silently, head bowed. A thought flitted across Matt's brain that nearly made him ill. He hoped to god that if this boy was routinely sent to 'service' men, that he at least preferred men. To be prostituted was bad enough, but to be forced to do something that was distasteful to you personally and against your very nature, that was sickening.

Some sick dark part of Matt had to find out. Maybe when he was out of here, he could do something about what amounted to white slavery. Yeah, like that wouldn't disturb international relations too much.

"Sit down," Matt instructed and watched as the boy turned and walked obediently to a chair, sat and waited. When he raised his eyes expectantly, Matt quickly realized the boy thought he was sitting so his mouth would be crotch level with a standing man.

Matt speedily sat down himself and noticed the boy's look of confusion. He was having trouble finding words. Luckily, the boy spoke first.

"You wish to ask me something." It was more statement than question.

Relieved, Matt nodded. "Do they force you to do this?"

He smiled at Matt. "You think I am being forced?"

Matt nodded. "You're not?"

"No. Not at all. It is seen as a great honor to service a guest of the royal family. When Jasmine told me of her dilemma, I offered to come." He lowered his head. "If I don't please you, I can send one of the others..."

Ah, shit. Matt tried not to think about how boys and girls from all over the complex were lining up out there somewhere to 'service' him. "Can I tell you a secret, just between us men?"

The boy nodded enthusiastically.

"I do prefer woman."

His eyes opened wide with realization. "You did not like Jasmine but did not want to hurt her by saying so. You are a very kind man."

Close enough. Matt nodded. "You won't tell Jasmine or her ... uh ... boss, will you? I don't want to get her into trouble."

"No, sir. I won't tell. But ... people may notice if I leave here too soon. The guard outside..."

The guard outside! That was freaking news to Matt and posed the question of whether the guard was to keep him in or others out.

He pushed that out of his mind to consider later. Now, he said, "I understand. Hey, do you ever get to play computer games?"

By the huge saucer-eyed look he got, Matt determined the answer was no. "I could show you how to play one, if you'd like." Vigorous nodding followed.

Matt made his way across the room to the computers thinking he would never, ever complain about being stuck in the van with the computers again. If this kind of shit was what being in the thick of the action entailed, the other guys could have it.

Chapter 4

Sam slipped around the compound as much as she could her first two days there. However, it was nearly impossible to find any time alone and even harder to move about unnoticed.

For one thing, the outfit she'd been given to wear made her look like she should be living in a bottle somewhere and calling all men 'Master'. For another, the other women in the harem were, she supposed not surprisingly, a nosy, jealous lot. They wanted to know who she was and where she'd come from.

In response, she provided the hopefully convincing alibi the commander had supplied her with. Her story maintained that she'd been in the harem of a cruel man who beat her and she had escaped and sought out this compound. They seemed to believe it. That fact saddened Sam because it probably meant her lie was close to the truth for many of them.

It seemed they all wanted to be her friends, at first glance anyway. Luckily Sam prescribed to the philosophy of keeping your friends close and your enemies closer. She pretended to return the friendships while not trusting a one of them further than she could throw the ephemeral scarves that now masqueraded as her clothing.

But acting friendly wasn't enough to win these women over, and that was Sam's other problem. She had a good body. She wasn't being conceited in thinking that, it was simply a fact. You couldn't run ten miles a day and practice the martial arts without being lean, firm and muscular. On top of that, nature had granted Sam small but nicely shaped breasts. Some of the older women in the harem, and some of the lazier young ones, displayed signs of hiding behind their veils and scarves for more than just modesty. They resented Sam's body and, unexpectedly, her blue eyes. Apparently anyone with eyes other than brown got preferential treatment around there, and Sam's eyes were very blue. Nothing she could do about it. In future she would remember when going undercover in a harem, bring brown colored contact lenses or the girls hate you.

It's not like they hurt her feelings by acting friendly to her face and then whispering about her behind her back, but it was interfering with the performance of her job. Whenever she tried to slip out of the secluded area where they were supposed to stay even though they weren't actually locked in there, they would notice and ask questions. Sam started to fear they'd tell the management or whoever ran this thing that she was acting strangely. She couldn't afford to have suspicion thrown upon her since she was indeed, up to no good.

If she'd learned anything in the service, it was to adapt and overcome. If she couldn't roam the compound searching for the source of the emails containing sensitive and supposedly secret info she traced going to known terrorist cells, she would find another way.

Her plan was to listen to every bit of gossip about the residents and employees at the compound she could. And there was plenty of talk. The women didn't have a whole lot to do if there weren't any male guests in the compound to be entertained, and even then, it seemed

they disappeared for an hour or two and then came back.

Sam was immeasurably grateful for the lack of male entertaining to be done and for the fact that the girls actually fought over who got to go service them. She really didn't understand it, but if things stayed status quo, she'd have no problem getting out of there without putting out.

The day had been particularly fruitful in the information gathering department. Some things learned made her happier than others. She discovered that every room was rigged with audio and visual surveillance. That thought she did not enjoy. Searching the compound and snooping around in guest rooms was now out of the question.

In the good news department, Sam learned a lot about the man who was in charge of keeping the computer and security system up and running within the complex. He seemed like a very likely candidate for her mole. If not him, than one of his underlings would have both the access to and enough knowledge of the system to send the encoded emails she had intercepted. What bothered her most was not knowing how far the deception went. Was it just a single bad apple, or did the infection spread all the way up the tree? The info in the emails was highly classified. Either someone had cracked the security and obtained the secrets or they had been handed over freely. That was too frightening for words. She so hoped she didn't discover evidence that a US ally had betrayed them.

Then there was the other piece of information that leaked slowly through the harem. There was an American guest staying here. The rumor expanded. He was military, high level, under guard and he liked boys. She listened more closely and discovered Jasmine had been turned away by the man so they'd sent in Rashid who was keeping very quiet about what did or didn't go on. He did, however, talk extensively how the man let him play computer games on one of the many computers set up in his room. That last bit of info was interesting.

She needed to discover the identity of this mystery man and his purpose for being here. Sam approached the head harem woman, swallowed her fear and her pride, lowered her eyes respectfully and asked, "May I be sent to the American man tonight?" She'd be safe, right? He liked boys. She could get a look at him, try to gather some intel and get out of there. No problem.

The head mistress or whatever you call the harem mother looked at Sam strangely. "You know he rejected Jasmine and was sent Rashid?"

Sam nodded.

"And still you wish to go to him?"

Sam had a brilliant idea. "My body is closer to that of a boy than Jasmine."

The headmistress nodded her head approvingly and smiled. "Very good. Bring him his dinner tonight and remain as long as he wishes."

Samantha's heart thudded loudly in her chest as she nodded and backed away. What had she just gotten herself into?

Training kicked her fear to the curb and she stepped back up to her boss. "Do you know his name? What do I call him?"

Run much like a fine hotel, the harem mistress knew all of her guests and their room.

"Matthew Coleman. He's in the Palm Suite. The kitchen will give you directions when you pick up his tray. Promptly at seven. Do not forget."

Sam nodded and backed away until her legs hit a bench and she sat down hard.

How many Matthew Colemans could there be in the US military? And what were the chances this Matt Coleman was her computer god? She'd looked up Matt's personnel file and found a picture once upon a time. At least she knew what he looked like – sun streaked light brown hair, long, lean body, and all – and she could identify him if he was by some incredible coincidence in the Palm Suite. And if he was ... suddenly, keeping her virtue was no longer a priority.

But what the hell was he doing here? Had Matt discovered the same transmissions she had and been sent by Zeta to investigate? Leave it to the US military to not let the left hand know what the right hand was doing. If they were duplicating efforts and she had to join a frigging harem for nothing, she was so not going to be happy!

Then again, Matt Coleman was one hot number. Spending a few nights in the glamour of this Middle Eastern palace in bed with her computer god might make it all worthwhile.

Chapter 5

Matt spent another day getting the guidance system up and running for the Brits. There was something in the program that was incompatible with another system they were using. In his defense, he had developed this technology for US government use, not this funky system the British military was employing. But since this technology was his baby, in Matt's mind he was working his butt off to save his own face as well as help the allies.

He crawled back to his room after the long taxing day hoping he'd have no more gifts from his absent host to contend with. He'd be very happy with a hot shower and bed. Maybe food if it happened to show up and didn't take too long to consume or come with a sex slave attached.

The shower would come first, he decided and stripped down as the water ran in the stall large enough to bathe an elephant. The separate tub, on a raised platform that overlooked the gardens, was so big he could probably entertain the entire harem in it. Hmmm. That was an idea. He knew he was exhausted when he allowed that thought to cross his mind *and* it appealed to him.

Dammit. He'd been jealous of all the guys on his team as they'd hooked up and got girlfriends because they were all getting steady sex. Everyone but him. Now, he had the opportunity to have some probably pretty kinky, crazy, harem girl sex (judging by the contents of his bedside table drawer). And what did he do? He'd not only turned it away, he'd went out of his way to convince his host that he liked boys to make sure they didn't send him any more harem girls to tempt him.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. He ducked his head under the hot shower spray and let the water pound on the back of his neck. Maybe one day he'd stop getting in his own damn way and just enjoy his good fortune.

Eyes closed, his mind began to drift to the night before. Not to Rashid learning how to play his first video game, but to before that, when Jasmine had him clasped in her warm, oil covered hand.

He was thinking he was definitely the stupidest supposed genius he knew when he heard the door to the bathroom open. He turned his head to look. The room was so huge, and the shower stall so large, it didn't have a curtain or even doors. The water simply couldn't reach far enough to splatter the room. So when she opened the door and stood there, he was pretty much exposed for her to see, fantasy induced hard-on and all.

It wasn't Jasmine. This girl was leaner and had piercing blue eyes that peered at him from the space between two veils covering her hair and face. He saw those eyes crinkle and knew she smiled at him from behind the covering. Then he watched those eyes drop and take in every exposed inch of him hungrily. His breath caught in his throat and before he knew what he was doing, he extended one hand to her so she could join him.

She came forward, arm out to him, and placed her hand in his. She came to him so willingly he had second thoughts. "I'm sorry. I can't do..." He shook his head, closed his eyes and let his head drop. Hopefully when he opened his eyes again, she'd be gone. Good plan until he felt her hands wrap around him as she pressed her very naked front to his back.

She ran a hand up his chest to tease one nipple while the other hand strayed down his abdomen. He drew in a breath and braced himself against the wall with both hands. It was suddenly clear in his mind, he was going to let this happen. His only solace was that he had tried to stop her. He hadn't tried incredibly hard, but he'd made the attempt.

Matt was tall, but so was this girl. She leaned her chin on his shoulder and whispered, "Shhh. Don't react. The suite has eyes and ears."

His back stiffened. Her voice sounded American and she'd just told him in SpecOp code that the suite had audio and video surveillance in place. But still he cursed himself. Naked and unarmed with his back to a stranger. If he was very, very lucky, he wouldn't end up dead for this act of extreme stupidity.

"Matt. It's me, Sam." As the woman hissed in his ear over the sound of the shower, she continued to roam his body with her hands and mouth, he presumed for the cameras. The water would drown out what she said.

He played along; maybe it would keep him alive. He turned in her hands and moved her short blond hair so he could appear to kiss her neck. In reality, he used the opportunity to say, "I don't know any Sam."

Her hands ran up into the hair that curled around his ears and pulled his head to one side, giving her access to nibble his ear. The fright of dying had taken care of his hard-on, temporarily. But if she kept this up, whoever she was, it wouldn't be gone for long. "You frigging idiot. I'm Sam I am. You're Computer God. Jeez. I thought we were friends."

That nearly sent him to his knees on the pretty marble floor. "You're a girl?"

His buddy Sam was a female? Not just female, but hot and naked, not to mention pressed firmly against him.

She laughed against his ear and he shivered in spite of the hot steam. "You didn't know? And stop looking so shocked. They could be watching. Kiss me or feel me up or something."

Oh, boy. He looked down at her, then recovered his wits and cupped her breast while he whispered, "What are you doing here?"

"I told you I was going deep."

Her comment about going deep while her hardened nipple pressed into his palm sent his mind to bad, bad places as he thought about how he'd love to be deep inside his good buddy Sam at the moment. Christ, this was a shock.

She nuzzled his neck again and said, "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"They loaned me out for computer training. Can you tell me why you're here?"

Sam—he still couldn't quite wrap his mind around that—looked up at him. "I don't know if I can tell you."

He pulled away and frowned. "You don't know if you can trust me?"

She drew him close again. "I do know that you are going to expose me and possibly get me killed if you don't start playing the part of the horny American with the harem girl. Oh, by the way, do you know they all think you're into men? What's that about?" Then she drew in a deep breath and pulled away, eyes wide. "Are you?"

He grabbed her ass with one hand and her chin with the other and kissed her thoroughly with plenty of tongue just to prove his point. When he pulled away, as breathless as she sounded, he hissed, "No!"

She smiled. "Good." Sam ran her hands up and down his body. She kissed him sweetly, while one hand snaked between them and stroked his length.

His cock was more than willing as it pressed against her belly and bobbed at her touch, but his mind balked that this was Sam. Christ. Could he never just be happy and enjoy something without over thinking it? First he didn't want Jasmine because she was a stranger as well as the equivalent of a sex slave, and now he was having trouble doing it with a friend. No wonder he was alone. Still, he had to be certain. "Are you sure?"

She raised a brow. "About doing this with you? Yeah. Are you?"

He ran his hands over her smooth, slick skin and ended with his hands on her ass. "Hell, yeah." She wrapped her legs around him as he lifted her and pressed her against the shower wall. Her arms wrapped around his neck, she grabbed his hair and steered his mouth to hers. His tongue met hers as he lowered her onto his erection, and then stopped. "Birth control?"

"We're good," she said quickly, then went back to kissing him breathlessly.

He sunk deeper into her and heard her moan. It was nearly his undoing. "I'm not going to last long," he warned. That was probably a good thing. Shower sex may be every man's fantasy, but his muscles were starting to protest and he was in constant danger of slipping and sending them both down onto the hard marble.

"That's okay. We have all night. I'm supposed to stay as long as you want me."

That could be way longer than one night.

Matt pumped into her fast and came with one long groan. He eased her legs to the ground and reached his hands between them. Maybe he'd been a little quick out of the gate, but he was a champion when it came to his hands. Matt proved that to Sam until he had her crying out and needed to catch her as her knees gave way.

She slumped against the wall, breathing heavily. When she could finally speak, she asked, "Where the hell did you learn how to do that?"

He grinned. "The internet."

She threw her arms around him again. "You are the computer god."

He wagged his eyebrows. "Wait until you see the toys in the bedside table. Even I don't know what some of them are for."

She let out a laugh. "I guess we'll have to figure them out together."

Oh, boy. The water was turned off in the blink of an eye as he rushed to get out, dried and to bed with Sam. She laughed as he tripped and nearly fell over trying to towel off at warp speed.

"Don't break anything I might need later." She eyed him suggestively.

She didn't need to worry, he'd put a splint on it if he had to, but nothing was going to get in the way of him enjoying every last second with Sam. And then, he'd get her to tell him why she was here, help her complete her assignment and get her the hell out. Suddenly, he did not like the idea of her being part of a harem, undercover or not.

* * * *

"So what do you think this is for?" Matt asked later that night as he held up a small black acorn shaped object.

After the shower, they'd eaten a hasty dinner, followed by a slow and thorough lovemaking session. Now they lay in bed, naked, examining the more than interesting contents of Matt's bedside drawer.

"It looks a little like a pacifier for a baby. Is it like to play naughty nursemaid and bad little boy who needs to be spanked?" Matt raised the item in question toward his lips and Sam used all of her speed and agility to grab his wrist.

"Ah, I wouldn't do that if I were you. It's definitely not a pacifier. It's a butt plug."

Sam laughed as the expression on Matt's face, one of mingled shock, surprise and intrigue. His golden brown eyes opened wide as he said, "Really." He considered the item in his hand again and then put it back in the drawer, pulling out a tube of lubrication. "I guess this goes with that."

She nodded her head and had a feeling Matt may be hoping to get a little kinky later. "Yeah. I'd think so."

He whipped out a long, oddly shaped rod with a curve and a ball at one end. "You can't possibly know what this is," he challenged.

She smirked. "Yes I do." She'd done her research for this assignment. It's amazing what you can find on the internet. She was now extremely well versed in the world of sexual devices.

"Okay. What is it?" He didn't sound convinced.

"Want me to show you?" she offered.

He looked at the shape and length of it doubtfully. "Is it for me or for you?"

"Oh, it is unquestionably for you."

He shook his head pretty violently. "No, then I absolutely do not want you to show me. Just tell me."

"Prostate massager."

That got the expected comical reaction.

He looked at it one more time with eyebrows raised and put it carefully back in the drawer as if he never wished to touch it again. "How do you know all this?"

"Part of the job description." She figured they could speak freely and not worry about the surveillance as long as they stuck to topics like the food, the weather or sex. If they needed to speak about anything regarding her assignment, they'd have to take another shower to cover the conversation. They couldn't do that too often. Eventually, whoever was watching would get suspicious. Or maybe not...

Sam watched as Matt pulled out massage oil and poured a good amount in his hand. Grinning, he instructed. "Lay down."

She was about to get very messy soon and would probably need another shower. Maybe she would tell Matt about her assignment and enlist his help during the next shower. If he lived up to his reputation, he was literally a genius. He could probably figure out a way to find who was the source of the signal and he definitely could move around the compound more freely than she could at this point. Although, she'd have to warn him not to use the computers provided for him for anything other than playing games. They were definitely not secure – but of course, as a genius he would have figured that out already.

Her thought process wasn't making any sense at the moment because Matt was running his slippery hands everywhere and she was enjoying the feel of them too much to think about work. She should probably be worrying about the assignment, her cover, the fact that someone might notice she was being awfully friendly with an American military man ... but when his slick fingers delved into her, she knew she wasn't going to think about anything for a little while.

He leaned low over her back and slipped a tongue around the whorls of her ear then whispered, "Hey, is that butt plug thing supposed to be for you or for me?"

Sam laughed. Genius or not, there were still a few things she could teach Matt.

Chapter 6

Head bowed over the keyboard, Matt's fingers flew across the keys. Sam had finally spilled

her assignment to him during their second shower together the night before. It didn't take Matt long to formulate a plan. While lathering Sam's incredibly hot body with his hands, he'd whispered his idea to her under cover of the sound of the water. She'd agreed.

So now he worked like a fiend on the network of computers provided him in his room. The same computers he and Sam both believed were not by any stretch of the imagination secure. He knew that the mole would access anything he did there, and that was Matt's plan exactly.

Matt took a disc that contained a flawed version of the program the Brits had been having trouble with. In actuality, he was done with them but he was pretending he wasn't and that he needed to work on it for them in his room.

The program on the disc was useless, so he wouldn't compromise the secret technology by running it on the computers in his room. The trick was, he'd rigged the program so it appeared to work, but in reality had very limited functionality. Then he added what he thought was an absolute stroke of genius – sometimes even he was impressed with the workings of his own brain – an invisible tracking program for the program itself! Anyone who ran it would silently emit a traceable signal.

The mole in place in the compound would definitely forward the technology to everyone in his evil network, and inadvertently lead Matt and Sam directly to them. That way, instead of just capturing the one small fish Sam had been sent to locate, they'd get the whole pond full.

It was no small task to code all of this on the fly, but Matt thrived on pressure. In fact, he didn't notice the sun set and ignored the growling in his stomach until a knock on the door reminded him that Sam should be delivering his meal. He glanced at his watch, in fact, she was late. He could definitely stand not only a meal break, but a nice sex break, too.

He flung open the door, intending to tease her about being a bad little harem girl for delivering her master's meal late, when Rashid stood in the doorway, tray in hand.

Matt stepped back into the room. "Rashid. Where's..." Uh, oh. What name was she using? They'd gotten around to a lot the night before, but the name she'd given them at the compound wasn't one of them. "Uh, the girl who was here last night? Blue eyes, short light hair, pretty..."

"You mean Salome." Rashid frowned. "You like her, I can see. But I have bad news..."

Matt's heart skipped a beat. "What bad news?"

"She was taken today."

Matt braced himself with one hand on the edge of the desk and tried to cover his panic. Slowly and deliberately, insuring his voice didn't betray his feelings, he asked, "What do you mean, taken?"

"A man came and said he was her master. She was a runaway and belonged to him. We could not prevent him. But he ... he hit her, Master Coleman. I saw blood on her mouth."

Matt swallowed the bile that rose in his throat. "Thank you, Rashid. You can go. I have work to do."

Rashid bowed his head and backed out the door. Matt managed to wait for the door to close

before he collapsed in the computer chair. His mind raced. Of course, she wasn't a runaway. Was this her cover story and her way to extricate herself from the assignment? But wouldn't she have waited to make sure the program he was working on worked? Of course, she would.

His stomach clenched. Shit, if the story leaked out that there was a runaway here, what was to stop any abusive asshole from coming here and claiming her as his own? He doubted anyone demanded to see ownership papers, if such a thing existed.

He closed his eyes and breathed deep. He was nearly finished with this program. Another two hours work, if he could get his brain to focus on the code and not Sam, and he'd be done. But there was still no way could he go searching for her throughout Dubai without raising suspicion. He had to have faith in her to take care of herself. Easier said than done.

He was going to get this program done and get his ass out of this place. Then he'd search for Sam, first through his SpecOp contacts to see if she'd gone home. If he couldn't find her, if she was taken and hurt, god help the man that took her.

Matt had just found her. No fucking way was he going to lose her now.

Flinging open the door, he said to the ever-present guard, "I need transportation arranged for first thing tomorrow. Who do I talk to about that?"

* * * *

Sam fingered her tender fat lip gently. This was going to look real pretty by tomorrow. She picked up the ice pack she'd been given and held it on, wondering if it hurt more with or without the cold pressed to it. Maybe this was why the harem girls always wore veils – to cover their bruises. That was not a pleasant notion. An even less pleasing idea was that every minute, every mile, took her further away from Matt.

That thought must have shown on her face because suddenly, a large male hand covered hers. "I'm sorry I hurt you. It was not my intention."

She smiled and winced as she felt it open the crack in her lip wider. "Stop apologizing. Just next time you get into playing the role of angry harem girl master, wear the gaudy gold ring on your left hand and make sure you slap me with your right."

Commander Anderson breathed in deeply and shook his head. "I hope to god I never have to go through any of this again."

Sam scowled. If it had been one of the guys, the commander wouldn't have come swooping in like a deranged Superman and dragged him out of the harem.

She'd snuck away long enough to make a call to the commander and tell him her plan with Matt. He'd approved it and then insisted he extricate her immediately. That's what he'd done, too, in a sweeping robe and fake mustache that nearly made her laugh and expose herself. But the man spewed out Farsi like he'd been born speaking it and had them all cowering when he demanded his 'property' be returned. She'd been handed over to him so quickly her head spun, especially after he added to the show by backhanding her across the mouth.

He glanced at her again and winced. "Good thing you don't have some big protective boyfriend around, huh? He'd kick my ass for what I did."

Her mind turned to Matt. She wouldn't mind having a big protective boyfriend one bit.

The commander patted her hand again and said, "Buckle up. Looks like we're about to land. Are you going to be up for the team meeting when we get back? Or do you want to go straight home."

"Are you kidding? I finally got a battle scar, there's no way I'm hiding it at home." That earned her a smile from Commander Anderson, but it wasn't half as big as the one on her face when she entered the meeting room back at base and the entire team surrounded her and wanted to know everything.

She had no intention of telling them everything, but there was enough excitement in the G-rated version to intrigue them.

Sam had just reached the point in the story where the commander had whacked her when the meeting room door flung open and a crazed Matt stood in the opening. "Oh, thank god."

He closed his eyes and let out a long shaky breath.

Sam stood, but it was the commander who spoke first. "Uh, may I help you?"

Sam swallowed and tried to keep her voice calm. "Commander Anderson. This is Task Force Zeta's comm officer Matthew Coleman, the operative that helped me on the assignment."

The commander raised a brow and Sam couldn't miss how he looked from her face — she didn't even want to think about the feelings that shown there — to Matt's haggard and obviously relieved expression. "Well, then. We owe you thanks. That was a brilliant plan."

Matt tore his gaze away from her as he addressed the commander. "Thank you, sir."

Sam noticed the guys elbowing each other and grinning. Okay, so maybe it was obvious more went on than just computer programming. So what? "Sir, I haven't had a follow-up report from Coleman yet. Could I be excused from the meeting, obtain the report and then relay it to you later?"

She was shaking. He'd come to find her, all the way from Dubai.

The commander visibly bit his cheek and mostly controlled his smile. "Go ahead, Foster."

"Thank you, sir."

Sam led Matt out the door, down the hall, and managed to not attack him until they were alone in an office with the door shut. Then she didn't hold back.

Arms flung around his neck, she ignored her swollen lip and kissed him. Then said, "Ow" and hugged him instead.

Matt buried his face in her hair. "I was so worried."

"I'm sorry. The commander came to get me out sooner than I'd planned or I would have told you."

"It's alright. You're safe. That's all that matters." He ran his hands over her as if looking for more injuries, then frowned. "Did he have to hit you so hard?"

"We've already discussed it. I'm fine. But tell me what happened."

"I finished the program, popped it on the disc and deleted it from the machine, knowing that every keystroke was probably mirrored and recorded at the main computer hub on the compound. Then I told them I was done and booked a flight."

She couldn't help her smile. "To my base, not to yours."

He looked contrite. "I had to know you were alright. And no one would give me any info on you."

"Of course not. I was deep under, remember."

He sighed. "I remember. Please tell me you're not going under again any time soon."

She squeezed him tighter. "No plans yet. I promise."

He cupped her face gently and kissed just the good corner of her mouth. "I hope you kept the harem girl costume, though."

She laughed. "Yeah, I did, you perv."

"Perv, huh? Then I guess I shouldn't tell you that I emptied the sex toy drawer into my duffel before I left..."

Her eyes opened wide. "You didn't!"

Matt shrugged. "Only one way to find out."

She smiled, kissed him gently and then sobered. "How's this going to work, Matt?"

"Us?"

Us. Sam really liked the sound of that. She nodded.

"Easy. We'll see each other whenever we can."

"And when we can't"

"I'll send you naughty instant messages." He ran a thumb over her mouth. "I'm supposedly a genius, Sam. Between the two of us, we'll figure something out. I just know I'm not letting you go now that I've found you."

To her absolute horror, that brought tears to her eyes. She looked away and laughed tearfully. "Dammit, Coleman. You made me cry like a damn woman."

Matt smiled. "You are a woman, and have I told you how immensely grateful I am for that?"

She leaned in. "Yeah, me too."

The End

About the Author:

It all started in first grade when Cat Johnson won the essay contest at Hawthorne Elementary School and got to ride in the Chief of Police's car in the Memorial Day Parade ... and the rest, as they say, is history. As an adult, Cat generally tries to stay out of police cars and is thrilled to be writing for a living. She has been published under a different name in the Young Adult genre, but Linden Bay is the first to release her romances.

On a personal note, Cat has two horses, 10 cats, one dog, six parakeets, numerous fish and one husband, and is not sure which of those gives her the most grief. Needless to say, she is very busy most days on her little 18th century farm in New York State. She plays the harp professionally and stresses that this does not mean she plays well. A past bartender, marketing manager and Junior League president, Cat's life is quite the dichotomy, and on any given day she is just as likely to be in formal eveningwear as in mucking clothes covered in manure. Cat hates the telephone but loves email, and is looking forward to hearing from you.

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Other works by Cat Johnson:

Trilogy No. 102: Opposites Attract

... a three-part lighthearted romp through the intertwining lives of six people who learn that in spite of everything you have to remember to live, love and laugh to be happy.

Taking a Leap: Bradley Morgan is the quintessential computer geek and nice guy, through and through. The only problem is that in his opinion, nice guys almost always finish last when it comes to hot women like his sexy co-worker Alyssa Jones. But things change after Alyssa finds her boyfriend cheating. Suddenly, nice guys like Brad don't look so bad. So when Brad agrees to ghostwrite the sex scenes for a romance novel as a favor for desperate client Maria White and asks for Alyssa's help after hours, she agrees wholeheartedly and things really start to heat up. Brad and Alyssa learn you should never judge a book by its cover, and that sometimes love requires a leap of faith.

Light my Fire: Amy Gerald's life is filled with whirlwind romance. Unfortunately, it's all on the pages of the romance novels she publishes. That is until she volunteers to cat-sit for her author friend Maria and meets Troy O'Donnell, the hunky fireman who lives next door. The problem is, this commitment-phobic consummate bachelor is far more willing to run into a burning building than allow love into his life. Troy will grasp at any excuse, even the ridiculous assumption that Amy is a lesbian, just to avoid his growing feelings for her. Amid a comedy of errors and misunderstandings, which includes Troy's first hilarious visit to a gay bar, Amy manages to light Troy's fire, but can she also conquer his fears?

Second Time Around: Antonio Sanchez thought that at 32 his life was all mapped out – wife, kids, career – until some major bumps in the road radically alter his course and send him careening right into the path of newly divorced Maddie Morgan. Suddenly thrust back into single life, Antonio moves back in with his old-fashioned parents and has to learn to juggle his kids, his job at the firehouse, and his role as Best Man for his newly engaged best friend Troy, all in addition to facing his unquenchable desire for Maddie. Throw in a slew of matchmaking friends and relatives, led by Maria whose apartment appears to be the Bermuda Triangle for lost lovers, and Antonio and Maddie discover just how complicated things can get. Can the pair prove that love really is better the second time around?

Trilogy No. 103: Red Hot & Blue

Trey: Special operative Trey Williams doesn't want a girlfriend, nor does he need one in his life. A distracted soldier is a dead soldier, that's his motto. The problem is, the woman who

has been recruited to pose as his wife on a special assignment is proving to be more of a distraction than Trey can handle. What's a soldier to do?

Jack: Ordered by his superiors to take time off for his "mental health", Jack Gordon heads back to his hometown for two weeks of R&R. But then he meets Nicki Camp, the new hand his brother has just hired to help out at the family farm. Is Nicki playing hard to get, or is she hiding something? Jack knows one thing ... he isn't going to rest until he finds out!

Jimmy: Jimmy Gordon has learned during his career in the Special Forces that he can handle pretty much anything, including pretending to be everything from a banquet waiter to a terrorist, while undercover. But there is one thing he finds he's having a bit of difficulty handling, and that's the governor's hot red-headed daughter, Amelia Monroe-Carrington. Maybe the time for pretending is over?

Trilogy No. 105: Smalltown, U.S.A. by Cat Johnson

You loved Pigeon Hollow in **Trilogy No. 103: Red Hot & Blue**. Now, really get to know the men of this quintessential Smalltown, U.S.A.

The Horseman: Jared Gordon considers himself a lucky man. He enjoys the simple things life has to offer: a slice of his mama's pie, a pretty girl, a well-bred horse. Life on his farm in Pigeon Hollow is good, until big city girl Mandy Morris blows into town. Like a tornado hitting a trailer park, Mandy turns Jared's simple life upside down. Will he ever be the same again?

The Ballplayer: Cole Ryan found a life of fame and fortune in the major leagues. When an injury takes him out of the game he returns to Pigeon Hollow, the small town he thought he'd left behind. Yet every cloud has a silver lining, and for Cole that would be returning to the arms of Lizzie Barton, the small-town girl who got away a decade ago and still haunts his dreams. Will the secret she's been hiding from him all these years get in the way of their future?

The Deputy: Deputy Sheriff Bobby Barton agreed to put up with the taping of a reality TV show in his town for two reasons. He thought it would be good for the town's business, and the producers promised they'd keep out of his. But the show keeps creeping into his personal life, and he finds himself hoping that the show's assistant producer, Christy Dunne, would creep into his bed. Did Deputy Barton make a mistake that will cost him his heart?

Trilogy No. 106: Nice & Naughty

The hot firemen you loved in Opposites Attract are back with their friends, but now they're wearing a lot less clothing!

Secret Recipe: A famous lifestyle maven who secretly can't cook? Good thing a sizzling fireman who knows his way around the kitchen is there to rescue her and her holiday charity event from certain disaster. And if they detour to the bedroom on the way to the kitchen, even better!

Mr. December: What's hotter than a fireman? Twelve of them, nearly naked on the pages of your calendar! But when a rich department store owner steps in for Mr. December and meets the pretty lady photographer, things really start to heat up. He's no fireman, but that's all right. He doesn't want to put out the flames between them anyway.

Can't Buy Me Love: What do you get when you take one over-worked caterer on the brink of a nervous breakdown and add a hunky fireman for sale at the charity bachelor auction she's catering? You get a woman who finally finds the one holiday gift to buy herself that she's never going to want to return!

Trilogy No. 108: Just Desserts

Revenge may be a dish best served cold, but these three tales are hot, hot, hot!

Private Investigations: Donna is the kind of person who never thinks twice when it comes to helping a friend in need. So when her co-worker suspects her boyfriend of cheating, Donna is right there in the stakeout car next to her. Little does she know that their little foray in private investigation will lead to her own investigating of a sexy PI's privates.

Between Love and Hate: Jade thought she'd found the one, until she finds proof her boyfriend has been secretly meeting someone else. What's a girl to do? Get back at him, of course. However, sometimes things aren't always as they seem.

Saving Grace: As Valentine's Day approaches, Grace realizes all of her friends have found the loves of their lives while she is still alone and lonely. But when a secret admirer sweeps her off her feet, she discovers that Mr. Right may really be oh-so-wrong. With help from an unexpected ally, can she get free of him before she finds herself all 'tied up'?

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Recommended Linden Bay Romance Read:

Trilogy No. 101: Turning up the Heat

You just never know where you're going to find love....

Blackout: Ashley and Curt get trapped together in an elevator. As the temperature rises they begin to reveal themselves in more ways than one!

Touch the Fire: Firefighter Garrett Flint rescues the beautiful Nicole from a burning building and then breaks all the rules by taking her into his home and into his heart.

June in August: June Monroe grew up next door to Wiley Patton. When he left for Vietnam she was just fifteen and hopelessly in love. Now three years later he's returned from war and little June is all grown up.

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