

# MODEL SOLDIER

CAT JOHNSON

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MODEL SOLDIER

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*“Out of every one hundred men, ten shouldn't even be there, eighty are just targets, nine are the real fighters, and we are lucky to have them, for they make the battle. Ah, but the one, one is a warrior, and he will bring the others back.” ~ Heraclitus, 500 B.C.*

This book is humbly dedicated to my military muses;

Sean, currently somewhere in Afghanistan, for letting me steal his images, his words, and his inspiration; and to his soldiers, who often labor unappreciated for all they do. Stay safe.

Janelle, for having the toughest job on earth, that of military wife, and for cheerfully answering all of my many questions and sharing her husband's limited time with me.

Chilly, the man of few words, for loaning a few choice ones to me. And Gary, for going above and beyond in support of my writing. I hope he knows how greatly I appreciate all the things he does for me.

As with all of my military novels, any inaccuracies or liberties taken with the facts are purely my own.



## Chapter One

Kneeling, Army Staff Sergeant David “Hawk” Hawkins surveyed the barren wasteland of the icy terrain ahead. Gusts of brisk winter air howled across the desolation, the frigid area vacant of all life save his squad. Hawk’s breath froze before him in mid-air each time he exhaled.

With the raise of a gloved hand, he signaled his men. The silent wraiths emerged from the ground, cloaked in the arctic mist, the only signs of their corporeal selves the barely discernable crunch of snow beneath boots. Upon his sign, Hawk’s squad stealthily approached their final destination on the side of the mountain.

This mountain had become Hawk’s own personal Hell. He was beginning to feel as though his many sins had come to bear and his sentence was this god-forsaken place.

Hawk decided to err on the side of caution and signaled for a short halt as he considered the juggernaut before them. Through frozen lips, he whispered as softly as a lover’s caress into his radio. “Bravo team, you’re on over watch. Alpha team, move out.”

As they had traveled on this path to Hell for the past hours, hours that seemed more like days, Hawk had divided his squad into two teams. Two entities separate yet bound together, one always supporting the other, providing security. He’d chosen his two best men to lead the teams, soldiers he would soon have to trust,

not only with his own life, but also with the lives of them all.

Without a word, the two groups responded to his order by moving quickly and surely into position. The over watch team, opening fire into the rocks above, broke through the icy stillness as the air erupted with the belch of gunfire. Tracers flew through the icy air like mad yellow jackets on a sunny day.

Hawk hit the rocky ground hard, knowing his body would pay later. But right now, he couldn't feel a thing, not while the adrenalin surged through his veins as bullets struck the snow-covered rocks protecting him.

Hawk heard a familiar "pop". "RPG! Take cover!" he shouted, not bothering with the radio, as the rocket propelled grenade cut a trail through the air, exploding nearby and showering him with debris as he lay behind cover.

As his men returned that less than friendly greeting with their own volley, his thumb engaged the selector lever on his rifle as his finger slipped onto the trigger. The scene seemed to move frame by frame to Hawk's eye as his brain and body, both on autopilot, processed and reacted to the situation.

Hawk's eyes traced the path the RPG had taken back to its owner whose fate was decided in the moment he began to rise from cover before Hawk's sights.

He squeezed the trigger.

Following the quick flash of his barrel, Hawk barely took the time to watch the man fall before he yelled, "Bravo team, maintain supportive fire."

With Bravo suppressing the enemy above, Hawk sprung from the ground and sprinted to join Alpha team. Diving behind protective cover, he knew he had to choose the next course wisely.

"Alpha team, follow me," Hawk ordered as he began to maneuver far right in an attempt to flank his opposition. Using a partially covered route as the supportive fire kept the enemy pinned in place, he

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moved quickly, too fast for the terrain.

"Shit," Hawk hissed as his boot slipped on the treacherous footing. Moving too rapidly could mean a fall from what was in all probability a deadly height, while moving too slowly could give the enemy the advantage and mean his squad's demise.

Taking a steadying breath that would hopefully reach down to his feet, Hawk ran as a few enemy rounds peppered the path around him. There was no choice but to accept the risk and drive forward if he wanted to win this battle.

Through his headset, Hawk heard the welcome news that B team had scratched two and continued to suppress the remaining enemy element. Two less bad guys to worry about as Alpha team got into place to assault the remaining opposition from the right.

Hawk waited until the last possible moment and then ordered, "B team. We're in position. Lift and shift fire." *And please try and not hit us*, he added silently, praying to whatever godly force aided soldiers in battle that none of his men would fall to fratricide.

He saw the enemy scramble. Having been pinned down, they failed to see Hawk's approach until too late. As they attempted to swing their weapons to ward off the surprise attack to their right flank, they fell one by one. To their credit, or perhaps as a testament to their stupidity, none tried to surrender but instead fought to the bitter end.

After a quick survey to insure his own men were still alive and standing, a small smile crossed his frozen lips as Hawk allowed himself barely a breath to enjoy the victory. Many a dead man had learned, too late, not to celebrate prematurely. There was still much to do.

"Bravo, establish security. Alpha, search the area."

His men, up until this moment silent, efficient killers, suddenly transformed into jubilant boys, filling the air with whoops and chatter as soon as they had completed the quick job of checking the downed enemy

and clearing weapons from them.

Shaking his head at their behavior, he didn't bother to correct them; they had been swift and the work was already done. Instead, he called in to base to report the situation and do a bit of bragging of his own.

"Team One to Base. This is Hawk. Over."

"Go ahead, Hawk. Over."

"The enemy has been eliminated. Awaiting further orders. Over."

"Return to base for debriefing. Over," the disembodied voice told him.

"Copy that. Over and out." Hawk sighed and looked at the crimson-spotted snow surrounding him. His only hope, when the time came many months in the future, was to bring all his men back from Afghanistan to their loved ones, alive and unscathed.

Well, perhaps that wasn't his only hope. He wouldn't mind something warm in his belly right now: coffee, food or whisky, any of the three would suffice. Hell, he wasn't picky. And while he was hoping, he hoped the journey back down to base would be easier than the one here. There was no way it could be any worse.

Unfortunately, as it turned out, Hawk couldn't have been more wrong.

"Fuck," Hawk mumbled, lowering his head against the driving wind and thinking that his protective facemask wasn't doing so great a job of protecting him at the moment.

"Sergeant?" Ryan Pettit, his second in command and the man who'd led Alpha team that day, questioned Hawk's comment, squinting against the sudden snow squall blowing tiny ice daggers into all their eyes.

"Nothing. It's just...I think I cursed us a bit back there up on that mountain. I assumed the trip back down would be easy, and this is what I get for that hope."

His Alpha team leader laughed. "Well, you know what they say. Put your hopes in one hand and shit in

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the other hand and see which one fills up fastest.”

Hawk laughed at that just as he spotted Wally, aka Trent Wallace, his Bravo team leader, suddenly emerge out of the blizzard from somewhere next to Pettit. Visibility was limited pretty much to the distance of your hand in front of your face. Thank god they’d finished off the enemy before this thing hit.

“I thought it was wishes, not hopes. Put your wishes in one hand and shit in the other,” Wally sputtered stiffly, looking and sounding as miserable as Hawk felt. They were all talking a little funny at the moment. Impending frostbite does that to a person.

“Hopes, wishes, same damn thing,” Ryan grumbled as he swiped at his face with one gloved paw, knocking away the snow that had built up on his eyelashes and brows.

“Yeah. Pretty much,” Hawk agreed. Hopes, wishes, both were useless.

Starting to look like the abominable snowman himself, he began feeling uncharacteristically superstitious, probably due to hypothermia and hunger. Then and there, Hawk swore to himself he’d remember in future not to do either, wishing or hoping. Not if this kind of torture was the result.

~

Thanks to the sudden storm, the journey down the mountain took them twice as long as the trip up. The only solace was that they walked away victorious and without any losses. When they finally arrived at base, Hawk gladly sent his men back to their temporary lodging to eat and get warm while he sat and waited, not so gladly, to be debriefed by the commanding training officer in charge of this shindig.

And he was taking his sweet damn time, too, long enough that Hawk had the opportunity to lean his head back against the wall in the warm office, close his eyes, and review the day, his life, his future... This much reflection was definitely evidence that he was deliriously tired.

As his thoughts drifted aimlessly, he couldn't help but wonder where the hell the time had gone. It seemed to Hawk as if he'd just gotten back to Germany from his third deployment in Iraq and yet here he was, in the field once more, in the frigging Alps no less for a Mission Readiness Exercise. But he'd do whatever it took, even freezing in the Alps, to prepare his new unit before they headed out again, this time for Afghanistan, the Kabul Province, to be exact.

He'd thought Iraq had been bad, but from what he'd heard, Afghanistan made Iraq look like the frigging French Riviera. Awaiting them in the far mountainous outskirts of the city of Kabul would be a few makeshift shacks for living areas, a generator or two, and a small cooking area. That was the extent of what he'd been told they could expect to find in the way of comfort. Supplies would have to be flown in by chopper to reach them. He'd heard there had been improvements and that more may be done before he arrived. One could only hope. Not that it mattered how sparse or unimproved conditions were, they would still complete their assigned mission.

He and his men had been so busy the past few months, using their combined experience from their tours in the sandbox to help train the guys in other units at the base in Hohenfels, they'd pretty much gotten the shaft for time to train themselves for this new deployment. Hawk hoped they all wouldn't pay the price for that once they hit Afghanistan, where the platoon would be doing dismounted ops the majority of the time, far from assistance and farther from home.

But he wasn't in Afghanistan yet. Instead, he sat there at base camp on the mountain infamous for breaking people, trying to recover from one of the hardest damn training exercise he'd ever been through. In fact, he'd hardly thought about his upcoming deployment in hours since the "enemy" force he'd faced today demanded every last scrap of his attention.

The current situation made last week's two days of

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training and live fire exercises in the field back at his home base at Hohenfels, even with the freezing temperatures and five inches of snow on the ground, look like a walk in the park. Compared to the conditions here in the Alps, that workout had been nothing.

The German Army prepared on the very same rocky terrain where Hawk had trained that day, many parts of which reportedly had up to four feet of snow. Hawk could only think that the Army sent them here because these were the same conditions they could expect to find in the mountains separating Afghanistan and Pakistan, the same region where Osama bin Laden's boys still maintained a stronghold in spite of all the good guys' efforts.

Today, Hawk's unit had faced some supposedly elite Special Forces sent in by Central Command to play the part of the bad guys to ready them for Afghanistan.

CentCom's handpicked golden boys were good, but not good enough. Hawk's squad, ten soldiers plus himself, had grown to be one hell of a force. Good enough to whip this Task Force Zeta's ass up and down the side of that god-forsaken mountain.

The sound of a door opening broke into Hawk's thoughts. His eyes flew open in time to see the black-clad, gray-haired training commander enter the room.

Hawk took the commander's offered hand and shook it while trying to ignore how much effort it took to even raise his arm from his side.

"Sergeant Hawkins. You did well up there today," Commander Miller, the man in charge of this show, said by way of greeting.

They did *well*? They'd done fucking *great*, was more like it! But instead of voicing that opinion, Hawk inclined his head and accepted the compliment. "I can't take credit for the complete molding of them, sir. I have one strong team leader and the other is decent. He's a bit rough around the edges, but I'm working to

fix that. Together, the team leaders and I have trained the rest of the Joes.”

He'd gotten them to where he needed them to be, acting together, their motions and movements fluid. They were efficient killers when needed, capable of identifying the enemy amongst a crowd and engaging only those who were combatants, following his orders without question or complaint and taking down the bad guys without hesitation or regret.

Commander Miller smiled and elbowed the man who had followed him into the room in the side. “Damn. I guess I shouldn’t have told you guys to go easy on them. I would have loved to see what they can really do. What do you think, Dalton?”

“The guys would have loved to play full-out, sir. I thought Bull would lose his mind, having to hold back like that. Maybe next time,” the Task Force Zeta Operative Hawk recognized as leading the opposing team in today’s exercise shrugged casually.

Hawk swung his gaze from this Dalton guy to the commander. “Excuse me?”

“Yes, sergeant?” Miller raised a brow.

Shaking his head in disbelief, Hawk sputtered, “You had your team hold back?”

“Nothing to worry about, soldier. I would never expect your squad to compete against Zeta when they play full out.” Miller slapped Hawk on the shoulder then turned to go after saying, “Go and get some rest. And again, good job up there today, sergeant.”

Anger-fueled and breaking all protocol, Hawk grabbed Miller’s arm. “Run the exercise again.” Then he added a quick, “Sir,” and then a, “please.” Although a little sojourn in the brig for insubordination would provide him some much needed rest, Hawk figured it was probably best to avoid it if possible.

Miller shook his head. “You won, son. There’s no need.” The commander’s eyes lowered briefly to Hawk’s hand, still on him. Hawk dropped his hold immediately, but not the subject.

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“There is no victory for me if your team didn’t go full out. Do you really think the insurgents in Afghanistan will be holding back when they face my men?” Hawk stifled anything else he might have wanted to say before he did end up in the brig.

An amused look crossed Miller’s face as his gaze moved from Hawk to his team leader for this exercise.

“Dalton?” Miller questioned the man with one word.

“He does have a point there, commander. And our guys would really enjoy being able to kick some ass unrestrained.” A cocky grin crossed pretty boy Dalton’s face, just begging to be knocked off with the help of Hawk’s fist.

“Alright, sergeant. I’ll call Commander Gordon back at the rear to confirm nothing’s come up that requires the team’s immediate attention. But barring that, you get your wish, soldier. I’ll see you and your squad back here at o-four-thirty.”

*O-four-thirty.* His men were not going to be happy when he informed them they’d be traipsing around outside in god only knew how much fresh powder at o-dark-thirty instead of dreaming in their racks, and all because of him and his damn pride. Hawk mouthed a silent curse.

Dalton noticed and laughed. “You walked right into that one, Sergeant Hawkins.”

Yeah, he’d really like to slug this guy, alright. But for now, he had to go break the news to his men that they were not only spending one more night on this mountain, but they wouldn’t be doing a hell of a lot of sleeping during it either.

The commander’s words echoed in his head. *You get your wish, soldier.* Hawk’s final thought as a smiling Dalton closed the door of the office behind him was that he really had to remember to stop wishing.

## Chapter Two

The problem with mothers was this—you had to love them, even when you didn't like them very much.

Emily Price considered this as she felt her hand go numb from her tight, annoyed grip on the phone receiver.

Meanwhile, her mother continued to regale her with tales of exactly how wonderful Emily's flawless sister Lily was for taking her shopping the other day, which Emily *never* did.

Perhaps that was because Lily and their mother both lived in Chicago, while Emily lived and worked, very hard she might add, in New York!

She didn't bother bringing up that small yet pertinent fact. It would only restart another familiar ritual battle, that being why didn't Emily move back home or at the very least visit more often?

For what? So she could feel inadequate next to her sister? Perfect Lily, whose hair had always been blonder than Emily's, whose grades had always been higher, whose boyfriends had always been nicer...

"Emily Rose! I can tell you're not listening to me."

Uh, oh. Had she forgotten to mindlessly respond at what her mother felt was the appropriate time during her diatribe?

"Are you playing on that computer of yours again while I'm trying to talk to you?" her mother's voice accused through the receiver held in Emily's death grip.

*Playing.* Yeah, because working for the busiest

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woman on the face of the earth, or at least on Madison Avenue, was all fun and games!

Resorting to base instinct as she held onto her temper and her sanity by the tips of her fingernails, Emily knew the time had come for fight or flight. She had to choose one and soon because she wasn't going to make it on this phone call one minute more without blowing up.

"I'm sorry, mother. My boss really needs me. I've got to go. Call you back soon. Love you. Bye."

She managed to stifle the long, loud, pent up groan waiting in her throat until after she'd punched the "off" button, using a bit more force than necessary to disconnect the call. Emily took one more glance at the display to make sure she really had totally and completely hung up before letting her head drop to the desk, again probably with more force than was wise.

After a bit, the slow, steady thudding of Emily's head banging against the desktop ceased, leaving only the soft sound of her boss' snicker. "How come I always have to be the bad guy who makes you hang up on your mother? I think I'm insulted. I'm a nice person. I would never do that for real," Katie Jorgenson complained.

"Oh, shut up," Emily moaned, forehead still pressed against the cool, smooth wooden surface. "You're an only child, Katie. You can't possibly understand what I go through with my mother and sister."

"Now, now. I'm dating a man with eight siblings so I've gotten quite an education from BB in this area."

Billy Bob Dalton, only the hottest as well as nicest man on earth...and he was Katie's boyfriend. Another reason to hate her beside the lack of siblings, the perfect boyfriend. Emily groaned and resumed her banging until she glanced up through her tousled blond bangs and noticed her boss' face had turned deathly white.

Emily sat up straighter in her seat to ask what was wrong just as Katie jumped up and threw her hand over

her mouth as she ran from the room.

Brushing the hair absently out of her face, Emily leapt up to go after her obviously ill boss. "Katie?"

A muffled, "I'll be fine," was all Emily heard before the restroom door slammed shut behind Katie's distressed face.

Frowning and concerned, Emily turned back to sit and wait for Katie to emerge so she could interrogate her further about the sudden departure when she noticed something strange sitting innocently on her boss' cluttered desk.

She was still leaning on Katie's desk holding the object in question when the ailing woman finally returned.

"What is this?" Emily asked slowly and deliberately, holding up her evidence and probably being meaner than she should to a woman who was obviously suffering.

Katie's face paled once again. "Um, that's my coffee mug."

"Yes, it is your coffee mug," Emily agreed enthusiastically. "And you love coffee. You can't live without coffee. You grind your own beans, for god's sake. So why, oh why is there tea in your coffee mug? Herbal tea, no less," Emily asked, sniffing the minty aroma, already sure of the answer.

Strutting forward on still visibly wobbly legs, Katie grabbed the mug from Emily's hands. "A person can try something new once in a while. Can't she?"

Katie sat down heavily in the desk chair, slumping rather than displaying her usual perfect posture that went along with the perfect rest of her.

Realizing she was still beneath Emily's scrutiny, Katie avoided eye contact, studiously shuffling a few papers on her crowded desk as she asked, "Where is that file for the Army ad campaign? You know, we still need to find a model for that..."

"Stop trying to change the subject," Emily accused relentlessly.

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Still not looking up, Katie said unconvincingly, "Jeez! An inquisition over a little cup of mint tea."

Emily smiled knowingly and made her way to the small kitchenette in the office. There they stored the necessities in case they had to throw together a quick show of hospitality for some big client or talent on the spur of the moment. The fridge was always stocked with bottled water, both bubbly and flat, an assortment of fruit and cheeses, champagne and chardonnay.

But what Emily needed was in the cabinet. She reached past the bottles of red wine on the lower shelf to grab a box of unopened, plain water crackers from above.

Dropping the box on Katie's desk, Emily instructed, "Eat some. It will help. My sister couldn't get enough of those when she was pregnant."

Katie looked up at her guiltily. "How'd you know?"

Emily raised a brow and ticked off the proof on her fingers. "Hmmm. I don't know. Turning green and running for the bathroom, no more caffeine for the coffee junky..."

She paused and waited for Katie's imminent apology.

"I'm so sorry I didn't tell you, Em. I haven't told anyone yet except BB."

"Why? You know you can trust me. You can tell me anything and I'd take it to the grave. That's what assistants and *friends* are for."

Tears glistened in Katie's eyes. "I know." She paused and looked around the office helplessly until Emily handed her a tissue. "Thank you. And it's not that I don't trust you. It's my body I don't trust. Em, I'm forty! I'm too old to be pregnant with my first child."

"No, you're not! How old was BB's mom when she had him?"

"That doesn't count, he was her ninth."

"That doesn't matter. And besides, things are different nowadays. Women are having babies into

their fifties! Modern medicine has all these tests and stuff. It's perfectly safe."

"This coming from a girl in her twenties with nice young eggs and a good firm uterus," Katie laughed tearfully.

Emily rolled her eyes as Katie shook her head in despair and continued, "I'm just so afraid. BB doesn't want to show me how excited he is because he knows how worried I am, but I know he is totally in love with the idea of being a dad." She sighed deeply and heavily. "Em, what if I miscarry?"

"BB is totally in love with *you*, and he will continue to be no matter what happens."

"I know that, *when* I can think straight. I'm just so emotional and irrational lately." Wiping her eyes, Katie added, "I'm sorry to lay this all on you, Em."

"Don't you dare apologize. I'm here for you. You know that. But I'm sorry you're feeling so badly. Where's BB right now? I'll cover work for you if you want to fly down to the base and visit him. That might make you feel better."

Being in the arms of a hottie like BB would sure make Emily feel better.

Katie laughed at that. "No, no need for you to cover for me. He's in the Alps, of all places. That flight is a bit too long for me at the moment. There wouldn't be enough barf bags on the plane for a trip as far as Germany."

Emily bit her lip. "Were you supposed to tell me that he's in Germany? Isn't where he goes top secret?"

BB was some sort of super secret military Special Operative.

"If it was classified he wouldn't have been able to tell me, so I couldn't have told you, now could I?" Katie rationalized.

That sounded reasonable enough, but working with the military on their marketing had been a lesson in rules, both rational and not. "Mmm. I guess so. Can I ask one more thing?"

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“Sure,” Katie said, quickly trying to break into the crackers as she began to pale again.

After watching Katie struggle with the cellophane wrapping for about a second, Emily grabbed the box out of her hands, tore it open skillfully and handed it back. “Are there terrorists hiding in the *Alps* now, too?”

Katie swallowed a cracker and then laughed. “Not that I know of, but I suppose anything is possible nowadays. He said it’s just a training exercise. Commander Miller called a few guys from BB’s task force in to help train some Army guys. No big deal, he said. Nothing to worry about...” Katie’s voice trailed off softly.

Even though she had a long distance relationship with BB, Emily knew Katie did worry, each and every time her boyfriend and his mysterious black-clad task force buddies disappeared for an undetermined amount of time to parts unknown. With a baby added to the mix, that worry and the frequent separations would only be worse for Katie.

And that raised the next question that had yet to be answered. “What are you two going to do, you know, about getting married? I mean, it is totally cool if you guys don’t. People do that all the time, but...”

Katie laughed. “Don’t worry, Em. BB asks me to marry him every day, sometimes twice a day.”

Emily jumped up and down. “Yay! A wedding to plan! I love weddings.”

“Hang on just a minute. I told him I’ll only marry him if I make it past my third month without...you know.”

“How far along are you now?”

Katie wasn’t showing at all. Although, now that Emily thought about it, did Katie’s boobs seem to be straining the buttons on her shirt a bit?

“Eight weeks, closer to nine, actually, if the doctor calculated correctly, and I can barely ride in a car without getting carsick and my breasts hurt so badly they feel like they are about to explode.”

Emily nodded in sympathy. "Yeah, my sister said that, too. But, hey, you're more than two thirds of the way to that three-month marker. Besides, I have a good feeling about this. You wouldn't be having all these symptoms if that baby wasn't planted in there nice and firmly, right?"

"I guess so," Katie laughed.

"So we need to start planning, just in case. The good wedding places book up a year in advance or more..."

"No. No big plans, Emily. If this wedding happens, it will be small."

Emily let out a snort. "He has eight brothers and sisters. Exactly how small can it be?"

Katie groaned and slumped lower in her chair. For a high-powered New York marketing executive, her boss could sure be an introvert. "I know. That's why I told him I want to elope."

Emily's face crumbled.

"Relax, Em. You will be there, even if we end up at a drive thru in Vegas married by an Elvis look-alike. I promise."

Well, that was something at least. "Okay. Thanks." *She guessed.*

That she'd get to be there for the ceremony softened the disappointment a bit, but not enough. Emily thought longingly about all the missed opportunities to visit bridal shops and watch Katie try on long white, or perhaps off-white, dresses.

Katie laughed. "Don't look so dejected. You'll get your chance one day and then you can plan as big a wedding as you want for yourself. I'll even help you."

"Yeah, sure, cause the men are just knocking down the door to marry me." Emily rolled her eyes.

Katie shook her head. "I've never seen such a bright, attractive, kind-hearted woman spend so many Saturday nights without a date."

"Hey, that used to be my complaint about you," Emily reminded.

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“Yes, it was, but now you don’t have to worry about me or my love life anymore. I not only got myself a boyfriend, I also got myself knocked up. So go out and find yourself your perfect guy.”

“Are any of BB’s brothers single?” Good looks were genetic. The Dalton brothers would have to be at least as hot as BB.

Katie shook her head. “No, sorry. He’s the youngest. The rest are all married off already.”

*Hmmm.* “Any of his military guy friends single?”

“No!” Katie exclaimed with warning in her voice.

Emily frowned at her. “Why do you say it like that?”

“Because one of us dating a Special Operative is enough stress. Believe me,” Katie said firmly, arms crossed over her chest. “Go find your own guy. A nice civilian businessman or maybe a construction worker. The city is full of them both.”

Maybe she didn’t want a boring old normal guy.

“Some help you are,” Emily grumbled and, feeling spiteful, went to pour herself a nice, big, steaming cup of caffeinated coffee, which she intended to drink right in front of Katie as payback.

Ha!

## Chapter Three

*What the hell?* Hawk frowned and counted the opposing team gathered at the rally point one more time.

“Problem?” There was that smug pretty-boy smile again on Dalton’s face.

*Yeah, there was a frigging problem!*

“Your team seems to have grown overnight,” Hawk pointed out, sounding much more casual than he felt about that fact.

He was sure his ten guys could take them, but that was still no reason to be happy Zeta was basically cheating by changing the rules mid-way into the game.

Pretty-boy Dalton nodded. “Ah. That. Yeah, when we told Jimmy—Commander Gordon—about your request that Zeta go all out, he insisted on not only sending the rest of the team over, but coming himself as well.”

And that put Zeta at a whopping seven men, three more than Hawk’s men had faced during the prior day’s exercise. On top of the extra manpower, they also had brought in some sophisticated computer shit and one of the new arrivals seemed to know how to use it as his fingers flew over the keys of not one but three laptops.

Noticing where Hawk’s gaze rested, Dalton commented, “Zeta wouldn’t be Zeta without Matt Coleman, the computer god over there, and all his

equipment.”

Extra guys and state of the art equipment. Fucking cheaters. All Hawk and his squad had access to amounted to what were, essentially, basic walkie talkies.

Hawk let out a sigh and then noticed Dalton seemed to be waiting expectantly for his response to what really hadn't been a question, but more of a boast that CentCom gave his men better toys.

Cocking his head, Hawk mustered a grin equal to Dalton's. "If your team thinks they need all that just to beat us, then you go ahead and feel free to use it. My guys, however, don't need anything more than what we had yesterday to beat you. Just our wits and our skill."

Dalton broke into an all out laugh at that. "I admire your confidence, Hawkins. But..."

Hawk watched as Dalton broke off mid-sentence and seemed to be hearing voices in his head. Pretty Boy's smile disappeared and the concentration became evident by the expression on his face.

When Dalton said softly, "BB here. Roger that," Hawk was sure of it. Pretty Boy was definitely crazy or actually talking to someone or something in his head.

"As I was saying, Hawkins, I admire your confidence but there is no way your squad can beat Zeta."

When Dalton continued with his insults as if nothing out of the ordinary had just happened, Hawk really got pissed.

"What the hell was that all about?" Hawk pointed a finger at Dalton's ear to indicate the previous, more than strange occurrence.

Although Hawk could see damn well that it was all an act, Dalton pondered the ceiling for a moment as he seemed to consider his answer carefully.

Dalton was clearly fucking with him, playing mind games as he said, "Well, it is top secret, but I figure I can tell you since you're going to need all the help you can get today."

Tapping a finger lightly to his right ear, Dalton

explained cockily, “Cochlear communications implants. Whole team has them.”

*Fuck.*

Hawk had heard rumors about SpecOps having communications devices actually surgically implanted in their frigging ears, but he’d thought it was bullshit. Maybe it was still all bullshit and Dalton was just messing with him.

But no, as Hawk glanced around the room he noticed more than one team member get the same glazed look and then respond to no one, including the damn training commander, Miller. One look at their supposed computer god told Hawk that Coleman was the puppet master, testing his toys, one by one. No wonder they’d needed him flown in for today.

“You still up for this?” Dalton asked with a gleeful smile, his perfect teeth nearly blinding Hawk with their whiteness.

Hawk was never one to back down from a challenge, no matter what the odds. “Hell yeah, I’m still up for this. You boys can talk to each other in your heads all you want, but you pampered SuperOps still won’t be able to hold up against battle-toughened soldiers trained with real-world mission experience.”

Hawk watched as Dalton rose nicely to that challenge.

“Oh, really? Perhaps you’d like to make this a bit more interesting. A little wager perhaps?” Pretty Boy suggested.

Sure. Dalton would want to make a bet since he probably took home three times what Hawk did in military pay, in addition to what was probably a huge Basic Allowance for Housing while Hawk made due with living in the bachelor barracks.

Hawk shook his head and swallowed his pride. “I’m not much into betting for money, Dalton.”

Pretty Boy nodded. “Fine. Not for money then. Something else.”

Hawk frowned. “Like what?”

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The other man shrugged and then, as if a bulb had been turned on in his tiny Pretty Boy brain, Dalton's face lit up as he looked Hawk up and down appraisingly, even pausing at the muscles in the arms folded defiantly across Hawk's iron-pumped chest.

*What the fuck?* Dalton was checking him out? Was Pretty Boy one of those "don't ask, don't tell" kinds? *Shit*. What the hell was Hawk supposed to do about that? He sure as hell couldn't beat him up if he was a fancy pants.

Since Hawk had always been a straight shooter, as well as *straight*, he came right out with it. "Listen, you're free to live your life however you want, but please tell me you're not hitting on me, Dalton. Cause I gotta tell you, you couldn't be barking up a more wrong tree if you tried."

After a second of surprised silence, Dalton broke out laughing so hard he had to sober himself up before he could respond. "No, Hawk. You're a real buff guy and all, but I'm as straight as you are and I've got a preg...uh...pretty girlfriend back home in the States to prove it. So no, we're not betting for a date with you." Dalton paused to chuckle one more time over that then continued, "But I did just think of a really good wager."

So if they weren't betting for Hawk's masculine virtue, then what? "What you got in mind, Dalton? Out with it."

Looking rather pleased with himself, Dalton said, "There's this um, *special assignment* that needs filling. It requires just the right man. Let's say that if your side loses, you have to take it, no questions asked."

Hawk frowned. "If this assignment is so *special*, why haven't you already filled it? Why doesn't anyone else want it?"

"I didn't say no one wanted it, just that it's special and needs the absolute *perfect* soldier to fill it, and believe it or not, Hawkins, that may be you."

"Well, I'm glad we both agree that I'm perfect, but I'm also on my way to Afghanistan for a year," Hawk

reminded him. Probably more like eighteen months the way things had been going lately. "Tell me this. *If* we lose, which isn't likely, how could I possibly fulfill this assignment?"

"Easy. No problem at all. You can complete it before you go. Hell, you could probably even do it in Afghanistan if necessary. It's a quick one. A day. Two at most."

"You'll have to give me a little more information than that. I'd have to clear this with higher up first." *What the fuck could this be about?*

"Nope. No more info until the exercise is over and all the details for the assignment are ironed out. Besides, it will be so much more fun for both of us if it's a surprise." Dalton tilted a head toward the bank of laptops. "And I'm sure Matt can get it cleared with your superiors by the time we get off that mountain, *if* you're game, that is."

Coleman could get it approved with Hawk's commanding officers? *How the fuck was that possible?* Maybe it wasn't. This could all be more bullshit, in which case Hawk could agree to just about anything now and his superiors could shoot it down later, getting Hawk off the hook should he lose.

In any case, Hawk still had a nagging feeling he might have gone insane when he found himself agreeing to the gamble for this unknown assignment. "Oh, I'm game, Dalton. Not that we're going to lose, but I'll accept your little wager. The question remains, however, what do I get if, no, *when* we win?"

"I'm sure your winning won't be an issue," Dalton smiled. "But just to be fair, what would you like?"

That stopped Hawk dead in his pride-filled shoes. "What do you mean, what would I like?"

"Exactly that. No games, Hawkins. If the universe shifts, hell freezes over, pigs fly, and your group wins, what do you want?"

*What did he want?* Cocky bastard. He'd show him. But still, Hawk couldn't come up with a thing. "I don't

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know,” he admitted after an embarrassingly long moment spent in indecision.

Shit, why couldn't he think of anything really good? A keg of beer crossed his mind, but didn't seem like enough compared to the mystery assignment he'd have to take in exchange. A humvee perhaps? Dalton had said anything, but what the hell would he do with it while he was deployed, and when he got back Stateside, Hawk had a feeling if he never stepped foot inside one of those vehicles again, it would be too soon.

“Want a suggestion?” Dalton asked after watching Hawk struggle.

“Sure.” What the hell, might as well see what Pretty Boy had to say.

“If Zeta loses,” Hawk didn't miss the smirk on Dalton's face as he emphasized the word *if*, “I'll get you a tryout for the teams.”

Hawk raised a brow and then purposely played dumb. “What teams?”

“You know what teams,” Dalton said, the words “smart ass” unspoken but unmistakably present in his response.

Hawk had to smile. Against all odds he was actually starting to like the Pretty Boy, but not in that way, of course.

“So, do we have a deal?” Dalton asked, one pretty brow raised.

David Hawkins in the SpecOps? Never. Not gonna happen, but it might be fun to see what the tryout was like and it would sure make a hell of a story if he made it and then turned them down.

After a breath, Hawk nodded and shook Dalton's extended hand. “Deal.”

Dalton turned to leave when Hawk called, “Hey. Tell me one thing.”

Pausing, Pretty Boy nodded, waiting.

“This assignment, is it something you'd be willing to do yourself?”

He smiled back at Hawk broadly. “I've already done

it, Hawkins. Believe me, I've already done it." Then Dalton turned to head for his task force commander, but not before looking back to add, "Oh, and Hawkins, besides the comm units, we've all got GPS implants, too, so Matt can keep us informed of our positions during *our* real-world missions. I probably shouldn't have told you that either, but I figure your boys can use all the help you can get. See you up on the mountain."

Implanted tracking devices, too? *Well, fuck.*

And with that less than heartening farewell, the entire Task Force Zeta team disappeared as quickly as they'd arrived, presumably to get into place on the mountain and await the arrival of Hawk's squad, who'd be walking into a pre-planned, computer coordinated ambush like lambs to a slaughter.

*Special assignment, here I come,* Hawk thought bitterly.

*Double fuck.*

~

"Pettit! Report!" Pinned down by Zeta's gunfire for the past hour, Hawk had never felt so disconnected from his men nor as helpless as he did right then. Dalton's team seemed to be everywhere, and always one step ahead of Hawk and his men.

Hawk barely heard his Alpha team leader over the noise, but what he heard wasn't good as Pettit's shouting finally filtered through his earpiece, "Four of our men are down, sergeant."

"Wally, what's Bravo team's status?" Hawk needed some good news at this point but there was no answer. "Wally. Dammit! Answer me!"

Barely audible, Wally hissed across the airwaves, "I'm not allowed to talk if I'm dead, Hawk."

*Shit.*

More frustrated than before, Hawk shouted into his radio, "Bravo team. Someone who isn't dead, give me a damn report!"

Radio silence gave him his answer. As far as this exercise was concerned, the entire Bravo team was

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deceased. That left himself and Pettit as sole survivors of his eleven-man squad. "Pettit?"

"Yes, sergeant."

"What's your location?"

"I'm behind the rocks just to the east of you."

"What do you say if we're going to go out, we go out with a bang?"

Always right on the money, Pettit asked, "Are you talking about the Butch and Sundance offensive defense?"

*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.* The squad's favorite movie. Sure, Butch and Sundance die, but they do it with style. "That's exactly what I'm thinking, Pettit."

"Roger that, Hawk. I'm ready."

He could hear the smile in Pettit's response. Doing something, even running toward your pretend death in a training exercise, was preferable to doing nothing at all.

"On my count of three, then. One." Hawk checked his ammo before continuing. "Two. Three!"

Hawk flung himself out from behind the rocks, dove and rolled behind the closest cover. When the shots came at him again, he was in better position to see exactly where they came from and how best to get there.

Aware of Pettit falling almost immediately to enemy fire to his left, Hawk lobbed a grenade in the direction of the incoming volley that had taken his team leader out. While that explosion kept the shooter down, Hawk ran full out, head on toward the shooter, jumped on top of the rocks hiding his opponent and showered the man hidden there with a hail of gunfire before feeling the hit in his own back.

Even with the knowledge that he was, for the purposes of this exercise, dead and a loser, Hawk felt satisfied that if nothing else at least he'd taken one of them out with him. And when he looked closer and saw it was Pretty Boy, he felt even better.

*Cat Johnson*

“Game over,” Hawk told the surprised and paint-splattered Dalton with a smile.

Barely a beat passed before Dalton replied, “Yes, it is, Hawkins. Matt, make sure Hawkins has those orders for his special assignment waiting for him when he gets back to the garrison.” Then Pretty Boy flashed his pearly whites at him.

Hawk had temporarily forgotten about that damn special assignment. He stifled a groan.

*Shit.*

## Chapter Four

Emily walked into the office to find Katie cradling the receiver and practically cooing into the phone. There was no doubt in her mind who was on the other end of that call. People in love could be so annoying. Cute, but annoying.

As Emily sat down at her desk and proceeded to boot up her laptop, she noticed that even though Katie continued her conversation with BB, at least her boss had the decency to quit the lovey dovey stuff in deference to the lack of privacy.

“I told Em about the baby... Mmm. You’re right. It probably is smartest to start transferring a few things sooner rather than later... I will, I swear.”

Unashamedly, Emily listened to the half of the conversation she could hear. After all, her name had been mentioned. That made it okay. Right?

The printer across her and Katie’s shared office began to buzz and spew out a few pages, which, with the part of her brain that wasn’t eavesdropping, Emily found odd. Katie’s computer wasn’t even on and Emily had yet to open any files, let alone print them. But she was too intrigued by what Katie and BB would be transferring sooner rather than later to worry much about the printer.

Were BB and Katie moving so they could be together full time? And if so, where? And more importantly, what did that mean for Emily and her job?

The phone conversation continued.

"It's here. Tell him I got it... Have fun going out tonight and safe flight home, baby, in case I don't get to talk to you before you leave... I love you, too... Bye."

Emily noticed the tears in Katie's eyes as she hung up the phone. "You okay?"

Katie glanced up, laughing at herself. "I'm fine. It's just the hormones. I can't even say good-bye without crying over it. Someone should really warn women that being pregnant also makes you insane."

Emily laughed. "I'll keep that in mind." Then she had to ask the question uppermost in her mind. "What are you going to do? I mean, where will you live once the baby is born and you get married? Down south near the base for his job, or here in New York so you can keep working? Or are you going to keep up the long distance thing?"

Katie shook her head. "With the baby, a long distance relationship would be ridiculous. But I can't expect him to give up his career for me."

"And he would never ask you to give up your career for him," Emily added.

"Exactly." Katie nodded.

Knowing her boss the workaholic would probably shrivel up and die if she wasn't able to work anymore, Emily could appreciate Katie's difficult decision. Of course, motherhood could change things.

"So what then?" Emily asked.

"Well, I kind of have a plan for that. It seems like we've picked up a lot of business in the south, especially with the latest military recruitment ad campaigns. I'm thinking about suggesting opening a southeast branch. I could still fly to New York whenever necessary, but home base would be down there near BB."

Emily hesitated before nodding. "Okay. I can do the south. My hair will frizz but otherwise, I won't miss the New York ice and snow, or the outrageously

expensive rent and super-sized cockroaches.”

Katie smiled. “Thanks, Emily, but don’t start packing yet. If I’m able to go full term with the baby, if the bosses agree to this and if I move—so many ifs—but *if* this all ends up happening, you don’t have to follow me, you know. You can stay here in New York and continue to work.”

Surprise and hurt colored Emily’s voice. “You don’t want me to come with you?”

“Of course I want you with me. I’d be lost without you. But you’re getting too experienced for the job of my assistant. You need to start taking on clients of your own. The day will come when you will be able to totally replace me in my job, I’m sure.”

It was true that so far, Emily had been responsible mainly for organizing absolutely every minute of Katie’s daily life and holding down the fort at the office while she was away on her many business trips or visiting BB. Given that Katie was so focused on work she would probably forget to eat if BB or Emily didn’t remind her, Emily kept pretty busy.

In addition, Emily was sometimes responsible for handling the talent also. She on occasion would have to fetch non-fat lattes or bottled sparkling imported water for the anorexic female models and gay male models they dealt with for their marketing firm. But that was about it.

Thinking about all the clients, bosses, divas, bitches, queens and crap that Katie dealt with daily, Emily cringed at the thought of taking it all on herself. “I’m not sure I’m qualified to totally replace you quite yet.”

“Oh, you’re qualified. You better be, because I’m about to give you your very first big solo assignment.”

*Big solo assignment?*

Emily peered at Katie to confirm she’d heard correctly. “You’re giving me a solo assignment?”

Katie grinned and nodded. “Mmm, hmm. It was initially BB’s idea, actually. He’s worried about my

working too hard when I travel. But I'm in total agreement with his suggestion on this one."

*Travel? Yay!*

Fears of divas and queens forgotten, Emily sat up a little straighter now. "For real? You'd trust me with my own client?"

Shaking her head while laughing aloud, Katie rolled her eyes. "Why in the world are you so surprised?"

"Uh, because you're a control freak, for one thing," Emily challenged.

Katie's mouth screwed up into a scowl at the reality of that statement. "Maybe I was, a little bit, before..."

Emily snorted. "You think?"

"Hey! Do you want this assignment or not?" One perfectly shaped auburn brow flew up in warning.

"Yes! And I'm sorry. You are the perfect boss, control issues and all," Emily added as she pasted on an overly sweet grin.

"Well, I am also a pregnant control freak and I'm thinking a trip to Germany, if not Afghanistan, isn't the best idea right now."

"Germany or Afghanistan?"

Katie nodded.

What was this assignment?

"Alright. That's okay. I like travel. I'm ready for anything, Katie." Maybe not quite ready for Afghanistan but she'd worry about that later.

Katie hmphed at that statement while shuffling through a pile of papers and file folders on her desk. "I certainly hope you are ready, because I'm afraid it might not be easy."

God, Emily hoped she wouldn't be stuck working with some German-speaking model on this assignment. She could get by with a few words of French, even Italian, but German?

Finally Katie found whatever she had been looking for. "Here you go."

Emily's eyes opened wide as her boss thrust the file into her hands. "US Army Marketing Campaign," she

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read, an uncontrollable smile spreading across her face as visions of soldiers danced in her head.

“Yup. And I’m not exactly sure you should be so happy about it,” Katie warned.

“Why not? You met and fell in love with BB during the Special Ops Recruitment Ad Campaign.”

Katie nodded. “Yes. That I did.”

“And we’ll be using an actual Army guy for the shoots, just like we used BB because he was a real Special Operative for the last one?”

“Yes.”

The joy nearly bubbled up through Emily’s chest. She tried but didn’t quite control the squeal of happiness that escaped her lips. No diva queen models of either sex for her first real assignment. Nope. She was getting to work with a real man. One of Uncle Sam’s finest for her very own. Emily was more than ready for that.

Maybe she would get to pick the guy. Emily imagined a long line of uniform bedecked soldiers, dog tags jingling as they all waited to meet her approval. Having to meet dozens, maybe hundreds, of men had to put the odds in her favor.

The thought that stumbling upon fairytale love, the kind Katie and BB had found, had her smiling even broader...until Katie’s insistent head-shaking ruined her good thoughts.

“What?” Emily whined, hating to have her fantasy ruined, especially by a woman who already had her own hero cast.

“I just don’t think you should be daydreaming about this particular soldier.”

*This particular soldier.* Disappointment warred with anticipation within her. “You’ve already picked him?”

“Not me personally, but yes, he’s been chosen.”

Was that a smirk on Katie’s face?

“Who chose him?” And he had better be right, not only for the ad campaign but also for her!

“BB.”

Emily considered that a moment. Former underwear model turned Special Operative turned military recruiting poster boy, BB Dalton was so good looking he bordered on beautiful. He must know some really handsome guys in the military, right? Did really hot guys hang out together the way gorgeous yet bitchy female models did? In any case, being a former model himself, BB would know the importance of having the right look for the ad campaign.

"Okay." Emily nodded slowly.

This might work out alright. And BB was the sweetest man on earth, the perfect gentleman. No way would he pick a jerk for Katie and Emily to work with. The happiness bubble returned.

Emily flipped open the folder and shuffled through the few papers inside. "Is there a picture in here?"

"Not in the client folder, no. The model was a...uh...recent decision and actually, I'm not considering that it's totally a done deal yet. BB said he is one hundred percent sure he'll be the one but the guy hasn't even received the info for the assignment yet. He'll get it when he gets back to his garrison. Until then, I'm not convinced he won't back out, but we'll know I guess by tomorrow for sure."

Emily pouted. "So there is no information on him at all?"

Katie smiled at her. "Relax. Check the printer."

"The printer?"

"Matt, BB's computer genius friend, sent a few background documents directly to our printer."

"How the heck...?"

Katie shook her head, "Honestly, I don't know how he did it and quite frankly, I think I don't want to know how Matt hacked into our wireless network from Europe and sent a document directly to our printer."

Katie was probably right. Some things were better left unasked.

"But I think there might be a picture of our potential model there."

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That sent Emily flying across the room, skidding to a stop and grabbing at the pages waiting innocuously for her there in the printer tray.

"Damn. There's no picture, but there is a spec sheet. Staff Sergeant David Hawkins," she read aloud.

Mmm. That was a nice name. Emily Hawkins. Emily Price Hawkins.

She continued reading. "He's thirty years old and seventy-two inches tall. That's..." Emily squinted at the ceiling, doing the math, until Katie interrupted her effort.

"Six feet."

Oooo, good. Emily liked tall men. He'd look good next to her five foot five, even if she wore heels.

"Hazel eyes," she went on to read. "That's good. If we put him in Army green, it will bring out any green tint in his eyes for the photos." Her head spun with the possibilities.

"Really, Em. I don't think you should expect too much."

Emily frowned at Katie. "What aren't you telling me?"

The big sigh her boss released, accompanied by her guilty look, did not bode well.

"The soldier selected may not exactly be happy about this assignment."

"Is that all? You told me BB wasn't happy when he was ordered to do the recruitment campaign either and that worked out fine." More than fine. Katie had never been happier since meeting BB.

Nope. Emily was not about to cancel her dreams of happiness over one disgruntled soldier pouting over a few photo shoots. She'd win him over fast enough and prove to Katie she could handle a big, supposedly difficult, assignment all on her own.

*Big.* Mmm. Most likely her soldier was big and muscular, as well as tall and handsome. This day was turning out pretty great and it was still only morning.

"I just wish there was a picture." Pouting, she

looked accusingly at the printer...and noticed the blinking red light indicating it needed more paper.

"Oh my god! There are more pages!" Flying into action, Emily nearly ripped off one short pale-pink polished fingernail tearing into a fresh ream of white paper and loading it into the printer tray.

Tapping her foot while Katie laughed at her across the room, Emily waited impatiently for the next page to print.

"Come on, come on," she urged the printer, which was obviously not listening to her judging by how slowly it chugged along.

Emily glanced up at her boss and spat with frustration, "This is taking forever! We need a new printer."

Katie smiled indulgently, but did get up and come over to wait with her as a color photo emerged ever so slowly from the machine.

Close shorn, dark hair appeared first, followed by serious, piercing eyes, a strong, square chin and then a chest so broad and forearms so thick they could have easily belonged to a lumberjack.

David Hawkins' features would never be considered perfect like BB's, but instead, he was ruggedly handsome and yes, all manly man. BB had chosen for them the quintessential warrior to represent the US Army.

Emily started grinning before the printing finished. Eyes never leaving the photo, she asked, "When do I meet him?"

## Chapter Five

First was the humiliation of having to hike down the mountain alongside Task Force Zeta as they relived each and every kill among themselves, sometimes even stopping to enlighten Hawk and his men about what Hawk's squad had done wrong during the mock slaughter.

Then Hawk had the pleasure of having to, while still wearing the game-ending paintball stain on his back, meet with Commander Miller once again back at the base camp. Miller apparently had gleefully watched and listened to every step of his golden boys' victory courtesy of Matt "Call Me Computer God" Coleman.

And now this, the topper at the end of one hell of a shitty day, having drinks with Zeta, an invitation from Miller for him and his men that Hawk thought best not to refuse even though the dead last thing he wanted to do was "bond" with frigging Task Force Zeta and "discuss the exercise". At least they'd gotten to eat some chow first. Hawk definitely could not have faced this on an empty stomach.

"Losing is more important than winning, if you learn from your mistakes," Commander Jimmy Gordon had told him in a southern accent so thick Pennsylvania-born Hawk had nearly needed a translator to interpret for him.

"Come on. We'll go over with you exactly what you did wrong," Gordon had the nerve to say when

they'd arrived at the bar while smiling and truly looking like he meant every frigging friendly word.

But the beer was German, dark and strong, and the pool table actually had all of its balls. All in all, since they couldn't fly out until morning, this might not be such a bad way to spend an evening, *if* he hadn't had to sit there and listen to Zeta recap what he and his men had done wrong.

*They didn't do anything fucking wrong*, he wanted to shout at them. They were outmaneuvered by technology, nothing more and that sucked, but worse, it scared the shit out of him.

"Hawkins?"

Leaning against the pool table, sighting his next shot, Hawk didn't even look up at Miller when he bit out a most likely less than polite, "What?"

Hawk finally glanced up in time to see the training commander's smirk. "Nothing. Just you're about to sink a striped ball."

"Yeah, so?"

Miller raised a brow. "So, you're solids, not stripes."

*Shit.* With a deep sigh, Hawk stepped back from the table, planted the cue stick on the ground and hung his head.

"What's wrong, son?"

The last thing he wanted to do was admit to Miller what he was about to, but he was a real man and so he would face reality. "That loss to Zeta today shook my confidence, sir. I mean, when I said I wanted Zeta to play full out I didn't realize what that meant. The implants, the computers... We're not ready, sir."

He looked up at Miller and told him, with as much conviction as he could put into his voice, the absolute truth. "We're not ready for Afghanistan. If the insurgents come at us with anything like Zeta did today..."

Hawk shook his head and continued his confession. "What if I can't bring them home alive? What

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happens when all that red in the snow isn't paintballs but our blood? What if my men fall in those mountains in Afghanistan just like they all fell to Zeta today?"

"They won't," Miller said simply with a confidence Hawk could only wish he felt.

"But..."

"No *but* about it. Do you really think the Taliban has access to the kind of training and equipment our teams have?" Miller asked.

"They might."

"They don't."

"How do you know?"

"It's my job to know. And besides that, we've faced them, right there in their own backyard. I can't tell you much more except that I haven't always been a training commander, son. A few years ago, I took Zeta into those exact mountains where you're headed, and I brought them all back out again. Alive. And if you repeat what I just told you, I'll deny every word."

Hawk couldn't care less that Miller and his SpecOps had sometime in the past most likely trespassed in a country they shouldn't have been in. He was more worried about his guys and keeping them alive. But at least now the strangely close camaraderie between Miller and Zeta made more sense. Miller obviously used to be their commander, sometime before Gordon took over.

"No disrespect, sir, but with those men and that equipment, I'm not surprised you and Zeta all came out alive. Unfortunately, I've only got my normal, human men and crap for equipment."

"First, Hawkins, the guys on Zeta are regular guys, just like you, and when you stop wallowing and get to know them better, you'll find that out," Miller chastised, pulling no punches.

Hawk bit his tongue to keep himself silent after the "wallowing" comment, true though it may be.

Miller continued on, undeterred. "Second, I can tell you this about what you're walking into in Afghanistan.

The remaining Taliban factions survive only because of a thriving drug trade. If they were based anywhere else besides in the largest poppy-producing region in the world, they'd have little to no funding and be totally screwed. Yes, I'll concede that is one point in their favor.

"However, they are also in a region in constant strife. It's occupied by foreign powers but ruled by a newly created government as well as, unofficially, by the local warlords and tribal elders. Having too many heads like that leads to confusion and chaos. Sometimes that climate will help the insurgents get a rare but small victory, but ultimately it leads to their defeat. Their own allies turn on them, when they're not turning on each other. The Taliban is living in chaos and squalor in those mountains. And believe me, they *don't* have anyone like our Matt Coleman."

The mention of Coleman aside, Hawk listened closely as Miller spoke. Now that he knew the man had been there, his words held more weight, though he said nothing that Hawk didn't to some degree already know.

"You and your men are good, Sergeant Hawkins. You held your own better and for far longer than I anticipated today. You will have the advantage in those mountains. Trust me."

Hawk managed a nod.

"I've had about enough of chasing balls around a table. How about a beer?" Miller offered.

Now *that* was one thing Hawk could totally agree with Miller on.

"Yes, sir. I'd love one." But once Hawk was leaning against the bar, strategically placed there by Miller, he realized Miller's sudden craving for beer had nothing to do with thirst and everything to do with throwing him in the path of Zeta's "normal" guys just to prove his point.

Miller introduced him to a dude named John Blake—no rank or service branch specified, Hawk guessed these guys were above that—and then he

disappeared.

Noticing the Blake guy grinning when Miller had mentioned Hawk's branch and rank during the introduction, he decided he'd had about enough for today without this guy and his attitude, too.

"An Army staff sergeant," Blake repeated with a laugh.

"Yeah. What about it?" Hawk straightened his spine, his knuckles whitening around his beer.

Blake shook his head. "It's just that a few months ago I was you. I was Army Staff Sergeant John Blake. I was a tank commander in Ramadi. We were eyeball deep in snipers at camp to the point we couldn't even go to chow without body armor. A few weeks before I left, I had to watch one of my men get hit with a vehicle-born IED right in front of my eyes while he was dismounted. He was out of that tank following my orders. Good thing he's got a hard head and lived."

Blake shook his head again and took a sip of his beer. "And now look where I am and what I'm doing. I've got more shit implanted in my body than I ever knew existed and I'm running around in the Alps playing what's probably the most expensive game of paint ball on earth. What a difference a bit of time can make."

Hawk frowned at him. "You're trying to tell me that a few months ago you were just an normal Joe out there in the sandbox."

Blake nodded. "Yup. It was my third, and I guess my final tour."

"So what happened? How did they get you?"

Blake laughed. "You make it sound like they took me hostage and brainwashed me or something."

*Exactly.* At first glance, all the Zeta guys had a bit of that *Stepford Wife* quality to them. Too perfect, too coordinated, too in tune with each other, as if they were humans replaced by robots, just like in that movie.

"I find it hard to believe that they pluck totally average guys out of the theater and turn them into you

super soldiers.”

Blake shrugged. “I can’t speak for all the rest of them, but in my case, yeah, believe it.”

“So you are honestly trying to tell me that you are all regular guys, just like me, but with better toys?”

At that, Blake laughed out loud. “Yeah, they...we...do have some pretty amazing toys, half of which Coleman over there invented. Now, he is *not* normal. He’s an actual card carrying genius.”

Noticing that Hawk still didn’t look convinced, Blake continued, “Look. I’m not saying any one of the troops out there would be right for the teams. Of course they’re more selective than that. You have to have certain qualities. Like the capability to work as a group, the aptitude to both lead as well as follow, and to switch between the two on a moment’s notice.

“And it helps to be a language expert like Trey Williams over there, or be able to drop a man with your bare hands like Jack Gordon, or never miss a shot like Jack’s brother Commander Gordon, or be a bomb expert like Bull Ford or a diving and swimming champion like BB Dalton.”

Yeah, Hawk got the idea. All perfectly regular guys. *Sure*. “So what are you? They all have specialties. What’s yours?”

Blake smiled. “I asked Miller that exact question when he mysteriously showed up at camp in Ramadi one day, dressed head to toe in his black body armor. He made quite an impression, I can tell you that.”

“And?”

“He said I had an instinct, some innate ability to think like the bad guys, and that was as valuable a skill as any of the others.” Blake shrugged as if he had trouble believing it himself.

“I’ve been told I have that instinct in me,” Hawk admitted. Staying one step ahead of the baddies, it was a skill that had kept him and his men alive more than once. Or perhaps it was just dumb luck. At this point, Hawk wasn’t so sure anymore.

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Blake nodded. "I know you do. I saw it today during the exercise."

Hawk let out a bitter snort of a laugh. "You mean the slaughter."

Blake smiled and raised his beer to salute Hawk. "It's all in the toys, Hawkins. Just the toys."

Against his will, Hawkins smiled along with him. But god help him if Miller was wrong and the bad guys got their hands on those toys, too.

He was still smiling when Dalton appeared at his side. "So, Hawkins. Your assignment is all set and approved."

That information chased the short-lived humor right out of him, especially when Blake asked Dalton, "You're really going to make him go through with that?"

Pretty Boy bobbed his head. "Damn right, I am. A bet is a bet. And besides, it's all set up and ready to go already."

Hawk turned to Blake accusingly, maybe even a bit hopefully. "You know what this is about?"

"Oh, yeah. He wanted me to do it originally but apparently I wasn't right for it now that I'm no longer enlisted Army. Not that I was going to do that shit anyway."

"If Jimmy told you to do it, Blake, you'd do it. Believe me. How do you think I got roped into it last year? The commander ordered me."

Hawk had the sudden urge to rip his own hair out of his head. "What is this 'it' you are both talking about? Come on, Dalton. I lost. I admit that. I'll take the stupid assignment, but you at least have to tell me what it is!"

"The orders will be waiting for you back at Hohenfels," Pretty Boy told him with a warning glance at Blake that said he better not spill the beans in the meantime.

Why was everyone being so mysterious?

"Hey, Hawkins? You got a girl?" A new voice

coming from somewhere behind Dalton asked.

What the hell did his love life have to do with anything and who the fuck was asking? Leaning past Dalton so he could identify the speaker as the computer god himself, Hawk answered gruffly, "No. Why?"

"Because after this assignment, you will," Matt Coleman said, walking in on the conversation uninvited. "Maybe too many of them. Last year, the team had to physically protect BB here from his adoring female fans at a bar. Of course, since they were taking their wet t-shirts off at the time, that wasn't such a chore."

*Fans?* Adoring *female* fans ripping their clothes off? Hawk glanced at Blake who shrugged and said, "Don't look at me. That was before my time."

"So anyway, Hawkins, I wanted to say good job today," the computer god added, sounding actually sincere.

Reminded again of the loss, and that Matt Coleman and his computers were the cause of it, Hawk scowled. "Yeah, thanks."

"No really. I mean it. If I didn't have your entire squad mapped with thermal satellite images so I was able to tell our boys your exact locations, you might have had a chance."

*Thermal satellite images.* Crap. The word "cheaters" sprang to Hawk's mind again as he let out a disgusted sigh before taking another gulp of his beer.

"Toys, Hawkins. Just toys," Blake reminded as he grinned once again.

Hawk was starting to really hate these boys and their toys.

## Chapter Six

On the flight to Germany, Emily had read and reread every document in the file Katie had given her—the plans and goals for the marketing campaign and, more importantly, the information about David “Hawk” Hawkins. The scarce little there was about him she devoured eagerly.

Too excited to really concentrate on anything, Emily totally ignored both the paperback novel she’d bought at the airport shop and Jai Devereaux, the photographer on the assignment with her. Out of guilt, Emily finally turned the book over to Jai to read on the long, boring overseas flight.

When Katie had decided it was best to schedule phase one of the campaign, the photo shoot, for as soon as possible, Emily hadn’t argued. Katie’s motives for the rush was because, for some reason, she was totally convinced Hawk would back out and they’d have to find a replacement.

Emily’s motives for the rush were very different.

She’d scrambled to secure both a photographer and plane tickets and had done so incredibly fast. Just three days after BB had chosen Hawk, Emily was in the air and on the way to meet him in Germany.

*Hawk.* God, she loved that nickname. It was so manly. She glanced down at the file for the thousandth time. *Staff Sergeant David S. Hawkins. Nickname “Hawk”.*

Oh, yes. A man with a name like that brought to mind all sorts of images and possibilities, and Emily considered each and every one of them repeatedly throughout the flight, and during the wait for the luggage, and then on the drive to the base at Hohenfels, where she hoped her dreams would finally come true.

"How long until we get there?" she asked for the second time during the drive from the airport.

Behind the wheel of the rental car, Jai raised one dark eyebrow and glanced at her sideways. "Anxious to get there, are we?" he asked.

She may have known Jai for two years now and worked with him on countless of Katie's marketing campaigns, but that didn't mean she would be willing to indulge the real reason her hand that held the paper she'd once again taken out shook unsteadily. Prince Charming was just miles, or rather kilometers, away now. And after studying him on paper for days, Emily was already half in love with him.

"Of course, I'm anxious, Jai. This is the first solo assignment Katie's ever trusted me with."

"Yeah, about that. How did you get her to do that? She's usually totally hands on."

Emily bit her tongue about the pregnancy and instead shrugged. "I didn't do anything." That part was true at least. "She thinks I'm ready." *I hope she's right*, Emily added silently.

"You'll do fine." Jai's dreadlocks swung as he pivoted his head to glance at her and then turned quickly back to the road as a car right on their tail flashed its lights at them and then passed them in the oncoming lane of traffic.

Damn, people drove fast here in Germany. Emily was certainly glad Jai had offered to drive. Once she could breathe again, she said, "I've got some ideas for shots."

"Sure, shoot." Jai grinned at his own little joke.

Rolling her eyes, Emily couldn't help but smile herself. "Well, I've been considering what to have

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Hawk wear. I guess we have to get a few of him in his dress uniform. But I really want a bunch of pictures in those cute camouflage pants, too.”

“Oh, of course. I totally agree. Camo was all over the runways in Milan and Paris this season.”

“I know!” Excited, it wasn’t until she saw Jai’s smirk that Emily realized he was teasing her.

“Sorry, Em. Couldn’t resist,” Jai offered in answer to her scowl.

When she still wouldn’t talk, he prompted, “Go on. What else did you have in mind?”

Glancing at the death grip Jai had on the steering wheel as another car whizzed past, rocking both them and the vehicle, Emily decided the rest could wait. “Let’s see what we find when we get there. We might get more ideas on site.”

“Looks like you don’t have long to wait now because here we are,” Jai informed her.

Emily put down the folder and saw the high fence of the base coming into view. She felt her heart thud harder.

*Oh, my.* No, there wasn’t long to wait at all.

Jai slowed the car to a crawl as they neared the two armed, make that *very armed*, guards at the gate. He stopped and rolled down the window. “Jai Devereaux and Emily Price. We’re here to photograph Staff Sergeant Hawkins. We’re expected, I believe.”

“Yes, sir. IDs, please.”

“Got your passport handy?” Jai looked at Emily expectantly as he passed his own to the guard through the open window.

“Um, oh. Yeah. Hold on.” Emily searched through her large and now rather unorganized carry-on and finally, after a brief moment of panic, found her passport in the side pocket. She handed it to Jai, who gave it to the scary guard for his intense scrutiny.

“I’ll have to ask you both to exit the vehicle.”

Emily froze and whispered to Jai, “What did we do? Are they going to search us?” Oh my god! What if they

strip-searched her? Was she wearing nice underwear? She couldn't remember.

"It's fine, Em. Just do as they say," Jai assured, looking much calmer than she felt.

Emily stared at Jai, suddenly unable to move. "But..."

"Em. Trust me. Just get out of the car, please...and try to be quiet," Jai hissed back as the armed and ready guards waited seemingly patiently for them to get out of the car.

Here was an unexpected wrench in Emily's fairytale scenario, getting strip searched or shot or thrown in a foreign prison or whatever by the guards at the gate.

The one guard who had moved to her side of the vehicle made her so nervous it took Emily two tries to get the door of the car to open. When he told her to leave her bag inside, she nearly passed out from anxiety. Airport security she was used to. Stone-faced men with machine guns calling her "ma'am" as they ordered her about and searched her belongings was quite another.

Although the sun shone brightly, Emily wrapped her arms closer around herself to ward off both the cold air and the chill of fear.

After the one guard had finished inspecting the front and back seats while the other one stood by and watched with weapon in hand, the first camouflage-clad soldier told Jai, "Pop the trunk, sir."

While Emily decided men in camouflage uniforms might not be so sexy after all, Jai nodded and reached in to hit the button on the door to open the trunk where they'd stowed their luggage and photographic equipment at the airport.

Just as Emily decided she was going to call Katie as soon as possible and tell her she would never take another military assignment again, a soldier rushed toward them in a light jog. Instinct had her taking a step back, until she noticed he was smiling and had his hand extended in greeting. The fact he wasn't armed

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with some kind of machine gun also helped calm her immensely.

“Miss Price.” She shook his hand and then watched as he turned to Jai. “Mr. Devereaux. I’m Ryan Pettit. The captain sent me down to escort you.”

Pettit watched as the guards replaced Jai’s camera equipment carefully back in the trunk as he explained, “We send a soldier down to meet any photographers and reporters and then after a routine inspection of the equipment, we sign them in under our care.”

Emily breathed for what seemed like the first time since they’d pulled up to the gate. Jai sent her a look that said, *I told you so*, but she still had no intention of apologizing to him for being worried. The entire experience had been nerve-wracking and she would definitely yell at Katie at the earliest opportunity for not warning her about base procedure.

After a short interaction with the guards that included a nod, some salutes, and very few words, Pettit turned to them. “We’re good to go. I can ride in the backseat and direct you where to drive.”

Just having him in the car made Emily feel better. Kind of like they’d be less likely to shoot her if one of their own was seated behind her and in the line of fire. And Pettit’s smile and enthusiasm was infectious. Once out of view of the guardhouse, she began to relax.

“The captain didn’t go into any detail except that you’re here for a photo shoot. So what are you here to photograph?” Pettit asked, sitting in the center of the back bench seat so he could both give Jai directions and talk to Emily.

“It’s a new marketing campaign to establish stronger branding for the US Army to raise public awareness and increase recruitment,” Emily turned in her seat and recited verbatim the goals Katie had developed for the campaign.

Pettit laughed. “Okay. Whatever you say... Turn right up here.”

Jai nodded and did as he was told, driving at a snail's pace, which also helped to calm Emily's nerves after the hour and a half speed-of-light drive from the airport in Munich.

"I don't know much about marketing and stuff but branding means logos and slogans and things, right? But the Army already has all of that including great slogans like *Be all that you can be* and *Army Strong*. So are you going to change all that?"

"No, just reinforce it and make it stronger," Emily reassured him since he seemed very attached to the existing slogans.

Pettit nodded. "How you going to do that? Make it stronger?"

"By giving the Army a face the people can relate to." *Hawk's face*, Emily thought. "One soldier that will represent all of you."

"Really? Cool! So who...?" Pettit's question was interrupted. "Oh, wait. I missed the turn. That's okay. Turn left at this corner and then left again. It's the first building, right there on the corner. You can just park at the curb."

As soon as the car stopped, Pettit jumped out and opened Emily's door for her. Military guys were so polite. She got a tingle again in anticipation of meeting Hawk.

"I'll run in and tell the captain you're here then come back out and help you unload your equipment. Captain has a room cleared for you to set up in and you can leave your stuff there overnight if you want, it's secure."

And with that, Pettit was off and Emily had opportunity to consider just how sweet soldiers were...at least the one's without guns who weren't searching her.

~

*What the ...?*

Hawk shoved aside the letters from home he'd been handed two days after they'd returned to Hohenfels

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from the training in the mountains. He'd flung the letters unopened on top of the blanket of his rack when he'd noticed the orders among them.

Sitting down heavily now, he read again the "special assignment" he'd let Pretty Boy talk him into betting. When it hadn't shown up immediately upon his return, Hawk had deluded himself into thinking this mystery assignment had been Dalton's idea of a practical joke.

No such luck.

"No. No fucking way." Even reading it again didn't change the contents.

"What's up, Hawk?" Wally poked his head in through the open doorway.

Hawk looked up at Wally guiltily. "Um, nothing. Just a, um, letter from home." He folded the paper again hoping Wally would think it was a letter even though it looked far more like orders than mail.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah, it's just um, my sister. She's uh, dating some idiot. No big deal."

"She cute, your sister? Give her my address. We can be pen pals."

Lie or not, Wally the Womanizer dating Hawk's sister, or even being pen pals, was *not* going to happen, at least not during Hawk's lifetime. "Yeah, right, 'cause you would be a real improvement over her dating an idiot."

"Damn right, I would. Besides, chicks love me. You got a picture of her?"

"Get out of here, Wally, and let me finish reading my mail."

With a grin Wally said, "Just keep me in mind." Then thankfully, he was gone.

With the sole determination that he was getting out of this assignment if it killed him, Hawk headed out to find someone of some authority the moment the coast was clear of Wally and his curiosity.

There was no way he was going to do this. No way his superiors would make him do this. Why should he have to follow orders that Dalton and Coleman had somehow finagled? After all, this wasn't a real assignment. He wouldn't be saving lives or even taking them, but instead... Hawk shuddered at the thought of what he would be doing.

*Fucking Dalton.* No wonder he'd looked so smug about this mystery assignment, and it made total sense that he'd already done it himself. Damn white-toothed fancy boy probably enjoyed it, too.

Thinking back to his last discussion with Pretty Boy and the Zetas, as he'd come to think of them, things started to make more sense. Coleman's mention of female fans attacking Dalton. Blake saying he couldn't do it because he was no longer regular Army.

Fuck. He'd walked right into this. He would never, ever agree to something without knowing all the details again.

Hawk's body was nearly shaking, vibrating with tension by the time he got to what was affectionately called the Head Shed because the company commanders hung out there. And as hoped, he found his captain in the Company Orderly Room.

"Sergeant Hawkins! Pleasure to see you back."

"Yes, sir. Thank you. Captain, can I, uh, speak with you for a moment?"

Ignoring him, Hawk's company commander began explaining things to another captain seated next to him. "Sergeant Hawkins and his guys had a little fun in the Alps with some of Hank's boys the past few days. In fact, Hank called to compliment me on how exceptionally well the squad did during the training."

Uh, oh. "Hank's boys, sir?"

"Yeah. Hank Miller. He was the training commander up there with you."

"Yes, captain. I met him. I, uh, wasn't aware... You know him, sir?" And are on a first name basis, no less. Great, just great.

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“Oh, yeah. We were deployed together once upon a time, back when he was regular Army. Then he moved on to Delta Force, and from there, onto ‘the teams’ as he calls the boys in black.”

“I wasn’t aware of that, sir. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about, sir, the training and the, uh, other thing.” Hawk held up the folded orders in his hand, wishing his company commander would ask the other captain in the room to leave so they could have some privacy.

No such luck. His commanding officer laughed.

“Oh, yeah.” To Hawk’s great dismay, his commander turned to his neighbor again, lips flapping. “You won’t believe this! Sergeant Hawkins here has been chosen to be the face of the modern Army for some feel-good marketing campaign. They figure by plastering his mug all over the press, everyone will get the warm and fuzzies about us and what we’re doing.”

“To what end?” The captain’s cohort finally spoke.

“Increase awareness. Encourage recruitment. Enlighten folks to our efforts for stabilization and rebuilding. Supposedly they had a similar campaign for the SpecOps last year that was incredibly successful for recruitment and public relations. That’s what Hank said when he sold the idea to me on the phone, anyway.”

So the miraculous appearance of Hawk’s orders hadn’t been all Dalton’s doing at all. It had been Dalton’s former commander Hank Miller helping, too. At least Hawk felt a bit better that Pretty Boy and his computer god weren’t all powerful. But still, the chances of his getting out of this incredibly embarrassing and ridiculous assignment were looking slim.

“Sir. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I’m not some male model. I’m a trained soldier.”

“Exactly. That’s why they want you. They don’t want a hired head. They want a real warrior.”

“Forgive my asking, sir. But have you seen the guy they used for the SpecOps ads? Because I have. He’s some pretty boy who looks like he belongs in those perfume ads you see on television. I look nothing like that.”

“Thank god for that. I don’t want some fancy boy representing my Army.” The captain shrugged. “The marketing people chose you, sergeant. I have to trust they know what they are doing.”

*Bullshit.* Dalton had chosen him, out of spite, not some marketing expert. And how that all fit together, how Dalton got to choose the new face of the Army, Hawk still wasn’t sure.

“But how am I going to do this thing when I’m downrange? I’m deploying forward with my guys in a few weeks.”

The company commander shook his head. “Not a problem. They’re already here.”

Here at the garrison, here? And *who* exactly was here? Hawk’s heart jumped. Perhaps he’d misunderstood. Before totally panicking, he decided to clarify first. “Sir? Who’s already here?”

“The photographer and the marketing person. I just got word from the gate that they’ve arrived. I sent Sergeant Pettit down to get them and escort them here. In fact, they should have arrived by now...”

*Pettit?* No, no, no, no!

How the hell was Hawk going to keep this thing a secret if Pettit knew? The teasing would be relentless. Soldiers never forgot. He’d have to live with this forever, until the day he died, which would hopefully be soon.

And with that thought, Pettit flew through the door. “Captain. Your civilians are here, sir.”

Pulling Hawk aside, Pettit whispered with a smile, “Hawk. Wait until you see this marketing chick. She’s one hot number. Mmm, Mmm. I like me a blonde.”

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Great. A woman no less. Hawk got to embarrass himself and play model in front of some blonde as well as his team leader Pettit. Just perfect.

Pettit, practically bouncing in his boots, turned back to the captain. "Sir. Miss Price was telling me about the ads. Do you know who they're going to use as their model?"

Hawk's heart leapt. Pettit didn't know. Maybe there was still hope...

The captain's face broke out into a huge smile, and all hope fled. "You're standing next to him, Sergeant Pettit."

Pettit's eyes opened wide as he looked at Hawk. "You mean Sergeant Hawkins, sir?"

With a disgusted sigh, Hawk nodded and admitted, "Yeah. It's me."

"Wow! My staff sergeant is going to be the face of the Army. How cool is that?" Pettit grinned, looking totally thrilled.

Hawk stifled a groan of dismay. "Yeah, great. Real cool."

Somewhere far in the distance, Hawk imagined he heard Dalton laughing.

## Chapter Seven

Yes, Staff Sergeant David “Hawk” Hawkins was a lot of things alright, and to Emily’s vast and bottomless devastation, so far none of them good.

He had the muscles she’d dreamed of, but along with them came a truckload of testosterone-fueled bad attitude. He was every inch the serious warrior his picture had hinted at, and he was also as stubborn and unyielding as a mule.

The Neanderthal before her, the Hawk himself, folded burly Popeye-like forearms across his chest and waited expressionlessly as Jai set up the equipment. But beneath the cold, steely exterior, Emily sensed molten anger bubbling just below the surface.

She’d tried to be friendly, but her overtures had been met with what amounted to a grunt followed by one long rude glance that covered her from head to toe and all the parts in between. Feeling exposed after that look, even in her cashmere turtleneck, wide-leg wool trousers, and leather boots, she couldn’t resist the urge to cross her own arms over her chest. Boy, was she glad she’d chosen pants over a skirt. She didn’t need him ogling her legs, too.

Maybe all this attitude was because he was just resistant to the assignment. Katie had warned her that could be the case. That would account for the standoffishness. And maybe it was partially her own

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fault, she was so used to working with sensitive, artistic, metrosexual straight guys or openly gay males, she simply didn't know what to do with a real manly man when she came across one.

Maybe that was the problem with her dating life, too. Something to think about...later. But right now she had an unhappy hulk of a male to handle. If only she could get him past this.

He was handsome, though in a rough and ready kind of way. Hot, actually, with dark hair cropped close to his head, deep eyes that openly mirrored his emotions (which was not exactly a plus at the moment), and a body so big that it would definitely let a woman know she was being held.

Emily picked her heart back up off the floor where it had first been trampled by Hawk's cold reception, dusted it off, and tried to salvage both this assignment and her dreams.

Steeling her nerves, she spoke directly to him. "So I was thinking first we can take some shots inside using the plain backdrop Jai set up. That way I can superimpose different backgrounds for various ads as needed. Then, if it's still light enough, we can move outdoors and scout some locations for exterior action shots."

No comment.

Emily sighed. This was not going to be easy, but nothing worth doing was. She turned to her only ally in the room. "Jai? What do you think?"

Jai looked up from the light meter in his hand. "Huh? Oh, yeah. Sounds good, Em."

Turning back to Hawk, she let her gaze roam over him the way his had traveled up and down her before. The fright from the guards a distant memory now, she was back to appreciating the benefits of a man dressed in camo.

"We can shoot the camouflage outfit first, since you're already wearing it." Emily noticed one dark brow cock up. She paused and waited.

"Outfit?" Hawk scowled. "It's a uniform. An Army Combat Uniform or ACU to be exact."

She felt her face pale at his censor. "Sorry."

This had not turned out at all the way she'd imagined in her dreams. In fact, it was becoming more and more like a nightmare.

Jai looked as if he was nearly ready so Emily figured she better be brave and broach the next subject. "So we'd like to um..." how to say this without getting shot down again, "make your, uh, physical, um, form stand out in the photos."

There was that brow again, but this time accompanied by a smirk.

He remained silent so she continued. "So maybe you could roll up the sleeves of your camouflage *uniform* shirt so we can see your arms a bit?"

Even though she'd remembered to call it a uniform—as if she would ever forget that again—she still got the disapproving look and head shake.

"No can do, and it's a blouse, not a shirt."

*Blouse*. That didn't seem very manly. But more importantly, why couldn't he just do one little thing without being difficult as well as correcting her terminology, as if she should know what military clothes are called?

"Why can't you?"

"Because it's against the rules, that's why."

"But I swear I've seen guys with their sleeves..."

The steady sway of his head still shaking at her finally stopped her in her tracks. "What?"

"You may have seen it, but it is against *our* regulations and *I* can't do it."

He meant *won't* do it. Emily couldn't imagine that his captain really gave a darn what his sleeves looked like.

"Maybe we can ask someone if it would be okay..."

He actually laughed at that. "No."

With a huff she gave in.

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“Fine. Are you allowed to take off your *blouse*?” Emily stifled a snort at the feminine word. “Can you wear just your t-shirt or is that against the rules, too?”

“Yes, I’m allowed.”

Finally, a yes, but still he didn’t move.

“Could you please take off your blouse?”

He smirked boldly but thankfully complied with a chuckle.

Hands planted firmly on her hips, Emily asked, “What’s so funny?”

“It’s been a long time since a woman ordered me to take my clothes off. Maybe this gig won’t be so bad after all.” Hawk took off his shirt/blouse and paused with a hand on his belt buckle. “Pants, too, doll?”

*Doll?*

“No, thanks. Maybe later,” she countered, eyes narrowed to aim a displeased stare at Hawk.

*Pig.* And worst of all, a pig with bulging biceps and beautiful pecs beneath a very tight shirt. His dog tag chain nestled right between said pecs and Emily suddenly imagined him standing before her without the shirt.

What was she doing? He was such a...a... There simply were no words to describe him.

The chuckle from Jai’s direction didn’t help Emily’s mood. She shot him a nasty look as well.

Emily turned back to Hawk and sighed. She had to get into a professional mindset. No more pouting that he wasn’t Prince Charming. No more bickering because he was acting like the typical difficult model. She was used to that, at least.

Thinking like Katie would, Emily imagined the finished print advertising. Hawk, standing in his t-shirt and camo pants. Arms crossed...make that hairy arms crossed.

Darn. BB was practically hairless but Hawk, no such luck. What were the chances of Emily being able to get him to wax the hair off his forearms? And if they chose to do a few topless shots, would he wax his chest?

Probably his back would require de-hairing, also. Stifling a laugh, she figured the odds of him agreeing to that were slim to none.

Could they airbrush out that much hair? And exactly how many tattoos were the tan t-shirt and camouflage pants hiding? Now that she was getting to know him better, he seemed the type to have ink, and lots of it. Probably a really crude naked lady or obscenities or maybe some morbid, bloody, skull tattoos, Emily guessed. She and Katie hadn't discussed the possibility of tats. Perhaps they could airbrush any of those out, too.

Then a small detail she'd missed before hit her.

She frowned. "Your shirt. It's tan."

"Yeah, so?"

"So, shouldn't it be green? You know, Army green. No?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it's the rules."

"Oh, come on. I know I've seen military men in olive green shirts."

He nodded. "I'm sure you have. Marines wear green shirts. Army wears tan."

She sighed again deeper. Fighting "the rules" seemed useless but she couldn't resist one last word. "Well, that tan does nothing to bring out the color of your eyes."

Hawk smiled broadly at that, looking genuinely amused, an expression Emily was beginning to doubt was in his repertoire.

"I'll make sure to point that out to my superiors. Maybe they'll consider changing the regulation uniform in deference to the color of my eyes."

Well, that was the highest amount of syllables she'd heard come out of him all at once the entire day.

Emily had a strong urge to stick her tongue out at him. He'd probably laugh at her for that, too, so she didn't give him the satisfaction.

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She heard Jai's shutter and looked up to see him snapping candid photos of Hawk, who went from a laughing smile at her expense, to a frown, to looking stern and kind of scary in a matter of seconds.

"That's great, sergeant," Jai encouraged with a grin. "Perfect. I want your whole range of expressions."

And that suggestion led to an even more comical expression of horror clearly written across Hawk's face when he realized, happy about it or not, this photo shoot, and this ad campaign starring him, was going to happen and there was nothing he could do about it.

Now it was Emily's turn to smile.

~

The hellish part of a day he'd rather forget about finally done, Hawk headed for his bunk, only to be waylaid by Wally, who met him at the door of their barracks.

"Hey, Hawk. We're heading out to get a few beers. We figure we better get it while we still can since there'll be no drinking or anything else fun where we're going. Wanna come?"

He could sure as hell use a beer about now, after what he'd just been through, but he couldn't go out on a bender and get drunk tonight. He had to get up early in the morning and meet with the cute and curvy but dim-headed blonde and her smart-ass Rastafarian photographer again. Tomorrow they had to scout locations for exterior action shots so they could shoot when the light was better.

*Scouting locations* and worrying about the *light*. Great, now he was starting to think like a frigging model.

"Where the hell have you been for the past couple of hours, anyway?" Wally asked, frowning as if he'd just noticed Hawk's extended and unexplained absence.

Hawk saw Pettit enter the hall, hear Wally's question, and freeze.

"Special assignment," Hawk growled, shooting a quick look at Pettit.

Hopefully the threats he levied against him in the captain's office that afternoon would keep Pettit's mouth shut and it would stay a "special assignment" as far as the rest of the squad was concerned.

He leveled Pettit one more warning glance as the man, who couldn't comprehend why Hawk was so miserable about the whole modeling thing, rolled his eyes at him.

"Yeah, but what kind of special assignment?" Wally continued relentlessly.

Hawk grunted, "The classified kind."

Clearly unhappy, Wally scowled. "Fine, whatever. We're leaving in thirty if you decide you wanna come."

Wally disappeared into his room and Pettit slunk closer. Lowering his voice, he began, "I don't understand why you..."

Hawk cut him off. "My assignment, Pettit. My choice."

Pettit sighed. "Fine, but if you think your face can be featured in every Army ad worldwide and no one will notice, you're crazy."

"And if you think we're going to see any advertising in those mountains in Afghanistan, you're crazy. We'll be long gone by the time those ads hit, and a year from now or more, when we finally do come home, they'll have moved on to some other poster boy. Believe me."

Shaking his head, Pettit turned back to his room, but not before saying, "For your sake, Hawk, I hope you're right."

Oh, Hawk would make sure he was right. He'd be so unpleasant to work with, Goldilocks would ensure he never worked on another assignment with her again. She'd go running looking for a new model. Dalton would just have to find her a new sucker for this job.

Shame too, she was a looker, if you liked the young and starry-eyed type. Hawk tended to go for the more experienced women himself. He had neither the time nor the patience for young innocent types like the

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bubbly blonde from today who had wanted him to roll up the sleeves of his camo "outfit".

Shaking his head with a laugh at that memory, he pivoted toward his own room to get his beauty sleep and curse Dalton for the thousandth time that day.

Apparently modeling was harder work than it seemed because sleep found Hawk the moment his head hit his lumpy pillow.

Quite simply, he was done in. Running through the Alps for two straight days had taken its toll on his body, and his "special assignment" had done a real number on his brain, as well. Consequently Hawk, who usually slept like a rock, dreamed. Not nice normal nightmares like forgetting to get dressed and attending a Promotions Board meeting in his underwear or anything like that. Oh, no. Thanks to Dalton and his little modeling assignment, Hawk's slumber was visited by images more appropriate for triple-X films than his weary brain.

"Take off your shirt, Hawk," Goldilocks cooed in his dream as she ran brightly painted, long, red fingernails across his chest until he imagined he could actually feel her touch on his skin. Standing on tiptoe in her mile-high stilettos to reach his ear, she breathed, "I want you. Now."

He didn't need to be asked twice.

Hawk reached down and hoisted her up, wrapping her legs around him as beneath her miniskirt his hands cupped each thong-exposed, gloriously round, bare ass cheek. Somehow she freed his erection from his pants. A slight shove had the thin string of her thongs pushed to the side and him sliding easily into her with a groan and a shudder.

She gripped his head tightly with two hands, kissing his face, his neck, his mouth, slipping a playful tongue inside. He could feel her, tight, wet, hot, as she moved easily in his arms, sliding up and down his slick length.

"Harder, Hawk," she demanded as the muscles deep inside her began to grip and pulse around him. She cried

out loudly with each of his thrusts until he lost all control and came with her.

Breathing heavily, Hawk awoke alone in his bunk, the sticky mess covering the spent erection in his boxer briefs a much too real reminder of his shame. But that was nothing compared to the knowledge that in mere hours he'd have to look Goldilocks in the eye and try not to remember how amazing it felt to fuck her, even if it had been only in his dreams.

Yeah, and the way the two of them got along like oil and water, that was pretty much what she'd tell him should he ever suggest them hooking up. *In your dreams.*

Shit. He needed to get laid for real, and soon.

## Chapter Eight

Emily stirred real cream into her to-go coffee cup, thinking how much she loved Europeans. No skim milk for these folks, unlike skinny-conscious Americans. She watched the people bustling past the window in the dim dawn light from the spot she and Jai had met to grab coffee before heading back to Hohenfels to meet Hawk.

The town nearest the US Army garrison had some surprisingly good restaurants. Emily realized she was finally getting some of the military-speak down. She even knew what a “garrison” was now, and her uniform knowledge had been greatly increased after yesterday’s photo session with Hawk. She tried not to think about that. The best part of yesterday had been driving away from the garrison at the end of the day.

Emily and Jai had found a great spot to eat out after that. They’d had a quick but sumptuous dinner before, jetlagged, they crashed early. The hotel wasn’t bad, either. Too bad she’d barely slept.

“Why did we decide to meet so early?” she whined, yawning.

“Because the Army starts their day early, and because we need to set up the shots and be ready to go when and if the sun finally comes out today.” Jai looked up at the overcast sky darkening the pink-tinged sunrise. “I hope it doesn’t snow.”

So did Emily. It was bad enough that, though exhausted, she needed to be on her toes to handle

Hawk. The last thing she wanted to deal with was snow during their outdoor shots. She had on her good leather boots and she hated snow...and cold, and early mornings, no matter what time zone they happened to be in.

*Sunrise!* Honestly, she couldn't remember the last time she'd seen one of those.

Tired, dreading the day ahead and feeling a need for sugar as well as caffeine, Emily grabbed some sort of rich-looking Germany pastry and added it to their two coffees on the counter.

She yawned again as, sustenance paid for, they left the warm shop for the frigid walk to their rental car.

Jai frowned at her as he turned the key in the ignition and waited for the car to warm for a minute before throwing it into drive. "Why are you so tired? We turned in at like seven o'clock local time. You should have had plenty of sleep."

"I didn't sleep well," she supplied, and hoped Jai would leave it at that and not question her further as to why.

Not sleeping well was an understatement for last night's torture. First, Emily had called Katie's office line to leave a message when she got to her room and had to lie on the voicemail that everything with Hawk was going perfectly and that she could handle him no problem.

Then she'd fallen into bed, only to be tortured with more thoughts of Hawk as she relived each and every uncomfortable, disappointing word exchanged between them, which is probably what led to her dreaming about him. She hoped that was it anyway. Whatever the reason, dream she did.

The dream started with a photo shoot, which was understandable considering they'd had one that day. However, the model was BB and Katie was there. To her horror, Katie began to take BB's uniform off until he was nearly naked, then they started kissing each other pretty heavily as she watched.

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Emily cringed even now at the thought. In her dream, she tried to look away but couldn't. And then something even more disturbing happened. BB morphed into Hawk, and the woman the mostly nude Hawk was making out with was suddenly no longer Katie, but Emily.

She'd woken up totally freaked out, and alright, she'd admit it, a little bit aroused. That was it for sleep. Her brain spinning and her body clock messed up from the time difference, Emily had given up on bed and took out her laptop.

Jai had downloaded the day's shots to her computer so she spent the rest of the time until she had to get ready to meet Jai playing with Hawk's photos and laying out some potential print ads.

"I woke up really early so I mocked up a few ads. I'll show them to you when we get there," she told him, happy to center the discussion on business.

"How'd they look? Do you think we have all we need for the interior shots and close-ups?" Jai asked.

Emily had to admit, she was pleased with what she'd come up with. "I think so. Although, since he's so far away," *and such a pain in the ass*, she added silently, "we may want to take some extras. And I never did get him into his dress uniform yesterday."

Or out of it, except in my dream...

"Mmm. Right. Make sure I'm in the room when you ask him to put his 'dress outfit' on. That should be fun." Jai grinned in her direction.

"Thanks," Emily scowled. So much for her supposed ally.

~

Surrounded by the photographic equipment that had been left set up from the day before, Hawk observed through the window as Goldilocks and Rastaphotographer parked in front of the Head Shed and got out of their car. He studied her more closely today than he had yesterday when he'd dismissed her as a young, silly, though cute, annoyance.

This morning, watching her juggle a large briefcase and an extra-large cup of coffee as she came through the door, he realized his nocturnal imaginings had given her a slutty sort of makeover. She didn't wear "fuck-me" high heel shoes or butt-bearing mini-skirts and her nails weren't long, red talons at all.

Cocking his head to one side, he wondered about why his brain would do that because the blonde before him—nose pink from the cold, unruly curls tousled by the wind, all bundled up in her thick wool sweater and looking like the girl next door, was pretty damn cute in her own right, just as she was.

He moved to the open door of the room, where he had a view of the main entrance of the building, just in time to see her blustering through the front door with a burst of cold air.

Goldilocks met his gaze and said quickly, "Morning," before concentrating overly hard on passing him in the doorway and setting down her briefcase on one of the tables.

If Hawk wasn't mistaken, she was avoiding eye contact with him as she set up her laptop.

Had he been such a beast the day before that she couldn't even look at him today? Thinking about it, he realized the answer was most likely yes, and that made him feel pretty shitty. The new "face of the Army", like it or not, and he was portraying himself as an ass. Probably not the best idea since performing even this bullshit assignment badly could negatively affect his chances at a promotion to first sergeant, and he was due for one.

Smiling, Rasta-man's greeting was quite a bit more welcoming than Goldie's. "Hey, have you heard the weather forecast for today? All I could get on the television in the room was in German."

Predicting the weather here in winter was a no brainer. "Cold," Hawk answered simply.

Unwinding an incredibly long and multi-colored scarf from around his neck and dreadlocks, Rasta

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grinned. "Yeah, I gathered that already. But what about snow?"

The answer to that he had actually heard from one of the guys at chow. "No snow."

Rasta grinned. "Good! See, Em. Nothing to worry about." He turned toward Hawk. "City girl here reacts badly to snow. What about you?"

Hawk raised a brow, remembering his recent fun in the four-foot deep drifts in the Alps. "Don't worry about me."

Goldilocks aka Em looked as if she wanted to take Rasta's scarf and strangle him with it.

Hmm, wasn't that interesting.

Very pointedly, she changed the subject. "Jai, can you take a look at the ad mock-ups so we know what more we need to get today?"

"You mean besides the dress...uniform?" Rasta-man laughed as he walked to a pissed-looking Goldilocks.

Hawk's ears perked up, not about the dress uniform part, but about Goldie having the ads done already. She did move fast. He'd assumed these frigging embarrassing photos wouldn't hit until after next week when he was safely gone, but maybe he had been wrong.

Trying to not look overly interested, Hawk used all of his vast skill and prowess learned over multiple tours of duty and sidled stealthily behind the two bent heads at the laptop. Glancing past Rasta-man's dreadlocks, he caught a glimpse of a portion of an ad. *His* ad. That was his eye glaring back at him off the screen.

Damn, no wonder Goldie wouldn't look at him today. He did look kind of scary in that one.

Goldie turned in her seat, glimpsed his face, and let out a frustrated huff of air. "You don't like it."

It wasn't a question, but a resignation filled statement of fact.

"I didn't say that," Hawk defended.

"You didn't have to. You're frowning."

"No, I'm not." Hawk consciously smoothed his brow muscles.

Goldie turned back to the screen but he thought he heard a mumble sounding like, "Yeah, right."

With the click of her short pink nails against the keyboard, the picture on screen changed to another one.

The two marketing gurus were discussing some fine points of demographics and target markets or something and didn't even notice him until Hawk readjusted his stance to try and see around them, which caught Rasta's attention.

"Hey, man. Sorry. I'm in your way. I'm sure you wanna see." Moving aside, Hawk got his first full-glimpse of himself.

He heard Goldie sigh. "I'm sure you hate this one, too."

Hawk considered the photo before him on screen for another second. Legs planted wide, he stood wearing his tan t-shirt and digital desert camouflage ACU pants, arms crossed in front of his chest, chin set, no smile on his lips, his nose showed and part of his eye, but that was it. She'd cropped the photo so you couldn't see the rest of his face or even identify it as him. He loved it.

Realizing he stood in that same pose now, Hawk had to admit, Goldie and Rasta had really captured his essence.

Hawk decided to throw Goldie a bone for her efforts. "I like it."

Visibly taken aback by the compliment, Goldie shook her head slightly as if she hadn't heard him correctly. "You like it?"

"Mmm, hmm. You cut off half of my face. I like it."

Couldn't have her getting too cocky, now could he? At least Rasta-man appreciated Hawk's humor, because he broke out laughing while Goldie's face twisted into an angry frown.

"I agree. Not seeing your face is preferable. Perhaps I'll crop them all like that." Insult delivered, she spun back to the laptop.

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"You do that, doll, and I'll owe you a big kiss, plus some." Hawk heard Goldie emit something resembling a disgusted snort and he smiled. She was sure fun to play with. In fact, reevaluating his former opinion of Goldie, Hawk decided he wouldn't mind at all playing with her some more. In all sorts of ways.

"I think we're good for the indoor shots for now," Rasta called from across the room where'd he'd moved to play with his stuff.

"What about the dress uniform ones?" Goldi shot Hawk a look. "Are you going to have any problems with us shooting you in your dress uniform?"

"As long as you don't use real bullets. No. No problem. Shoot away."

Hawk smiled as she rolled her eyes at his corny joke. He was pretty certain using real bullets had crossed her mind at one point that morning.

"The photos in here we can take anytime using the lights, Em. I'm anxious to get outdoors and scout some locations for the exterior shots while the weather is good," Rasta-man suggested.

Hawk really, really did not want to be helpful for this thing he was being forced to do against his will. But also against his will, his brain had been in overdrive and he actually had an idea for the outdoor shoot. And shit, he was going to share his idea and he was sure Rasta would love it and take a hundred more photos of him because of it.

*Oh, well. Here it goes,* he thought. "I had some thoughts about the outdoor shots."

Looking amused, Goldie turned to him. "Really? You? Had thoughts?"

Hawk raised one brow at her and rose to her challenge. "Mmm, hmm. I do that occasionally. Think. Be real nice to me, Goldilocks, and I might share some of my more interesting thoughts with you sometime. I guarantee you'll enjoy it."

His pet name for her went over like a fart in a spacesuit, judging by the look on her face. He smiled

again. Yeah, he definitely was enjoying this verbal foreplay. But time to get back to work so he could get this assignment over and done with.

"Anyway, I don't know what you're looking for exactly, if you want authentic-looking combat shots or not, but troops come to Hohenfels for realistic force-to-force combat maneuver training," Hawk began.

Rasta nodded excitedly. "So you do mission rehearsals and stuff like that here."

Hawk nodded. "Exactly."

"What do you use in the simulations? Lasers?"

Well, well. Rasta-man wasn't just a pretty face with a lot of hair. He had some sort of military experience, probably from behind the lens of his camera but at least Hawk wouldn't have to explain everything to them both like children.

"Exactly. We have a laser engagement system and COBs—Civilians on the Battlefield—who help us train. There is a village set up, totally realistic, perimeter razerwire fencing, guard towers, MPs on patrol, and civilian housing where the COBs live. You'd never know you weren't in Iraq or Afghanistan."

Rasta looked excited enough to jump right out of his skin at that thought. "And we can get permission to shoot there?"

"Captain said whatever you wanted, he'd approve. Within reason," Hawk added.

Eyes wide, Rasta began grabbing some of the equipment and stowing it in bags. "Great! Let's go."

Goldie watched him and said wryly, "I guess it's all set then."

Hawk grinned. So she didn't like not being in control. Interesting and something to remember for future.

Rasta paused and glanced at her. "Sorry, Em. Did you have an idea for something else?"

"No. I think we should trust Hawk's experience."

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Goldilocks was going to trust him. Mmm, mmm. He liked that idea and he'd also stow that fact away for later use.

Today was turning out to be pretty interesting all around.

## Chapter Nine

In the dimly-lit comfort of her hotel room, Emily stared into the haunting eyes of Staff Sergeant David “Hawk” Hawkins and realized her heart was not only beating faster, but parts lower were beginning to throb as well.

*Darn it.*

She reached out one finger and ran it down the side of his cheek, shaking her head. He was an idiot, a total jerk one moment, and then he came up with the perfect suggestion for their shoot the next moment and he actually cooperated during it.

The man was gorgeous to look at on the outside, and a male chauvinistic pig on the inside.

And she wanted him.

Emily leaned back from the laptop screen and the photo of Hawk, decked out in his dress uniform, chest covered in ribbons or medals or whatever they were called, face stern, as usual, his jaw firmly set, his eyes piercing straight through her.

There might be more inside this man that she’d only glimpsed. Of course, that something more could be either good or bad. There was no telling for sure, but she would never know.

Emily sighed. She left for New York tomorrow. She and Jai had tickets on a morning flight out of Germany. She was returning to work and to her boss a success with

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enough photos for a kick-butt ad campaign. She was also returning home without her Prince Charming, and in that respect, this assignment had been a failure.

A knock on the door made Emily jump nearly out of her desk chair.

She heard Jai's voice follow the knock. "Em! You still awake in there?"

Happy she hadn't taken the time to change into her flannel pajamas and knowing Jai would tease her relentlessly for certain if she had, Emily opened the door for him.

"No, I'm not asleep. And if I had been, you sure would have woken me up."

He grinned. "But you weren't sleeping, so it's all good. And since you're awake... There's a Ratskeller right next door to the hotel. What do you say we go out and sample some of the local culture in the form of German beer and nightlife for our last night here?"

"I don't know. I thought I'd work on some more print ad mock ups..."

"You can do that tomorrow during the flight while I sleep off a nice dark lager hangover."

Emily laughed. No doubt that would be exactly how the flight would go. "Okay." Then she looked down at her wool trousers and sweater, the same ones she'd worn all day. "Am I dressed alright for a Ratskeller? I don't think I've ever been to one."

"Em, it's just a bar. You're overdressed, I'm sure. Just come on."

Trusting Jai's fashion advice because one, she had no other choice and two, the rest of her wardrobe packed in her luggage looked pretty much like what she had on but in a different color, Emily grabbed her wallet out of her briefcase and headed out.

The minute Emily walked into the bar she felt it, eyes on her, lots of them, all male. And judging by the fact that Hawk stood in the center of the group of males watching her, she guessed they were all soldiers from the neighboring garrison. They weren't in

uniform, but they did all sport the signature military cropped hair, two of them even walked in sync when they crossed the bar to the jukebox together.

Hawk smiled and crossed the room himself, but he wasn't following the other two, he was heading right for her. Emily took a deep breath and prepared for another verbal battle.

Nodded a greeting to Jai, Hawk turned to her. "Hey, Goldilocks. Fancy seeing you here."

"Good evening, sergeant. Em. I'm going to get us two beers. Good with you?" Jai asked her, grinning in amusement at what was apparently her new name, at least as far as Hawk was concerned.

She scowled at her supposed friend but accepted his offer. "Yeah, fine. Thanks." Glancing back at Hawk, she had a feeling a beer, or two, would be in order tonight.

As Jai left them alone, she raised her chin to confront Hawk as he towered over her. "Do you even know my name?"

He grinned wider. "Yeah."

Emily crossed her arms and challenged him over the noise of the many bar patrons, "Okay. Then what is it?"

Leaning down toward her, Hawk breathed into her ear, "It's Emily, Goldilocks." Then he grinned wide.

She shivered involuntarily at the feel of his warm breath against her skin and swallowed hard, unsure what to say to what was basically a simple answer to her question, which she certainly never expected to bodily effect her as it had.

Deciding the safest course of action would be to change the subject, she did just that. "So, I looked over the shots from today. They look really great. I could email you the proofs if you wanted to see them."

And then she would have not only his email address, but also an excuse to be in contact with him after she left Germany tomorrow. But why would she want that? He was a jerk, most of the time, anyway.

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Like now as he shrugged. "Whatever."

"Don't you care about the ads?"

"I have to tell you, doll. I won't waste one moment thinking about this modeling thing once the rounds start flying and the baddies start giving up."

"Fine, I won't bother you with them then."

Looking actually sincere, Hawk shook his head. "I didn't say you'd be bothering me. What I meant was I'll have a few things on my mind. You know? Latest word from where we'll be in Afghanistan is that it snowed over four feet overnight and more will be on its way. And that's the good news, because at least with the snow mounds building up we actually have a perimeter defense. There's only little barriers about knee high without the snow to keep the bad guys out."

"Oh." Emily didn't know much about perimeter defense, but she did hate the snow and could empathize with him about that. The bad guys didn't sound so good, either. "Hopefully they'll get the snowplows to clean all that up before you guys get there."

Hawk laughed gleefully.

"What?" Why was this guy always laughing at her expense?

Hawk could barely respond through his enjoyment. "Oh, Goldilocks. There aren't going to be road crews cleaning up for us."

"Isn't it kind of like the set up here at Hohenfels where you're going?"

Hawk tilted his head to one side and grinned. "No, it's not."

"Oh. I figured all bases were probably the same," Emily shrugged.

"No, doll. They're not, but I'm not going to a base anyway." He smiled, shaking his head. "If I was going to be at Kandahar or Bagram, then yeah, maybe we'd have some services, but not where I'll be. We literally have some dirt huts and a few rail boxes. Supplies will have to be choppered in and dropped to us. It'll be like going caveman."

Not appreciating his delight at her expense, Emily grumbled, "That should be easier for some of you than others, I suppose."

One dark brow rose with amusement. "You calling me a caveman, doll?"

"Maybe." Emily smiled, enjoying her own cleverness.

It was the strangest thing, bickering with Hawk kind of got her excited. Even his calling her doll was starting to sound sexy, and she hadn't even drunk the beer that Jai was now carrying her way.

Hawk, looking like he got as much pleasure from the sparring as she, grinned wide as Jai joined them.

"Sergeant, did Emily tell you? The shots we took at the training village today are awesome."

"Good, I'm glad." Strangely, Hawk looked like he meant it.

Emily grasped the topic of work before she imagined running her fingers down Hawk's massive forearm again.

"I agree with Jai. The SpecOp ads Katie shot with BB were all taken in a studio. They were good but nothing like ours. The ones we took outdoors today look really authentic, like we actually shot in the war zone. As great as BB was, I think our Army ads will be even more effective because they look so real, right down to our caveman model, here." Emily grinned and sipped her beer.

Hawk raised his glass in a salute. "Thanks. I think that may be the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

Emily laughed. "You're welcome."

"Fucking Dalton." Hawk shook his head and took another swallow from his own glass.

That got Emily's defenses up. He could pick on her, but no one picked on her boss' fiancé in front of her. "What's wrong with BB? He's practically perfect."

Hawk laughed. "If *he's* your perfect man, sweet thing, than I don't know what the hell you're doing hanging around with me."

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"I'm not hanging around with you. You are hanging around with me. Jai and I came here to absorb some local color before we leave tomorrow morning."

Jai glanced from her to Hawk and back again with a strange look on his face. "Um, I see Sergeant Pettit over there. I think I'll go ask him...something."

Hawk grabbed Jai's arm. "Pettit knows the truth about all this, and he also knows I will kill him if he spills the beans. But as far as the rest of them know," he bobbed a head in the direction of the soldiers across the room standing with Pettit, "you and she were here for the last two days taking photos of the garrison, *not* of me. Let's keep it that way, understood? As far as my squad is concerned, my assignment was to be your escort only. That's all. Got it?"

Jai laughed. "Yeah, I got it. Don't worry, sergeant."

Hawk looked more than a bit concerned as he watched Jai cross the room.

"He'll keep your secret," Emily assured him, thinking all the secrecy was stupid since his face would soon be in ads pretty much everywhere.

His eyes still following Jai as he joined the group of soldiers, Hawk asked, "How long have you known him?"

"Jai? A few years, I guess. He's discreet, I promise."

Hawk raised a brow. "You two fucking?"

"What? No!" God, he could be so crude sometimes!

Hawk smiled and Emily continued to rant. "You are the rudest, biggest, nosiest..." She couldn't figure out how to insult him more so she left the sentence open ended.

"And you hate that you find me attractive."

That accusation had her sputtering. "You? Attractive? Ha!"

Okay, maybe she did think he was hot, but he didn't have to know that. "Don't flatter yourself. You are a job. Nothing more," she finished.

Hawk smirked. "Keep telling yourself that, Goldie. Maybe you'll start believing it. Although, I find that

alcohol usually has the opposite effect on a woman's libido." He glanced at the beer in her hand which she had been nervously emptying without even knowing it.

"I see. So what you're saying is that girls need to be drunk to find you attractive. That's totally understandable." Emily smirked.

Hawk shook his head and smiled into his own beer. "You are cute when you try and fight with me. The question is why are you fighting this so hard, doll? I know you're attracted to me. *You* know you're attracted to me. You're leaving tomorrow. I'm leaving next week." He let the facts hang in the air for her to absorb and draw her own conclusions.

"Are you suggesting...?" She could barely get the words out past the heart beating in her throat at the thought.

Could she do it? Have sex just for fun with a man she barely knew?

Although she did know him, didn't she? They'd spent two days together. She knew some of his personal and probably all of his military history from his file. She knew that for some reason BB had chosen this man to represent the entire US Army. She could see that both Hawk's superiors and his subordinates liked him. All of that had to count for something.

"You sure are doing a lot of thinking in there, Goldie." Hawk ran one thick finger from her forehead, between her drawn brows and down her nose, tapping the tip playfully. "Stop frowning. You'll get wrinkles."

Emily fought the shiver that his touch sent down her spine and decided it wouldn't hurt to play along, for a bit anyway. "Let's say, under the influence of some sort of temporary insanity and German beer, that I did consider sleeping with you..."

"Oh, believe me. There would be no sleeping. Just good old-fashioned sex. Incredible, unforgettable sex. Lots of it."

Emily swallowed hard. She didn't know if she'd ever experienced sex that qualified as that before. Certainly

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not in recent memory. She forced herself to focus on her point again.

“Anyway. If this were to happen, hypothetically of course, what would it mean?”

“*What would it mean?*” Hawk repeated.

“Yes, what would it mean?”

He laughed and shook his head. “It would mean that you and I would both walk away satisfied, me to Afghanistan, you to wherever you come from. It would mean that you would never have to deal me and my brutish caveman ways again, however, you would have some damn nice memories to keep you warm at night. As would I and believe me, a year in Afghanistan with no sex, I’m going to need the memories.”

“A year? Really?” Okay, so she’d gone a good year herself without sex, but Hawk didn’t seem like the type to be celibate by choice.

He laughed. “Doll, even if sex while deployed weren’t against regulations, there aren’t going to be any females where I’ll be, just those ten ugly mugs over there, and I don’t go that way.” Hawk glanced at his fellow soldiers and shook his head.

“So I could possibly be the last woman you were with for an entire year?”

“Mmm, hmm, and not possibly, most definitely. Tonight is our last hurrah. There won’t be any time, with getting ready to deploy in a few days to go out for beer or women. You’re it, doll. My last hurrah.”

He smiled and ran a hand up her arm, sending a chill through her in spite of the hot stale air in the bar. “The last woman I’ll touch for an entire long, lonely year. The one I’ll picture at night when I’m all alone and lonely in my cold dark tent.”

Emily took a shaky breath. Her body wanted this man, and now her brain, which was usually the rational of the two, was starting to think it was a good idea, too.

Hawk stepped in closer. “Come on, doll. Do something just for the fun of it just once in your life.

Go tell your friend over there that you're tired and going back to your room."

She glanced at the group of soldiers surrounding Jai. "Even if I leave alone and you sneak upstairs later, they'll notice when you leave, too. They'll all know."

"My men? Maybe. Probably. So what if they know? Do you really care? You'll never see any of them again, and they'll all be envying me spending one of our last nights in civilization with the hottest girl in this place."

Damn. She was really going to do this. She took a giant swallow of her beer.

"Room two-ten," she told Hawk before her nerve ran out.

He looked about as surprised at her decision as she felt herself. Then she turned to go try and lie to Jai, who would most likely see right through her. The worst part was that Hawk was right. At the moment, with her heart pounding and her sex throbbing, she didn't really care what anyone thought.

## Chapter Ten

Room two-ten. Hawk swallowed hard and stared at the brass numbers on the door while the condoms purchased from the men's room at the Ratskeller felt heavy in his jeans pocket.

Once within the inner sanctum, Hawk's plan was to avoid talking at all costs. Emily was most likely the kind of woman to scare off easily and the last thing he wanted was for her to change her mind and turn tail and run before he got his hands on her. Not when he was this close. One thing Hawk knew for sure when it came to women, he never assumed he was in until he was, well, *in*.

*Emily.* Funny how now that he stood outside her hotel room, feet from her, moments from making last night's erotic dream come true, he didn't think of her as Goldilocks anymore. That was quite a change. Usually the women he slept with remained forever "Red" or "Blondie" or "Legs" or whatever name he'd dubbed them at first sight.

Maybe the difference was he and Emily had a professional relationship, too. Who the hell knew? Nothing about this girl and his attraction to her made sense.

She was not his usual type, but pretty much the opposite of it. They fought like cats and dogs and at times he was fairly sure she outright hated him. And yet here he was, outside her hotel room, and at her

invitation, no less.

Hawk realized he was wasting time on the wrong side of the door with all this thinking, which was also very unlike him. He raised a fist and knocked loudly, holding his breath that she'd answer.

And answer she did.

The door opened and Emily, still in the clothes she'd worn to the bar, stepped back to allow Hawk to enter. He took a step forward into the room, and suddenly had an arm full of woman.

Good thing he had lightening fast reflexes. He caught her and managed to not fall backwards onto his ass as she dove at him, crashing her lips into his.

Hawk shouldered the door shut with the hope it would lock on its own. Angling his head to take full advantage of her hungry kiss, he didn't give the damn door another thought as Emily's tongue invaded his mouth.

Figuring they would end up there anyway, he stepped heavily toward the bed with Emily wrapped around his neck and waist. A willing woman literally in his hands was good, but one in the bed was even better. There he'd be free to unwrap the wool-covered package and enjoy what was underneath. And more, holding her up was severely limiting his own participation in this unexpected but more than welcome foreplay she'd initiated.

Hawk prided himself on the prowess of both his hands and mouth and he intended to show off all his skills for this woman. They may have only one night together, but as he set her down and lay above her, he vowed he would make sure she never forgot it.

Beneath him on the mattress, Emily squirmed and broke their kiss. He raised himself up on shaky arms afraid he had crushed her with his not-inconsiderable weight.

He needn't have worried.

All he could do was groan in response when one of her hands pulled at the turtleneck tucked into his jeans

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while the other fumbled with his fly.

She said only two breathless words. "Clothes off."

Two words were enough and he couldn't agree more. He wanted them skin to skin and since she was obviously willing, who was he to slow them down?

With a long low growl, he dove in for one more taste of her warm and inviting lips, untangled his hand from the mass of her hair and then set to work on getting them both naked as fast as possible.

She helped and by the time his clothes were in a heap on the floor, so were hers, then Hawk really had something to groan about. Her bulky sweater had hid more than just creamy, ivory skin. It also had disguised two perky peaks tipped with rosy nipples.

"Damn, you're beautiful." And to Hawk's surprise that was no bullshit. He meant every word.

"You're not so bad yourself," she whispered while her hands explored his now bare chest.

From the top of her blonde head to the tips of her pale pink polished toes, and everything in between, this woman was a man's wet dream. Better than Hawk's latest dream actually, because she was real, in more ways than one. All of her—every last inch right down to the patch of pale curls between her legs proving her a natural blonde—was god-given temptation.

He'd always been a breast man, usually the bigger the better. But after a run of chicks with implants, everything from fake breast to surgically-plumped lips, Emily's natural perfection was a huge turn-on.

Hawk ran his tongue over one pebbled nipple now and watched her shiver. He liked that reaction, a lot, so he took the bite-sized tidbit into his mouth and suckled hard until she groaned and lifted her spine off the bed to press further into his mouth.

*Damn.* If the rest of her was as sensitive as her breasts, they were both in for one hell of a wild ride. He could hardly wait. When Emily spread her legs to give him room to lie between them, he didn't hesitate. Heart pounding, Hawk nestled his throbbing erection

against her folds.

Hard enough to drive nails with the thing, he nudged a bit and found her slick and ready.

"You're so wet," he breathed.

"I've been that way for two days now," her raspy voice informed him.

They'd first met two days ago. She was finally admitting she'd wanted him from the very beginning. That knowledge was nearly his undoing.

Hawk held himself very still as he tried to resist plunging unprotected into her. The way he felt he didn't trust himself to not lose it the minute he was inside this woman. The dead last thing he needed was a David Hawkins Junior running around back in the States while he was in Afghanistan chasing baddies through the mountains.

At the speed of light, Hawk grabbed the foil packet from the pocket of his jeans, covered himself and slid deep inside Emily.

~

The man slept like the dead.

No sooner had he shuddered inside her, left to briefly flush the condom away and then slipped back between the covers next to her and he was out like a light. She'd felt him literally fall into sleep as the rock-like muscular arm he'd thrown possessively over her had gotten heavier and heavier, pinning her in place at his side.

Not that she blamed him for being physically worn out. He had expended quite a bit of energy. And it wasn't like he'd left her unsatisfied and wanting or anything. No, she'd done quite a bit of shuddering herself.

But still, how could he sleep? His even breathing told her he wasn't having any second thoughts about what had happened between them.

Emily glanced at the clock. She'd been second guessing herself and what had happened for an hour and a half now. And on top of not being able to sleep, she

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had to pee.

Back in New York, counting the days until she met her supposed Prince Charming, Emily had imagined a similar scenario. Snuggling in bed after making love, bodies intertwined, falling asleep in his arms, feeling warm, safe and loved. Nowhere in her visions had it been a one-night stand and in her dreams she hadn't had to desperately relieve herself.

Thinking waiting any longer was not an option and it would be just too bad if she woke Sleeping Beauty up, Emily wiggled her way free of the vise that was Hawk's arm and slipped from the bed.

When she returned, he hadn't moved a muscle. Hmm. Some war-hardened trained fighter he was. She could probably set off a bomb under the bed and he wouldn't wake up.

"I sure hope the Taliban doesn't sneak up on you at night," she whispered under her breath and crawled quickly back under the warm covers with a shiver.

"I heard that."

She could hear the smile in his voice.

"Well, it's true. You sleep like a rock."

"When I know it's safe to do so. Otherwise, a boot crunching or a breath taken too deeply outside my tent will wake me up. Believe me."

"Oh." What else could she say about that? She knew nothing about what this man went through on a daily basis and she probably never would. Another reason her decision to jump him, literally, and hop right into bed was probably ill advised.

Hawk readjusted to accommodate her and then flung his arm over her waist. From behind her, his gruff voice asked, "What's bothering you, doll? I can feel you frowning from here."

Two big arms gathered her up and pulled her close to his chest. As he started to kiss up and down her neck and shoulder she felt him grow hard against her naked butt.

It wasn't exactly easy to think with him doing that,

but she managed to answer the question. "I'm wondering exactly how stupid sleeping with you was. And speaking of sleeping, what about all that big talk in the bar about how there'd be no sleeping? Hmm?"

"Mmm. I have an excuse. You wore me out. I didn't know Goldilocks would turn into the big bad wolf in bed."

"You're mixing your fairy tales and I don't usually do this, you know."

"Have sex with incredibly hot and handsome soldiers you've only known for two days?"

"Yes. The two day part, at least. The hot and handsome part is pushing it, don't you think?" she joked rather than let him see her doubt.

She felt him chuckle. "You still don't like the idea that you found me attractive from the minute you walked into that office yesterday, do you?"

Actually, it was from the minute his eyes stared back at her from the paper computer printout back in New York, but she wasn't telling him that. And because of exactly that attraction, she should have run screaming from the Ratskeller the moment she realized Hawk was inside.

She'd fallen half in love with Hawk on paper before ever meeting him, imagined fairy tale "happy ever after" with him. And even the reality of two days of fighting with him over every detail of this campaign couldn't fight that attraction. So what did she go and do? She jumped into bed with him, willing to settle for one night over nothing at all.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

"You're doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"Thinking."

"I can't help it," Emily sighed. Having sex with Hawk raised a good dozen or so questions. Would she ever hear from him again? If she did have to contact him for work, how weird would it be?

"Well I can," he said, running a hand from her

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waist, over her hip and down to her thigh where it paused and made small circles against her skin.

“You can what? Not think? Yeah, I figured that.”

“No, my witty little thinker. I meant I can stop you from thinking.”

One large rough hand pulled her leg up and over his hip as he slid into her from behind while fingering her clit at the same time.

Her eyes closed involuntarily at the combined feeling of him moving inside while his hand worked her increasingly sensitive spot.

The tension began to build and she breathlessly shuddered out, “Oh.”

“Still thinking?” he asked playfully.

Somehow, she managed to respond. “Shut up, Hawk.”

Emily heard him chuckle just as the hip-bucking orgasm broke over her.

A few incredibly wonderful thrusts more and Hawk wasn’t laughing any longer. With a deep groan that reverberated straight through her body, he quickly pulled out of her and she felt warm wetness against her back.

Holding her tight, his body hot against hers, he growled against her hair. “Mmm. I could do that with you all night long.” Then to her great disappointment he pulled away and sat up. “But right now we both need a shower.”

Emily moaned at that suggestion. She’d be willing to overlook the stickiness on her back if it meant not getting out of the warm bed again. “Now? It’s cold out there,” she whined.

“Yes, now, and don’t you worry about being cold. I’ll warm you up. Believe me.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her up and out of the blessed warmth of the sheets.

“Oh, okay. But try not to get my hair wet. It will take forever to dry.”

Hawk laughed. “Oh, sweet thing. I can’t make any

promises. I find shower sex tends to get pretty wet.”

*Shower sex?*

Emily glanced down and took in his spectacularly naked, beautifully muscular form. The thick thighs, small waist and indescribably large forearms. *Oh boy.*

“Are you sure you don’t want to go back to sleep? You seemed pretty tired before,” she teased, unable to resist.

Rapidly getting visibly hard again, Hawk took a step closer until their bodies touched. His voice low, he said, “I think we’re done sleeping for the night. What about you?”

Not having closed her eyes yet, and with a really long flight home just hours away, Emily still nodded in agreement.

If she was going to have only one night with this man, she was going to make the most of it. She’d deal with the many consequences later.

## Chapter Eleven

Afghanistan.

The most heavily mined place in the world and, for better or worse, Hawk's home for the next year. He got his first glimpse of the desolate region in the dim light of dusk.

The plane carrying him, his squad, and their loaded pallet of gear landed without incident at the old Kandahar International Airport, now being used as the base airfield. Having secured a seat in the front row of the C14 aircraft, Hawk's boots hit the ground ahead of his men as he took his first step onto Afghan soil. The blast of frigid air in his face served as the local welcoming committee.

Kandahar was only the initial stop on their tour of Afghanistan. Next up, Bagram Air Base, then a quick hop on a helicopter to their final destination, the mountainous outskirts of Kabul, where the insurgents waited for them. He had no doubt the baddies would be very sorry to see them arrive.

Hawk and his men had gotten their official Afghan primer back at Hohenfels, but during their quick welcome tour of the base at Kandahar he realized that actually being there, seeing the sights, listening to the stories and first-hand experiences of the Army guys already there, was quite an eye opener.

The base at Kandahar was riddled with old crashed Russian helicopters from the war in the eighties. Even

the rafters for the roof in one of the buildings were made from old Russian helicopter blades. The base was high compared to sea level and there were mountains off in the distance everywhere he looked.

That was some of the cool parts about being there but it was the ear-full they got at the dining hall during chow that was enough to cause Hawk to have no appetite for his boiled carrots, mashed potatoes, and ketchup-covered meatloaf.

"When they talk about landmines, they ain't shitting you. There are land mines everywhere outside the fence," the soldier from the 10th Mountain Division informed them.

Hawk had no intention of venturing outside the fence during his brief stopover, so that wouldn't be an issue.

"So there are a lot of Canadian troops here, huh?" Wally asked through a mouth-full of macerated food.

Across the table, their welcoming party of one nodded. "Yup. But there are a lot of Army units here, too. The main ground guys are from the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain like me. The Army aviation units attached to us are from all over. There's a lot of reserve units on base, as well."

"I heard we're to expect a lot of snow." Unlike Wally, Pettit asked his question *before* he shoved another forkful of food into his mouth.

The soldier let out a snort. "Snow? Yeah, there's snow, and cold, but that's nothing compared to what it's like here in the summer."

Wally took one glance at Pettit's concerned face and laughed saying, "I'm from Alabama. I can handle the heat."

The soldier shook his head. "The heat's not the issue. Don't get me wrong, it's hot, but the humidity's not like in the south. It's more of a dry heat. The problem's the sand. It's baby powder fine and boy, does it blow. There are sand storms all the time in summer. Damn stuff gets into everything. Feels like I'm always

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cleaning it out of my damn weapon.”

Four-foot snowstorms that hit overnight in winter and sandstorms every day in summer. Lovely. Hawk never thought he’d ever find a place that made Iraq look appealing, but he may have done just that. Thank you, Uncle Sam, for the year vacation in Hell.

The soldier kept on and what he said had Hawk laying down his fork and knife so he could give the unbelievable tale his full attention.

“Don’t worry too much about the weather, though. It’s the locals you really need to watch out for. We pay off the warlords to allow our convoys to drive back and forth to our forward operating base. If we don’t use his truck drivers and workers, we get attacked, so guess what? We make damn sure we use his men and all is good.”

“I’ve heard rumors about the locals doing some sick shit, like hiding IEDs in corpses so when the soldiers go to investigate the body they get blown to kingdom come,” Wally piped in.

“That one’s not a rumor, it’s fact. These guys are crazy bastards. A few years back supposedly a local warlord who was on our side, probably because we paid him enough to be, skinned a local alive for attacking American soldiers and hung his body on a post for everyone to see as an example.”

Hawk shook his head in horrified disbelief. “Shit.”

“Jesus!” Pettit hissed under his breath.

“I know. It’s the stuff of movies but it’s real. Hey, you can see the house and compound belonging to one of the local warlords from the fences at the airfield. Ask someone to point it out to you when you leave.”

All just part of the Kandahar welcome tour Hawk supposed. He let out a sigh as he wondered exactly what the chances that he and all of his guys would get out of Afghanistan alive and back through Kandahar on the journey home with all their parts in working order.

He’d thought more than a few times about what he’d like to do with sweet little Emily when he finally

got home. But now, hearing the horror stories, he was even more certain his decision to avoid starting anything more with her before he left was the correct choice.

Hawk didn't need the image of Emily crying for him back home distracting him downrange. Sure, she was probably pissed he'd only emailed her that once, and even then, he'd kept it short, but in the end she'd thank him...*if* he was around to be thanked.

He'd deal with her anger when he got back Stateside. The vision of tempering an angry Emily put a smile on his face. Hawk tucked that little scenario away to enjoy later when he was in the semi-privacy of their temporary lodging for the night. But right now, he needed to arm himself with as much info as he could to make sure he got both himself and his men home.

Hawk turned his attention back to the soldier across from him. Leaning forward, he asked, "What have you heard about what's waiting for us in those mountains in the Kabul Province? Whatever you can tell me, I wanna hear. All of it."

~

Emily walked into the meeting late, which was not her fault at all.

Someone had fallen onto the subway tracks, so they had stopped service to get the stupid person off the tracks. She felt justified in calling the person an idiot because, one, they weren't hurt, and two, who leans so far over the tracks to see if the train is coming that they actually fall in unless they are brain dead?

Anyway, her train had been late and consequently, so had she for a meeting with Katie and the big bosses, the owners of the agency, aka the guys who signed her paycheck—well not literally, the accountant did that, but still, they were important.

She was sticking with blaming the subway; it didn't matter that she lived near enough to walk if she absolutely had to for any reason, like the trains not running. But it was a long walk and cold outside, and she

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had on her new red patent-leather shoes and there were a ton of puddles from a recent rainstorm.

Emily tried not to think about how she had been running late that morning anyway after having slept like crap the night before because she was once again reliving her one night with Hawk.

Her brain knew thinking about him was pointless. It should anyway, she told it enough! But yet, the rebellious gray matter continued to disobey the minute the lights went out at night, and Emily had no control over it.

Apparently Emily looked as flustered as she felt as she flung her bulging briefcase on the desk while at the same time offered a hurried apology.

Katie smiled sympathetically and said loud enough for the entire table to hear, "Tough ride in?"

Thank goodness for Katie, smoothing things over. Emily answered with a short laugh, "You wouldn't believe it if I told you. They actually shut down the subway. But I'm here now and ready to get to it. So what did I miss?"

Mr. Howard, as in The Howard & Dean Agency, nodded in her direction. Hopefully that was a good thing, Emily wasn't sure.

Mr. Dean, the other half of the partnership, began speaking again. "You're just in time. We were about to review preliminary results of the Army campaign. The client reports that they've tracked a small spike in recruitment since the new Army ads hit two weeks ago. However..."

Uh, oh. *Howevers* were never good.

He continued, "it is not nearly as large a response as the SpecOps ads yielded last year. We need to evaluate why that is. Any ideas, people?"

Mr. Dean glanced around the room expectantly.

Katie shrugged. "I'd have to say that I'm not sure we can expect the same response. It's apples and oranges trying to compare SpecOps and enlisted Army. We portrayed SpecOps as elite, which made people

want it more.”

Mr. Howard nodded. “Exactly why we did not approach the Army campaign in the same way. Our goal, which was successful in some respects and not so in others, is to show the Army soldier as a warrior, a protector of our freedom, yet at the same time, make it so that young men and woman can identify with him. Relate to him. See themselves in his shoes...or rather combat boots. Todd, the ad, please.”

Mr. Howard’s assistant Todd instantly held up one of the print ads. Suddenly Hawk’s piercing eyes bore directly into Emily as she stared at the glossy photograph before her.

Her traitorous heart began beating faster.

The perfect tag team player, Mr. Dean took over where his partner had left off. “Take a look at this ad. Our man has the terrifying warrior look down pat. The question is how do we make him appear more accessible?”

Katie sat up straighter in her chair and pushed aside the ever present box of crackers she kept next to her at all times now to combat the morning sickness since she’d decided to reveal her pregnancy to the entire office.

“Perhaps that’s the difference in the response. Accessibility. BB did a press tour as the SpecOps ads hit. National television appearances on the morning talk shows, local radio stations in targeted areas, live appearances. We’re also missing the advantage of being connected to a big name. Remember, we piggy-backed the recruitment ads on top of a national Andre Milano underwear ad campaign starring BB.”

Howard and Dean nodded as one.

Emily nearly choked.

Hawk was unhappy about posing for her in his uniform. She shuddered to think how he would react if they decided he had to pose in designer underwear! And she cringed at the thought of having to tell Hawk he was going to be interviewed by the five chattering ladies

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of *The View*, like BB had so willingly been.

She had to put a stop to this, and now.

Emily raised her hand tentatively to speak. She was used to being the assistant, sitting silently, taking notes, supplying what her boss Katie needed, just like Mr. Howard's assistant Todd and Mr. Dean's assistant Marci. She was not used to being an active participant, but this being her assignment now, she had to speak up.

Mr. Dean noted her raised hand and bobbed his head in her direction with an amused smile. "Emily?"

Nervous, Emily spoke quickly, hoping all the while that the words "I slept with the model" weren't emblazoned in red across her forehead.

"Hawk, um, Staff Sergeant Hawkins, the model, is currently deployed in Afghanistan. We would have to get the approval of his superior officers to have him sent home for that kind of press tour."

Mr. Howard shook his head slowly and Emily could almost see the wheels of his mind turning as an idea formed. "I don't think there's a need to have him sent back here. Afghanistan is perfect. Do the tour over there."

Emily frowned. "But there's a war on. I'm not sure I can get a United States soldier booked on 'Good Day, Afghanistan' even if they are on our side."

Her little joke earned her a frown from Mr. Howard. "I don't expect you to. We need to show this soldier in his element, not sitting around drinking coffee and chatting with some show's hostess. I want him eating with his men, working out at the base, training. Or, you know, a video of him handing out dolls or chocolate or whatever to the little Afghan kiddies."

Mr. Dean nodded vigorously. "That would cover the other aspect of this campaign. The client wants the market to realize the Army's focus is the people over there. Giving the war a face the public can relate to is just as important as giving the Army a relatable personality. I think it's a great idea."

Emily inwardly cringed. Hawk wasn't exactly a relatable personality.

Outwardly, she saw Katie cringe as she jumped into the conversation. "I do have to agree with Emily on one point. There is a war on. The model is a professional soldier and is already over there. But we would have to send over Emily and at least one cameraman, ideally two, one for still shots and one for video. As untrained civilians, can we keep all of them safe? I've heard conditions can get pretty bad in some spots."

Emily considered that and had to think that living in New York City was probably pretty good training for the war zone.

Todd suddenly joined the conversation. He was obviously feeling bold since Emily, also an assistant, had spoken up earlier. "The USO sends people to the war zone all the time. Important people, too. Celebrities. Robin Williams just got back and that Irish Tenor guy. There are always bands and singers over there performing for the troops at their bases."

Emily frowned at him, willing him to shut up.

The last thing she had expected was to ever see Hawk once more since the bastard hadn't even bothered to email her and say he was still alive. Given that fact, she was not in any rush to fly to Afghanistan and have to work with him. He obviously didn't want to see her again or he would have emailed or written. And besides further bruising to her wounded ego, flying into the middle of the war hadn't been on her immediate agenda, either.

"Perfect! Great idea, Todd." Mr. Howard smiled at his underling, who glowed under the praise, probably while he envisioned getting his own big solo assignment and moving up in the company.

"Marci," Mr. Dean shot at his assistant who sat silently with her laptop open on the conference table clicking away as she took notes for him. "What can you find about the USO?"

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Marci's fingers flew into action and didn't it figure? She had the website up in no time.

"They are a not-for-profit, privately-owned organization. Ooo, this is good. They offer what they call a 'handshake tour'. Besides comedians and musical acts, they've had authors, sports figures, and politicians on tour. Here's a picture of that bicyclist Lance Armstrong with the troops. It says they have a USO center set up at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan."

"Where is our boy Hawk?" Mr. Dean asked Emily directly, shocking her out of her trance.

"Kabul," she reluctantly supplied, feeling her cheeks blush at the mention of "her boy Hawk".

"Marci. How close is that to Bagram?" Mr. Dean asked Marci.

"I think they're pretty close," know-it-all Todd jumped in, uninvited.

Emily sat silently as Marci's fingers clicked, knowing damn well since she'd already obsessively studied the Afghan map that Bagram and Kabul were *very* close, on the map at least.

Before Marci could tell them that, Emily's hand shot up again. "But Hawk isn't a celebrity like Lance Armstrong. Why would the soldiers want to shake hands with just another soldier?"

Mr. Howard answered her. "There are two goals for this tour, Emily. First, we have to try and make Hawk a celebrity among other soldiers. But more importantly, this tour really isn't for the entertainment of the troops. It's for the people back home who need to feel good about where their young men and woman and hard-earned tax dollars are going. Photos and videos of him there, properly placed in the media here at home will accomplish that."

"Bagram Air Base is an hour drive north of the capital city of Kabul, Mr. Dean," Marci piped in.

*Damn efficient Marci.*

This could not happen. They had agreed they would never see each other again. He hadn't made contact, so

she had to assume he hadn't changed his mind. Emily simply could not face seeing Hawk and having him blow her off, not after he'd occupied her mind night and day for weeks now.

"Hawk isn't in the city. I believe he and his soldiers are in some primitive camp somewhere in the Kabul Province in the mountains along the Pakistan border," Emily quickly supplied, realizing too late that was an awful lot of information for her to have about a model she'd worked with only once.

Mr. Howard raised an eyebrow, his coffee mug poised halfway to his lips. "I take it you can get in touch with him somehow?"

Emily blanched. She'd also only emailed him once, totally for work, of course, while he was still in Germany.

"Um, I don't know. I suppose so. I can try emailing him but the satellite internet can be iffy there, I believe." Yeah, she didn't sound too much like she'd become a stalker and read everything she could get her hands on regarding the troops in that area. "But again, it will be up to his superiors to allow him to come to Bagram."

"The client is the US Army," Mr. Dean pointed out, tapping his copy of the client folder on the conference table. "If they want their own campaign to succeed, I don't see that they'd have a problem working with us by loaning out one soldier for a few days."

"True," Mr. Howard agreed. "But it never hurts to cover all the bases when dealing with the military." He swiveled his chair to face Katie. "How about your contacts? Can you get this Hawk ordered to do a USO handshake tour?"

Katie smiled. "I'll call Hank Miller from CentCom and see what he can do. That man is amazing when it comes to making people do things."

Mr. Howard donned a satisfied smile. He loved nothing more than pulling strings. "Excellent."

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Smiling, Mr. Dean nodded. "This may actually work out perfectly. If we can hook him up with a celebrity already on a scheduled tour, we can piggyback on their publicity and the troop support. There's our missing star power that we had with the Milano-SpecOps joint campaign. Marci, can you forward the USO information to Emily?"

"Already emailed. And they have contact information and phone numbers listed right here on the site."

*Oh goody.* "Thanks, Marci," Emily said, trying to sound sincere.

Mr. Dean started shuffling papers into a pile and stashing them into various folders, which he shoved at Todd. "Emily? Can you handle coordinating the USO aspect?"

"Yes, sir. I'll get right on it."

"Great. Keep us informed," Mr. Dean ordered.

"This is an important client," Mr. Howard added, as if Emily didn't already know that paralyzing detail. "I want to be apprised every step of the way."

And with that, Howard and Dean both rose and the meeting was over.

As the room emptied, Emily remained frozen in her seat. This was going to happen. She would have to see him again, do her job and do it well and all while pretending that everything was perfectly okay. Great.

For maybe the thousandth time since Germany, Emily revisited her and Hawk's final moments together.

*"You going to be able to get back to the base okay?" she'd asked that morning, suitcase packed and zipped and ready to go to the airport.*

*"Yeah, I kept one of the cars we came in and made the rest of the guys cram into the other two." Hawk had run a hand up her arm to cup her face and then said, "You know, I've been thinking."*

*"Uh, oh. Are you sure that's safe? You thinking?" Emily had teased him to avoid tearing up at their*

parting.

*He'd grinned at her then and she remembered her heart skipping a beat. That was when she'd known saying good-bye and meaning it was not going to be as easy.*

*Then he said something that made her heart and her hopes surge.*

*"I was thinking that it might be kind of cool if you did email me the pictures. I'd like to have them, you know, just for fun."*

*She'd nodded enthusiastically. "Oh, sure. I can definitely do that. No problem."*

Yeah sure, no problem at all, except that she'd emailed him the pictures the moment her feet had hit US soil and gotten exactly one word back from him by email. "Thanks." That was it.

And that is what she got for hoping, for planning, for thinking that an agreed upon one night stand could be anything more.

"You gonna be okay with this? Em?"

Emily was yanked out from beneath her memories with a jolt to find Katie looking expectantly in her direction.

Katie clarified when Emily gave her nothing but a blank stare. "Going to Afghanistan, I mean. Are you okay with that?"

Emily joked to cover her discomposure. "Oh, yeah, sure. I'm great. Actually, I've always wanted to see Afghanistan."

"Are you going to email Hawk with the news?" Katie asked perfectly innocently. Emily, though guilt-ridden about it, had chosen to keep her little indiscretion in Germany to herself.

"Um, no. No yet. I think I'll get everything ironed out first with the USO and wait for you to get approval from the Army. No use getting his hopes up and then having to cancel."

Emily nearly glanced up and waited for the lightning strike for that little lie.

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Katie nodded. "You're right. I'll be interested to see how the USO feels about our idea."

The other question remaining was how Hawk would feel about this. Emily could only guess it wasn't going to be good.

## Chapter Twelve

“Can I borrow your toothpaste later, Hawk?” Wally asked through a mouthful of food. “I’m out until my next care package gets here from Mama.”

Whenever the hell the next supply drop would be...

Hawk sighed. “Yeah, sure.”

Wally grinned. “Thanks. I’ve got an extra deodorant if you need.”

Hawk raised a brow. “Thanks.”

If the temperature reached above freezing in the near future, Wally’s antiperspirant might be a hot commodity, but at the moment the chance of sweating seemed pretty slim.

Things at the compound in the Kabul Province were, to put it mildly, scarce.

Hawk and his squad were far from anyone else, including their own unit. No base meant no store, which meant some basic necessities, things like toothpaste and believe it or not, forks, were hard to come by. Guys actually walked around with their fork in their pocket to make sure they didn’t lose it or no one swiped it.

You pretty much had to come stocked with everything you would need, borrow from one of the other guys or do without until more arrived from home. Hawk’s camp was so remote that supplies were sling loaded beneath a chopper, flown in and then dropped. Unfortunately, you never knew when the supply drop would arrive.

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It seemed the only convenience they did have on a regular basis was internet access. Go figure! A hell of a lot of good email did Hawk since he'd vowed to himself he wouldn't maintain contact with Emily while he was downrange.

Basically, it seemed the only things to do there were fight, write (for those who had someone to write to), clean weapons or reload mags, fun stuff like that.

Oh, yeah, and think.

There was far too much time to think. And more often than not, Hawk's thoughts turned to Emily and their one night together. Then his mind went to that day right after they'd been together when she'd emailed him in Germany with his photos.

She'd kept the email all casual and light, on the surface anyway. But reading between the lines, Hawk could tell she wanted more. He could have a girlfriend if he wanted one. He could have Emily if he wanted her.

*Wanting* wasn't the problem.

This was not the time or place to get himself tied to a new girl back in the States. One hundred and ten percent of his concentration had to be on bringing his men home alive. After he'd accomplished that, god willing, he'd worry about the other parts of his life.

"I'm gonna go get on the computer and email my sister for some toothpaste," Hawk said, breaking his thoughts from Emily. "Looks like I will be needing some more soon." He sent a meaningful look at Wally.

"Ask her to send some pictures," Wally suggested with a waggle of his eyebrows.

With a sigh and a shake of his head, Hawk set aside his empty MRE—meals ready to eat being their main sustenance—and left his men to finish their respective meals.

He made his way to the tent where the shared computer was located. Since the rest of the guys were still eating, he was alone as he logged into his email account. He owed his sister an email anyway or there would be hell to pay. It was just easier to shoot her a

quick hello than listen to her bitch for the rest of his life.

As expected, an email from his sister sat in his inbox. *"Would be nice to know my brother is alive and well. Write me! Susan"*

Also, as per usual, were a good dozen jokes, pictures or funny videos sent to him by the guys back at the rear. Hawk deleted most of those without reading them.

But what was most unexpected after all this time was an email from Emily, buried in his inbox below all the others.

Surprised, Hawk clicked quickly to open it.

He found himself leaning forward closer to the screen to read it.

*"Hawk. You'll be getting orders for another assignment. I did my best to get you out of it. Sorry. Emily"*

What the hell? Orders for another modeling assignment? Out here?

Hawk laughed. If they could get those orders to him through the snowdrifts, he'd gladly follow them. Emily probably wanted a picture of him in his white snow camo "outfit". She'd have him standing outside in a blizzard for some new ad, as if that would make the young boys and girls back home jump right up and run to the local recruiting office to join up.

Since it was doubtful they were sending Rastaphotographer here to him, Hawk figured whatever she needed he could have Pettit take.

Hawk would have Pettit snap a shot with that super expensive digital camera he was so proud of, then he'd email it to Emily and be done with it. That should cover it.

Confident that was all this new assignment would entail, Hawk sent a quick reply to his sister, remembering to ask her to send him toothpaste, and a metal fork or two if she happened to have a spare. Then he emptied all the remaining emails out of his inbox and logged off.

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Back in his tent, Hawk broke down his weapon and broke out the gun oil and supplies he'd need. He settled in for the meticulous task of cleaning the familiar item.

The act was almost like meditation for him as he let his hands complete to task they knew so well. He let his mind wander and as usual, Emily was the main attraction.

Chuckling, Hawk imagined Emily's horror at having to ask him for more pictures when she knew how unhappy he'd been about the first set.

Then he heard the chopper, the familiar whoop whoop whoop of blades cutting air. Immediately on alert, Hawk's eye located his backup weapon in the tent as he slammed the pieces of the gun in his hand back together until he heard the jubilant shouts of his guys and relaxed immediately.

Outside the tent, someone, it sounded like Wally, shouted, "Woo hoo! Supply drop."

Slamming the last piece of his cleaned and oiled weapon into place, Hawk flung it over his shoulder and went outside to see what goodies had been delivered. Hopefully Wally's care package with his toothpaste and maybe even Hawk's mysterious new orders would be among the letters.

He chuckled again and thought of Emily trying to get him out of them. Perhaps she wasn't too angry at him after all.

~

In her peripheral vision, Emily noticed Jai glancing at her once again.

"What?"

"Nothing. You just seem nervous."

"I'm not nervous." That said, Emily noticed she'd been drumming her fingers on the armrest between their two seats and immediately folded both hands in her lap over her seat belt.

"It's perfectly understandable, Em. You're flying to Afghanistan. The war may be centered in Iraq, but Afghanistan is no picnic. I remember my first time

here. It can be scary, and even more so for you, a woman."

She rolled her eyes. "We're going to be on a US base full of armed men. I'm not worried I'll be taken hostage by the local gun-toting bad guys. Honestly."

It was only one armed man that had her on edge.

"Hmmm." Jai's doubt was clearly evident in that one sound.

Raising a brow, she turned in her narrow commercial airplane seat to face Jai. Even in business class, the seats were not exactly comfortable for the length of time they'd been in them.

But Jai was more annoying at the moment than Emily's seat and the stiffness in her butt and legs it caused. "Yes? Do you have more to say?"

"I was just remembering the flight home from Germany. You were a little freaky then too, exhausted and hyper at the same time."

"I'm not afraid of flying," Emily asserted. She was afraid of a lot of things but that was not one of them.

Jai shook his head. "No, I know it's not fear of flying. I've flown with you before and you were fine. But there's something..."

Emily watched realization dawn on his face. "It's him. You're afraid of seeing him again."

She felt her face blanch.

"I don't know who you're talking about." Emily looked anywhere except at Jai. She was such a bad liar, people always saw right through her and she didn't need Jai knowing the truth. Not now.

"Oh my god! You spent the night with Hawk that last night in Germany. The night we went to the bar and he was there!"

Emily nearly choked. Was it written that clearly across her face? "What? No, of course not!"

Jai continued on, studying her face as she felt it grow hot. "I can't believe I didn't realize it before. You two just seemed to hate each other so much, but now looking back, the sexual tension between you and Hawk

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during those photo shoots and then at the bar was so thick I could have cut it with a knife.”

He shook his head and let out a long slow hiss of breath. “Wow. You and Hawk.”

Heart pounding, Emily started to deny it but instead sank low in her seat, defeated. “You must think so badly of me.”

Frowning, Jai let out a short laugh. “Why?”

“I barely knew him.”

“Oh, jeez, Em. Do you know what I see on the road with all those models and crew? One night stands are the tamest thing compared to the orgies, drugs, alcohol, you name it and I’ve seen it. Now on the other hand, you finally letting yourself relax for a night and falling for a really nice guy who obviously found you attractive as well is nothing to be ashamed of.”

“You think Hawk is nice?” That surprised her.

“Yeah. I mean, in a tough guy, trained killer kind of way. But the man holds honor high on his list of priorities. Hawk is dedicated to serving his country. That much is obvious. He’d do anything for his soldiers and them for him.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yeah. He’s a good guy.” Jai nodded.

“How do you know?”

“Don’t forget, I spent time with his squad at the Ratskeller after you got ‘tired and went to bed’.” He chuckled, knowing now that excuse had been a big old fib, hence the air quotes Jai used when repeating her weak lie. “You want some guy advice, Em?”

Emily guessed it couldn’t hurt. “Sure.”

“If you want to know if a man is worth your time, you look at how he treats others and how they treat him, particularly his subordinates. Hawk’s a decent man. A bit serious at times, but still, you could have done far worse than him to jump in bed with.”

Emily sighed. As much as she would love to tell Jai how wrong he was about Hawk, she couldn’t bring herself to admit he hadn’t even bothered to email her

after she wrote him about this assignment.

Hawk may well be a good guy to his soldiers. She'd freely admit that, but so what if he was a man's man? In the female department, the man was severely lacking. In fact, he just plain sucked.

"Can we change the subject now?" Emily asked hopefully.

"Sure. Hmm. Let's see. Subject change. Oh, I know. So what do you think of Little Miss USO up there?" Jai suggested the new topic of conversation in a low whisper.

Emily wasn't so considerate and used her natural voice figuring Little Miss USO and her entourage probably couldn't hear all the way up there in first class where she was drinking complimentary champagne and eating freshly baked chocolate chip cookies which Emily was allowed to smell but not eat.

"I think, judging from the looks of her outfit, the soldiers at Bagram are going to be very happy to see her."

Honestly, how many years ago had tube tops gone out of style anyway?

"She's an entertainer, Emily. They all act a bit over the top. It's just part of the image. You know, packaging for the public."

Emily raised a brow, thinking that the "packaging" had a little help from a bottle of red hair dye and some silicone implants, not to mention a press person, makeup person, and bruiser of a bodyguard.

"So, you're saying the fact she flirted with you is all part of the act?"

Jai grinned. "Nope, that was all part of my charm."

"And what about her flirting with the pilot, the man who took our boarding passes, and even the gay male flight attendant? Hmm?" Emily challenged.

Jai feigned shock. "She did? I'm crushed." He laughed at Emily's scowl. "Alright, I'll admit. She is a bit flirty."

And Hawk was scheduled to be at her side every

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step of his time in Bagram. Just great. Emily imagined all the flirting, or worse, Little Miss USO would do with Hawk and how he'd eat it right up.

She let out a low groan.

"Oh, lighten up, Em. This being part of a USO tour will be fun. You'll see."

Emily laughed bitterly. "Oh yeah, real fun. I can't wait."

## Chapter Thirteen

Emily's love for Kerri London, chart-topping country singer and star of this USO thing, did not grow during the twenty-two hour journey from New York. In fact, by the time their plane landed in Afghanistan and Emily waited in the aisle for what seemed like forever for Little Miss USO's entourage to get all of her many carry-ons out of the overhead compartments, she was seething with anger.

"Some people are so inconsiderate! Why the hell didn't she check all that stuff with the regular luggage instead of carrying it on?" Emily complained to Jai.

He glanced down at Emily's laptop case and additional briefcase and raised an eyebrow accusingly.

"I needed this stuff to work on the flight," she defended against his unspoken condemnation. Okay, so she'd been so nervous about seeing Hawk again she hadn't done a damn thing, but still, she'd intended to and that's all that counted.

"Come on. It looks like we're moving and I've had quite enough of riding around in this tin can."

"Hmm. A bit of claustrophobia?"

He shot her a look. "I admit nothing. And before you start teasing me, let's see how you fare on your first helicopter ride, shall we?"

Jai headed down the aisle and Emily followed a bit less enthusiastically. She'd thought the incredibly long

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and many-legged trip to the airport in Kabul had been bad, but she had a feeling the relatively short helicopter ride to the military airport at Bagram Air Base would probably be far worse.

She was right. White knuckled and shaking, Emily managed to not lose her lunch or pass out during her first helicopter ride. Jai on the other hand, didn't seem to mind it at all.

"So you don't like being on a huge commercial jet, but you don't mind this flying eggbeater? Why is that?" she accused as she stumbled after him on wobbly legs.

Jai grinned at her. "We all have our little quirks."

Emily glanced back and noticed that Little Miss USO was doing just fine as both her bodyguard and some military guy helped her out of the helicopter. That figured. Emily probably could have fallen out on her face and they would barely have noticed. She glanced down at her own comparatively diminutive chest, figuring that must be the differentiating factor.

With a sigh of resignation, Emily glanced up and noted Jai had gotten pretty far ahead of her and was already striding toward a tall, smiling, sandy-haired man. She rushed to catch up.

"Hey! Mel!" Jai greeted the man like they were old friends.

"G'day, Boofhead! How's it going?" The stranger responded with a handshake and a slap on Jai's back.

Emily frowned at him. "You two know each other?"

"Sure do. I'm sorry, Em. Let me introduce you. Emily Price, marketing maven from Madison Avenue's famed Howard & Dean Agency. Mel Townsend, Australia's best embedded combat video man."

Emily extended her hand. "Australia? Wow. When I asked Jai if he knew any cameramen for this assignment, I didn't realize his little black book extended to another hemisphere."

Mel shook her hand warmly with a smile. "Jai and me, we've known each other for years. Since..."

"Kandahar, two-thousand and four," Jai finished for him. When he noticed Emily's surprised look he shrugged. "I told you I've been to Afghanistan before."

Her brows drew closer together as she considered she really didn't know all that much about Jai at all. She'd always just assumed he'd stuck with magazine fashion layouts with the occasional ad shoots thrown in. Hmm. Perhaps she should pay more attention.

"Onya, Jai, that's right! That was a hell of an assignment," Mel nodded.

"Mel's been embedded here in Afghanistan with the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne along with an Aussie reporter for the past six months. When I found out he was here and that the reporter he was assigned to recently shipped home, I contacted him."

"And I said bloody hell, yes, I would gladly work with this old bastard again, especially for this assignment. She's sweet. Easy peasy. Aye, Jai?"

"Compared to some of our other assignments, oh, yeah," Jai agreed with a snigger but didn't elaborate.

Hmmm. Definitely some history here.

Mel laughed and addressed Emily again. "I figure any assignment where the humvee I'm riding in doesn't get blown up is apples."

Emily shook her head. "Is that very often? Your getting blown up, I mean?"

The ruggedly handsome Australian grinned, his whisky-colored eyes twinkling mysteriously. "More often than I'd like. No worries, Emmie. This assignment, she'll be right. Here we'll be as safe as a joey in his mama roo's pouch."

"Alrighty, then. Good to hear." Emily nodded, wondering what she'd done to deserve this particular assignment with this man she couldn't understand and how her name had suddenly become *Emmie*.

"Any word on Hawkins' ETA?" Jai asked Emily.

She shrugged. "We don't have any events scheduled for the handshake tour until tomorrow. He's supposed to arrive sometime today, but you know the

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military—when they do give you a timeframe, they change it ten times. I guess we have to trust the Army will get him here.”

Mel nodded. “His helo should be arriving any tic of the clock now. I talked to some of the blokes in the control tower. They said he’d be here today.”

Emily raised a brow that Mel could get an answer so easily when all she got from the military for the past week was the runaround.

“Holy moley! Who’s the stunner? She the star of this show?” Mel asked, elbowing Jai in the side and staring across the airfield in Little Miss USO’s direction.

With a sideways glance at Emily, Jai grinned. “Yup. That’s Kerri London herself. She and Emily are going to be good friends by the end of this tour. I can tell already.”

Emily shot him a nasty look before watching the object of all the male attention make her way across the airfield in skintight red leather pants, four inch heels and a rhinestone-studded denim jacket, her long red mane blowing in the wind.

“Better watch it, mate. I bet this one here gets mad as a cut snake.” Mel smiled good-naturedly in Emily’s direction. “Fair dinkum, Emmie, she does look like she’s keen to get a bit, but don’t you worry. She’s a bit of alright, but she’s got nothing on you, love. Besides, there are more than enough diggers around here for both of you, plus some.”

Emily frowned. “What’s a digger?”

“Military men,” Jai supplied with a grin.

She was beginning to feel as though she needed a translator or an Australian/American dictionary to speak to Mel. Even so, she got the drift of his last statement and scowled at him.

“I am here to work, not find men.” *Or diggers.*

That statement was truthful. She wasn’t looking for “men” plural, only for one particular man. And actually, after his recent behavior, she wasn’t all that

sure she wanted that one anymore.

Emily watched the wide sway of her competition's shapely hips and the energetic bounce of her more than generous chest and sighed. Hawk ignoring her she'd prepared herself for, but watching Hawk hook up with Miss Sex on Heels might just be more than Emily could take.

Suddenly, a warm friendly arm was around her shoulders. "Come on, love. Hot pants has her own transportation. So let's get your things and you loaded into my jeep. You keen for some tucker or a cuppa?"

Emily wasn't sure if she was keen for some tucker or not and was afraid to answer lest she commit herself to an orgy with some diggers or something. With a silent plea, she raised a brow and glanced at Jai.

Laughing out loud, he answered her unspoken question. "He means food and a cup of coffee or tea, Em. You'll get used to him, don't worry."

Somehow, Emily doubted that but answered anyway, suddenly realizing how chilled she'd become from the helicopter ride and now, from standing in the wind on the airfield.

"Sure, Mel. Some food and hot coffee would be great." And getting away from Ms. Kerri "Hotpants" London even better.

"Bloody good and then I can show you to your lush accommodations for the duration of your stay." With a wink at Jai, Mel asked, "So, Emmie, have you ever slept in a tent before?"

Emily groaned. This was going to be one heck of a trip.

~

"Hey, Grandpa. They still letting you fly? I'd thought you'd be back in the nursing home by now!" Wally joked with the helicopter pilot who'd brought Hawk and the squad to their secluded camp weeks before.

Wally had explained to them all then that since he and the pilot were both from Alabama, he figured it

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gave him teasing rights with the old guy. So far, the elder man gave as good as he got from Wally, which never failed to amuse Hawk.

"Listen here, boy. I was flying when you weren't even a gleam in your mama's eye and I'm still here. What does that tell you?"

"That the Army is desperate and has to hit up the senior citizen centers back in the States to recruit?" Wally shot back with a smirk.

"Ha, ha. Real funny there, kid."

The man was in his sixties and had actually flown CH-46's for the Marines in Vietnam. The reality was that the wrinkled, grey-haired reservist was nearing the upper age limit to be allowed to fly and would soon be forced to retire, but the old coot was determined not to quit before they made him and for that, Hawk had to admire him.

In any case, it was nice to see any familiar face again out there, even one he'd only met once. Hawk smiled at the pilot now. "Hey, Lou. Glad to see you again."

"You, too, Hawk. Didn't think I'd be picking you up again so soon. What's up? You and your two boys here giving up already? Heading for home?"

Hawk snorted out a laugh. "Not exactly." He almost wished that were the case.

"I tell you what, it's way better than that, Grandpa. Well, maybe not better than going home but still really great. Wait until you hear the news," Wally began excitedly.

"Wally," Hawked growled in warning.

He looked innocently at Hawk. A bit too innocently. "What? I can tell him about my promotion, can't I?"

"Yes, you can tell him about your promotion," Hawk gritted out between his teeth, silently warning Wally not to spill the rest of the news as well. The news about the newest orders that had Hawk far from happy.

It seemed Hawk's captain and his good old friend Commander Hank Miller had been busy in the weeks Hawk and his squad had been downrange. Between the two of them, and thanks to some marketing genius' idea, Hawk was now part of a frigging USO handshake tour with some country singer he'd never heard of.

But that wasn't even the worst part. Thanks to some strange twist of fate, Wally's advancement had just come through from the promotions board. Someone decided it would be good press to incorporate the promotion ceremony into the tour. Of all people, now Wally was in on this secret, too, and Hawk had a horrible feeling that would cost him. He'd probably have to barter his sister for Wally's secrecy.

Traveling conditions in the area were volatile enough that Hawk was instructed to take both Wally and another soldier with him. Pettit had been the no brainer decision since he was already privy to Hawk's secret hell. So here they were, the three amigos, heading for a frigging USO tour.

Hawk wrestled himself out of his own misery and listened as Wally excitedly told Lou his news.

"I finally made it, Grandpa. No more Specialist Trent Wallace. When you fly us back, you'll have to call me Sergeant."

"You'll be lucky if I don't call you the one who accidentally fell out the chopper door," the old pilot said, then was so amused at his own joke he laughed until he coughed so hard he had to snub out his cigarette.

As the pilot lit up another one, Hawk smiled at the one bright spot to this trip—the fact the old coot pilot took no shit from Wally even though Hawk feared, unless he decided to pull rank on Wally, he would certainly have to take some shit from him about this modeling gig.

Then Hawk considered that in under an hour he'd be with Emily again. Okay, maybe that made two bright spots in this trip. He'd get to see Emily after what

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seemed like a very long separation and find out if this near physical ache he felt whenever he was alone and thought about her was strictly horniness and the loneliness of being deployed or the real thing.

He was really hoping it was the former. This was neither the time nor the place for the real thing.

## Chapter Fourteen

Taking a long, steaming sip, Emily was enjoying a nice hot “cuppa” in the dining hall with Jai and her new Aussie pal when she literally felt his presence and knew without turning around that Hawk had arrived.

Jai’s wave in the direction of the door behind her confirmed her intuition. Her heart kicked into overtime. Somehow, Emily didn’t think that was caused by the caffeine.

“Sergeant. Glad to see you made it,” Jai greeted the trio of men who strode into her sight line as one to stand next to the long table.

Emily knew the moment had come, that she would have to greet Hawk, and yet she still didn’t know how she should act. Angry? Which she was. Indifferent? Cool and friendly like nothing had happened between them? That would require an award-winning performance on her part.

She had no clue what to do or say. Worse, she had begun to wonder if her voice would give her away no matter what she chose to say.

Luckily for Emily, Jai made the introductions and gave her a small reprieve.

“Mel, this is our man for the shoot, Staff Sergeant Hawkins. Sergeant Hawkins, meet Mel Townsend, our video man for the next few days.”

Mel rose and shook Hawk’s hand. “G’day, mate.”

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Hawk nodded a greeting in return and hooked a thumb at each of the two men on either side as he introduced them. "Sergeant Ryan Pettit and Specialist Trent Wallace..."

"Call me Wally. And after tomorrow, it'll be Sergeant instead of Specialist," one of Hawk's entourage added.

Feeling ridiculous that she had yet to speak, Emily jumped in. "I saw that your captain had added the promotion ceremony to the schedule of events. Congratulations, Wally."

That earned her a wide grin from the man. Paranoid, Emily had the bad feeling Wally recognized her from the Ratskeller and was imagining how exactly his sergeant and she had spent that night in Germany.

Wally took a step closer and extended one beefy hand in her direction. "Well, hello there. And what's your name?"

Hmm. Wally was flirting with her. What exactly did that mean? He wouldn't do that if he thought she'd been with Hawk, would he?

Or would he? Especially if Hawk had told him that he was finished with her and Wally could have her next.

Seething at this newest theory, Emily answered briskly, "Emily Price."

"Wally." The warning in Hawk's voice was evident.

"Just being friendly, sir." Wally grinned at his superior as he took Emily's offered hand in both of his and shook it warmly. "Polite and friendly like my mama taught me."

"Your mama didn't teach you what you're thinking," Emily heard Hawk mumble. He took a step closer to them both and Wally dropped her hand in response and took a step back, conceding to Hawk.

This was interesting.

Hawk hadn't made any contact with her in months, but in true caveman fashion, he had sent a definite signal to Wally to back off immediately. He might as well have peed on her leg and marked her as his

territory like a damn male dog.

Well, well, well. Apparently he didn't want her but no one else could have her either. Lovely, but actually, knowing Hawk, not that surprising.

Emily couldn't avoid it any longer. She finally looked directly into Hawk's gaze, finding it focused singly on her.

He smiled. "Hey there, Goldilocks."

The deep timbre of his voice and his small crooked smile melted her frozen heart, while at the same time reignited her anger, particularly when Emily noted she was back to being Goldilocks again, reaffirming that any closeness they'd attained that one night in Germany had expired.

As flippantly as she could, Emily answered, "Hi, Hawk. Glad to see you're still alive."

He smirked at that. "It takes a lot to kill me, doll."

Of that, she was certain, at least at those times when she was royally pissed off at him, like now. Although, during other times when she forgot to be angry, believing Hawk would be hard to kill didn't do much to ease all those ridiculously pointless nights of worrying she'd done for this man. And Hawk? He probably hadn't given her a second thought since they'd said goodbye in Germany.

Feeling mean, she smiled sweetly back. "Good, because I'd hate to have to start the ad campaign from scratch with a new model. So much work..." She shook her head dramatically.

As Hawk laughed aloud Wally raised his hand to get her attention. "I'm available to model if you need me, Ms. Price," he offered.

"No, you're not, Wally," Hawk said, his eyes never leaving her face.

Wally grinned in her direction, nodded and mouthed behind Hawk's back, "Call me."

"Nice to see you both again, Miss Price, Mr. Devereaux." Pettit, ever polite, stepped forward and shook her hand, then Jai's, then turned to Mel. "Very

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nice to meet you, Mr. Townsend.”

“Pleasure’s mine, Sergeant,” Mel answered warmly.

The male bonding and testosterone level around the place was starting to stifle Emily.

“Well, great. Now that everyone’s been introduced perhaps we should review the schedule,” Emily suggested, starting to feel uncomfortable under Hawk’s gaze.

He held up a folded piece of paper he’d had hidden somewhere in his uniform. “I’ve got the schedule. It’s simple enough. I’ll be where I’m supposed to, when I’m supposed to be there. Don’t worry.”

“I wasn’t worried,” she bit out quickly.

“No?” Hawk returned skeptically. “Good.”

She hated he knew her so well. Not reviewing the schedule with all the parties involved would up her stress level considerably and Hawk darn well knew it.

Emily was considering how to suggest again they all go over the schedule together while not sounding obsessive compulsive, thereby proving Hawk right, when she noticed she was suddenly the subject of Jai’s smirk and Mel’s interested stare.

If she weren’t careful, not only Jai, but also Mel would know about her little indiscretion with Hawk.

“Um, Jai. Don’t you think we need to review the schedule with Mel?” Emily suggested.

Jai raised a brow in her direction. He had worked with her enough to know her obsessive organizational issues, too. And Emily felt fairly certain that it was becoming increasingly obvious to Mel, also.

Was she that transparent to the male race?

“Why yes, Emily. I think it is an excellent idea to go over things with Mel. Sergeant, would you and your men like to join us while we brief our new cameraman?”

Hawk nodded. “Sure. Just let us grab some chow.”

Jai smiled. “Great.”

“We’ll be right back,” Wally said, specifically to Emily, with a wink and a grin.

Hiding a smile, she nodded. “Okay, we’ll wait for

you.”

Hawk, Wally and Pettit left and when the overwhelming presence that was Hawk moved further away, Emily could finally breathe freely for the first time in minutes.

“So, you and the Staff Sergeant, huh?” Mel grinned.

“Jai!” Emily squealed the accusation, spinning to frown at him.

“What? I didn’t tell him! My hand to God, Emily, I swear,” Jai defended.

“Don’t blame him, love. Fair dinkum, Emmie, Jai didn’t tell me. You did. You should never play poker. You don’t have the face for it.”

Emily sighed. No use hiding it now.

Mel continued, “Whatever happened, there’s a bit of tension between you two now, I think.”

Emily laughed at that understatement. “Yeah. There is. He emailed me exactly once afterwards and now, after months of no contact, he’s acting like I’m his territory. You’re both men. What’s up with that?”

Jai shrugged and suggested, “Just men being men?”

Mel nodded. “Right, mate. And if you use it to your advantage, he’ll play directly into your hands.”

About to ask what he meant, and reiterate she was so angry that maybe she didn’t want him in her hands, further conversation was interrupted because Hawk and his men returned, trays of food in hand.

Changing the subject, Emily grabbed her briefcase off the floor. “Okay, let’s get started.”

“Super. So what have you got for me, love?” Mel asked, hooking an arm around the back of Emily’s chair. His fingers stretched to gently run up and down her arm.

It took Emily a moment to recover from the shock of that, and after one look at his wicked grin, she realized Mel was trying to make Hawk jealous for her benefit. And as petty as Emily felt, she kind of liked that idea. It would serve him right, after all. Maybe if he had bothered to email her, things could have been

different.

A glance in Hawk's direction and how his gaze remained focused on Mel's fingers still touching her told her the plan was working and also raised another issue—what if Hawk decided to beat up Mel over what was really a sham?

Hmm. She'd have to consider this carefully. On one hand, the shoot would be more difficult if the model took a swing at the cameraman. On the other hand, she loved that Hawk was jealous.

She watched as Pettit and Wally attacked their food like starving men while Hawk had yet to touch his, and she was certain jealousy was practically killing the man.

His face growing more stony by the second, Emily really began to fear for Mel's well being.

Deciding there was nothing she could do about it now without making a scene, she ignored Mel and his wandering fingers, refused to look at Hawk and his possessive anger and took out her papers to review the schedule with all involved. When all else failed, resort to work mode, that was Emily's usual *modus operandi* in times of personal crisis, and she saw no need to change it now.

"Okay. First thing after breakfast with the troops tomorrow morning is Wally's promotion ceremony with Hawk and Kerri London," Emily began.

~

Hawk would surely need dental work done by the time he left Bagram, because pretty much since he'd arrived, he'd had to keep his teeth grit tightly together in an attempt to not tell that damn Aussie to get his fucking hands off of Emily.

The cameraman had been all handy with her at dinner, then even worse the next morning when the bastard had the nerve to kiss her cheek hello at breakfast, leaving Hawk to wonder precisely where the bastard had spent the night and with whom.

Exactly how long had Emily and Crocodile Dundee been here in Bagram together? Hawk didn't know but

he sure as hell wanted to find out.

In spite of their history together, or maybe because of it, Hawk would never take Emily as the kind who would sleep around with a guy she'd just met. He knew he'd been the exception in Germany, not the rule. But damn, with this guy anything was possible. She might see him as different...smooth, sexy (not that Hawk could judge such things in other men) and he had that foreign thing going. Chicks always dug guys with foreign accents.

The possibility of Emily being with this Mel Townsend character was all Hawk could think about, and now he had to participate in Wally's promotion ceremony in front of a hundred and fifty, maybe two hundred, soldiers.

They were all gathered there, not for him or for Wally's promotion, but instead to get a look at this supposedly famous Kerri London singer babe.

"I can't believe Kerri London is going to help promote me!" Wally hissed in his ear.

"You've heard of her?" Hawk asked softly, surprised.

"Hell, yeah! You haven't? Oh come on, Hawk. You've heard her songs, I'm sure of it. *Red Lipstick and a New Pair of Shoes?*"

Hawk raised a brow. "Must have missed that one."

"*Only Your Dog Loves You Now?*" Wally suggested further.

Hawk laughed. "Nope. Sorry. But that's a good title, though."

Wally let out a frustrated sigh. "What do you listen to?"

"You bitching, mostly," Hawk grinned and then stood at attention when the superior officer who'd be promoting Wally climbed the stairs to the makeshift wooden stage followed by the red lipstick wearing star herself. At least they'd put her in a flak jacket for the day so perhaps Wally would be able to avoid drooling on her during the ceremony.

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"Attention to Orders!" The sound reverberated through the crowd. The gathering of soldiers on the ground in front of the stage snapped firmly to attention in unison.

A few hundred men in formation all in their camo uniforms, looking sharp and professional; Hawk knew that sight would make Emily happy for her shot. He located her blonde head and cute figure quickly in the crowd. Then he found that bastard cameraman nearby her and scowled.

Hawk forced himself to pay attention as the ceremony began and the officer read the promotion warrant.

"The Secretary of the Army has reposed special trust and confidence in the Patriotism, Valor, Fidelity, and Professional Excellence of Trent Shirley Wallace..."

*Shirley?* Oh, Wally was never going to hear the end of that!

"...In view of these qualities and his demonstrated leadership potential and dedicated service to the U.S. Army, he is therefore promoted from Specialist to Sergeant..."

As the reading of the warrant continued and finally came to a conclusion, Hawk had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing at Wally's middle name and the look of horror on his face when he realized Hawk had heard it.

For the final piece of the promotion, the officer who'd read the warrant whispered instructions to the singer, who, to Wally's great pleasure, personally put his new stripes on his uniform.

"Congratulations, Sergeant Wallace," she cooed to the accompaniment of a few cameras flashes and the collective cheer of the assembly.

The promotion part of this gig was over but unfortunately Hawk's job was far from done. Next came the picture taking part of the program because every one of those many soldiers standing out in the

cold was there to get his picture taken with Kerri London and Hawk was supposed to stand there next to her for each and every single shot, whether they wanted him there or not.

He glanced down at her now as she addressed him directly. "Hey there, sugar. Sorry we didn't get to meet earlier. I'm Kerri."

Hawk took her extended hand. "Staff Sergeant Hawkins."

She raised one thin eyebrow. "That's a mouthful, darlin', although I am sure you are just that." She smiled seductively. "What should I call you?"

Hawk raised a brow of his own. "You can call me Hawk."

"Mmm. I like that. Hawk. Nice. Now, Sergeant Trent Shirley Wallace. Since you're the man of the hour, you get your picture made first." She turned her solicitous smile on Wally, who visibly melted beneath her gaze.

"Shirley's a family name, ma'am. My mama's maiden name. We take family seriously where I'm from," he explained, standing so close to Kerri for the pose they looked glued at the hip.

The Army photographer motioned for Hawk to step closer to her also and he did so, although leaving a good six inches between his leg and hers.

"A fine man such as yourself, I'm sure you do take family serious, sugar. Now smile pretty for the camera."

The snap of the camera heralded one picture down, two hundred or so more to go.

Actually, the entire process took less time than Hawk anticipated, especially considering Kerri took the time to personally flirt with each and every one of the men who climbed up next to her for a picture, all under the watchful eye of her bodyguard, of course.

By the end, if Hawk never heard the word "sugar" again, it would be too soon.

When the long line of soldiers finally disappeared

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and Kerri and Hawk were left alone on stage with no one but the base photographer, the woman still amazingly had the capacity to smile at him.

“Well, thank you, Hawk. It was nice to have company for this one. I’m usually alone.”

Hawk had to laugh. He somehow doubted Ms. Kerri London was ever alone unless she wanted to be. “We both know not one of those soldiers was here to have their picture taken with me. They probably have their knives out cutting me out of the prints as we speak.”

She laughed and smacked his chest playfully. “You’re a funny one. But I can tell you I wouldn’t be throwing your photo away. I bet just your picture could keep a girl warm at night.”

Shaking his head at her with a slightly embarrassed grin, Hawk broke eye contact with Kerri and noticed Emily next to the stage. She was telling Rasta-photographer and Crocodile Dundee something, but judging from the look on her face as she noticed Kerri touching him, she was pissed.

Wasn’t that interesting...

Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, Hawk played right into her jealousy. “Then maybe we should have the photographer snap a shot of just the two of us. One copy for you and one for me. What do you say, Miss London?”

“I’d love that, sugar. But only if you call me Kerri.”

From the corner of his eye he watched Emily’s face redden. Hawk replied with a grin, “You got it, Kerri.”

Then he draped one arm around the star and for the first one of all those many, many pictures, Hawk actually smiled.

Life was short. Hawk had learned that from watching too many lives ended too soon. Emily may be pissed, she may even be sleeping with the Aussie, but he knew one thing for certain, he wouldn’t give up a chance such as this to be with her.

They’d been thrown together again for this USO

thing by fate or luck or frigging Dalton for all he knew. But whoever or whatever had put them together, Hawk wouldn't waste the opportunity.

Disengaging from Kerri, Hawk turned toward a seething Emily. "Okay, boss. What's next on the agenda?"

He knew exactly what was on the schedule next, it was a tour of the base facilities, but he wanted Emily to have to talk to him.

With a withering look that might wilt a less determined man, Emily answered, "I don't know. Ask Jai."

Hawk hid his smile. She knew. She had that schedule memorized, just like he did. She was just too mad to answer him. Yup, this jealousy thing just might work to his advantage.

Loud enough so she would hear, Hawk said, "Come on, Kerri. Off to our next stop." Then he extended his hand to help the singer down the steps just as Emily turned in a huff and stalked away.

Hawk watched her go and grinned. He always did enjoy a challenge and if nothing else, winning back a fuming Emily would be that.

"Bring it on. I'm ready, sweet thing," Hawk said to himself.

"You say something, Hawk?" Kerri cooed, nearer to him than he'd realized.

"Hmm? I'm just talking to myself. Bad habit I picked up from being deployed so much. You ready for our tour?"

"Ready and willing, sugar." She winked and extended her arm for him to take.

Strolling arm in arm with her, like the gentleman he sometimes pretended to be, Hawk shook his head at himself as they walked. In the not so distant past, this woman would have been right up his alley. A hot and willing redhead, a pre-set and definite date of departure, deployment as the ideal excuse to not call her again... The perfect set-up for a short-lived, hot and heavy

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fling, and Hawk wasn't at all interested.

Hawk had to wonder about why he had this sudden change of heart. Then he glanced up and saw Emily's irate, quick stride ahead of them in the distance and Hawk figured he already knew.

## Chapter Fifteen

Emily stared down at her copy of the schedule on the desk. One more day for a few more staged photo ops and then back to New York.

She wasn't sure if she was happy to get away from having to watch Hawk with that harpy or not since after this, she'd likely never see the man again.

"I told you before. You keep frowning like that and you're gonna get wrinkles."

His deep, aching familiar voice suddenly filled the room. She cursed herself for leaving the door to the office open so he could sneak up on her.

Hawk swung that open door closed.

"I thought we'd never be alone," Hawk growled, so near to Emily's ear, she could feel the warm heat of his breath on her skin. His close proximity sent a shiver straight down her spine, which only made her frown deeper.

She glanced around the USO office she'd been allowed to use. Darn it. They were not only alone, but this late at night, there wasn't much chance of that changing.

Hawk sidled up closer behind her until she felt the hard muscles of his thighs pressed against her back. Running his hands up both her arms, he bent and kissed her neck lightly.

"What do you think you're doing?" She jumped up

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out of the chair and spun to face him. He let her turn in his hands, pushed her discarded chair aside and moved in again.

One large, warm, rough hand moved to cup her face. She had to swallow the lump forming in her throat as she ached to reach out and touch the man so close to her.

She watched his mouth move slowly toward her as he said, "I'm picking up where we left off in Germany."

As much as her lips craved his, Emily's eyes flew open wide at the nerve of that statement. "Oh, no you're not!"

"Why not? You want me as much as I want you. I can see it written all over your face."

"That's not true." Emily was one of the worst liars on earth, but she figured it was worth a shot.

Hawk grinned. "You've said that before, beautiful. Remember, back in Germany, right before you jumped me?"

The reminder of Germany fought back Emily's raging hormones and brought her screeching to her senses. "You're right. I did, and you never even emailed me afterwards. Oh, wait, sorry. Correction. You did email me. One damn word and then nothing! And now you're all flirty with that Kerri London!"

She shoved him away hard, but a part of her immediately regretted the loss of his warmth.

Hawk's eyes narrowed and for the first time during this encounter, he appeared unsure of himself. "No flirtier than you are with that Aussie cameraman."

"I am not!"

"Bull shit."

"It is not bull shit. I do not flirt with him." Emily feared she might have actually stomped one foot like a child as she made that statement, but continued anyway. "You want to see flirting, take a look at Kerri London. *That* is flirting. I do not flirt!"

"Okay, maybe you don't, but Crocodile Mel sure as hell does with you and you are all too ready to let him,

aren't you?"

"So what? I'm not involved with anyone. You have no claim on me, David Hawkins!"

Hawk drew in a long, slow, deep breath. "No, I don't. You're right."

Impossibly, he looked almost sad about that.

Letting out a sigh, Hawk said, "I'm sorry I didn't email you."

An apology from Hawk, Emily had to wonder exactly how many woman could claim they'd received one of those. She guessed not many.

"Why didn't you?"

He shrugged and released one, short, bitter laugh. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

Emily crossed her arms firmly. "Yeah, well it wasn't. In fact, I can tell you, it sucked."

*Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry.* Emily repeated the mantra silently, willing her misty eyes to listen up and follow orders as she stared unfocused at the stained ceiling.

Stepping close again, Hawk whispered, "I know. Let me make it up to you."

With a lot less conviction than before, Emily spat, "Why are you bothering kissing up to me? Little Miss USO was all over you today. Why don't you go be with her? I'm fairly certain you'll get lucky." *If you haven't already*, she added to herself.

Hawk chuckled. "Little Miss USO. That's funny. And I'm not interested in Kerri. I'm interested in you."

Emily let out a huff of air. Hating the hope that was beginning to sprout in her chest, she held on to the memory of a smiling Hawk attached to Kerri London's hip all day. She hated it about as much as she loathed that he called her Kerri when Emily had been everything from doll to Goldilocks to boss on this trip.

"If you're not interested in her, you don't show it very well."

"I'll show you now," he whispered.

Hawk's lips covered hers in an instant and she

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couldn't fight it. Truth be told, she didn't try.

As his mouth crushed hers, she let the tears escape until they wet her face and crept into their kiss.

"I'm so sorry, Emily." Hawk's hands wiped her face as he continued to kiss her and murmur, "So sorry."

He picked her up like she weighed no more than a rag doll and set her on the desk's edge, stepping between her legs as his kisses became more passion-filled and less apologetic.

Emily knew being with him again now would make leaving again in two days even harder than it had been the first time they parted in Germany. What she hated even more was that she didn't care. She wanted to be with him, as painful as it would be later.

Hawk pulled back, grabbed her face in both of his hands and stared at her closely through eyes heavy with wanting. His voice husky, he said, "I'm gonna lock the door."

With a tremor in her voice, Emily answered the question he hadn't asked. "Okay."

Drawing in a sharp breath, Hawk flipped the lock and was back in the blink of an eye. And then his hands were everywhere, followed by her clothes. Emily didn't blame Hawk for his haste, she couldn't get enough of him, either. Touching wasn't enough. Even his hot skin pressed against hers wouldn't satisfy her need.

Emily didn't feel complete until, with a shudder and a groan Hawk said her name, her real name, and slid deeply inside her. Only then, on a cold metal desk in a strange office in the middle of Afghanistan did Emily feel like she'd truly come home.

The delicate wall she'd worked so hard to construct around her bruised heart over the last two months crumbled further with every thrust of Hawk's body into hers.

Weeping and shuddering, Emily realized she was in big trouble when she found herself crying and coming at the same time.

More tenderly than a man his size and usual demeanor should have been capable of, Hawk cradled her in his arms, quieting her sobs while tenderly making love to her.

He loved her gently until they came together in one final, tremendous conclusion to what, to her chagrin, felt like a momentarily huge event in her life.

"You alright?" he asked moments afterward, still covering her body with his.

"No," she answered simply, truthfully.

Hawk brushed a stray hair out of her face and sighed. "I am sorry."

"I know you are. But nothing's changed. You're going to do it again."

"No, I won't."

Staring up at the ceiling, Emily laughed sadly. "Yes, you will. You'll go away in two days and I'll never hear from you."

Hawk shook his head. "You will hear from me. You'll see."

With two muscular arms, Hawk levered himself off of both her and the desk and began to get dressed.

His eyes never left her as he watched while she did the same. With admiration in his voice, Hawk swore, "Damn. I wish I could take you back to my tent with me."

Emily wished the same thing. If she was going to have a newly broken heart, she might as well enjoy a full night of sex first.

"My tent maybe?" she suggested hesitantly.

He shook his head with a sad smile and touched her face softly. "That would be very nice, but it's not a good idea. I could get in big trouble."

"Okay, I understand." Not really, but...

Kissing her again deeply, he let out a sound of near pain when he pulled back from her. "You are very hard to leave."

*You should talk*, Emily thought as he moved away.

Looking them both over to make sure they were

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dressed and put back together enough to be seen in public, Hawk moved toward the door and paused with his hand on the lock. With a sweet smile in her direction, Hawk asked, "Ready to get back to the real world?"

*Not even close.*

Still trembling, Emily nodded. "Sure."

~

Making love to Emily was easy. Trying to get some sleep afterwards, not so much.

Tired and yes, still wanting more of her, Hawk finally dragged his sorry ass out of his rack and hit the showers. The hot water striking his back felt good until...

"Hawk! Holy shit, you have to get out here now."

Soap still in his eyes, Hawk switched off the shower and quickly wrapped a towel around his waist and glanced down to check his condition. His mind had wondered back to reliving his too short time with Emily with some pretty visible results. Luckily, Pettit's voice so close on the other side of the shower curtain had deflated that situation pretty rapidly.

Now Hawk, ready for anything but really wishing he had his gun and some clothes on, flew out from behind the shower curtain to come face to face with a very flustered Pettit. "What? What's wrong?"

"It's Wally."

Oh no. When it came to attracting trouble, that kid was a life-sized magnet. "Where is he?" Hawk asked as he pulled his uniform t-shirt over his head, not taking the time to tuck the hem into the waistband of his pants.

"That's the part you aren't going to believe. He's in Kerri's tent."

"Aw, fuck." Hawk jumped on one foot as he shoved a sockless foot into his boot, grabbed his blouse in his fist and ran for the door.

He'd had a bad feeling about Wally's ability to resist that woman's overt flirting. What he'd been

counting on was that Kerri was all show and she wouldn't actually follow through.

Bad call on Hawk's part because now Wally could get into huge trouble, and, looking down at his barely dressed, definitely non-regulation appearance, Hawk realized so could he if anyone saw him looking like this.

Hawk didn't even feel the cold air against his still wet skin as they flung through the entrance to the tent used by Kerri's entourage...only to be stopped by the steel wall that was her personal bodyguard.

He heard Kerri say, "Let them through, Tony. It's okay."

Looking around the brick's chest, Hawk saw Kerri, fully clothed and wringing her hands. "I didn't know who else to call. I'm pretty sure he can get into trouble for this and I didn't want to do that. I couldn't find you so I had Tony get Ryan."

Hawk looked around the otherwise empty room and frowned. "I don't understand. Where's Wally and what happened?"

Kerri hooked a thumb at the door behind her. "In there."

That didn't explain much, but Hawk didn't require words when he could just go find out for himself. He preferred that actually, seeing things for himself.

Striding to the next room, the picture awaiting him there truly was worth a thousand words.

"Jesus, Wally." Seeing his newly promoted sergeant stretched out there, face down, naked and tangled up with an equally undressed female had him cursing even more colorfully beneath his breath. Judging by the woman's uniform lying on the floor she was with the 455<sup>th</sup> Air Expeditionary Wing of the USAF. Fraternization at its most blatant.

"Pettit, get in here. Kerri, can your guard keep everyone out of here until I clean up this mess? I mean everybody. I don't care if it's a five star general or the President of the United States, they cannot, I repeat *cannot* enter this room."

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"You got it, Hawk. Tony?" Kerri glanced back at her hired brute as he folded his arms and nodded, relieving Hawk's worries somewhat on that front.

And now for Wally. The scene looked like a cross between a frat house party and a Roman orgy.

Hawk eyed an empty bottle of bourbon lying sideways on the floor. Another violation that was enough to get Wally court-marshaled and kicked out of the service.

Hawk picked up the glass bottle and handed it to Kerri. "Civilians can probably get away with drinking on base, but Wally..." He shook his head.

Kerri got his drift and nodded, eyeing the bottle. "Gotcha. I'll be more careful with my empty Wild Turkey bottles in the future."

Stashing it deep in the garbage bin already mostly filled with water bottles and Styrofoam plates, Kerri winked at him and Hawk said a silent thank you that she was being so cool about this. They might just get Wally out of this mess without a trip to the brig first.

"We've got to get him up, dressed and out of here," he said mostly to himself, but Pettit stepped forward.

Stooping down, Pettit grabbed a fallen bottle of water off the floor and cracked the top. Standing over Wally, he looked a bit too pleased as he doused Wally's head with the entire contents.

It took a bit of time to bring him around. Wally started out sputtering and then looked hazily around the room through squinted eyes. Hawk watched as the pieces began to fall into place in Wally's addled brain, waiting for full realization to set in before he bothered yelling at him.

Wally glanced down at the naked girl beneath him and there it was, the "oh shit" look.

"Wally, what the hell were you thinking?"

Naked and sitting up on the edge of the bunk now, Wally, still dazed, shook his head. "Hell if I know, Hawk. I guess I wasn't thinking."

Hawk averted his eyes with a scowl. "Obviously.

And can you please put some clothes on?"

Wally grabbed a pair of underwear off the ground from amid the tangle of discarded clothes, pulled them on and then sat down heavily on the edge of the bed with his forearms braced on his knees.

Airman whatever-her-name-was still didn't stir, which was probably for the better. One problem at a time.

"Oh, he was thinking alright, but with the little head instead of the big one," Pettit joked.

Hawk shot him a look to silence him.

"If someone besides me and Pettit found you here, you could at the very least be stripped of your new rank. You'd be damn lucky if you didn't end up out of the Army totally with a dishonorable discharge."

"I know, Hawk. I was stupid."

Hawk continued, undeterred by Wally's contrition. "And then we have to hope she doesn't press charges. You outrank her, Wally. If she decides to cry sexual harassment or worse, rape..."

Wally shook his head miserably. "I know. I'm sorry. I swear to you. I won't let it happen again. Ever."

Hawk went on, "And if she does end up talking and you lose that promotion and get busted back down to specialist or lower, you know it's going to fuck with your head. I can't, I *won't*, have you become a liability downrange, Wally."

Wally simply sat looking repentant, head shaking. Hands shaking, too, now that Hawk took a closer glance.

Hawk sighed. "Get dressed and get out of here."

"Yes, sir." Judging by his tone and the sudden switch to the formal "sir", Wally had realized he was in very deep shit.

With a quick backward glance at the unconscious girl still on the bed, a clothed but disheveled Wally slunk out of the tent.

Pettit watched him go before saying, "You think he

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learned his lesson?"

Hawk laughed bitterly. "No."

"Well, I bet he'll at least be on his best behavior for the rest of the time we're here," Pettit offered.

Hawk sighed. "Yeah, maybe. But I can tell you one thing. I'm not going to let him forget this. When it comes time for maintenance duty back at camp, Sergeant Wallace, if he's lucky enough to still hold that title, is going to be first on my list."

Pettit laughed. "I have no doubt, Hawk. I have no doubt."

Grabbing a twisted sheet hanging from the bottom of the bed, Hawk pulled it up, covering her the best he could without getting too close.

"What do we do with her?" Pettit asked with a glance at the Airman.

Good question.

"I guess we leave her here to sleep it off. Will you go make sure Wally keeps himself out of sight until he doesn't look and smell like he rolled in a bottle of bourbon?"

"Sure thing, Hawk." With a nod, Pettit left to do as he was told like a good soldier. If only Wally could be so obedient.

Turning, Hawk noticed Kerri hovering in the doorway. "That okay with you? If we leave her here to sleep it off?"

"Of course, it's her bunk for while I'm here anyway. Until now she's been no problem, real quiet," Kerri explained. "She did hint that her boyfriend back home just sent her a Dear John, or I guess Dear Jane letter. That's probably what got into her, besides Wally, that is."

Kerri grinned at her own little joke and went out to the front of the tent.

Hawk followed. "Thanks for calling me. It could save his career."

Kerri smiled. "No problem."

He smothered any feelings of guilt about yelling at

Wally when he remembered that he and Emily had broken some rules themselves last night. Yeah, Hawk's had been a similarly unwise decision, but with one big difference—Emily was a civilian, making it a shade less illegal, but not by much. They also hadn't been drunk. Nope. Alcohol wasn't required for either of them to want to jump each other.

Hawk glanced back at the doorway to the room where the Airman still slept. "I just hope she's smart about this."

"She's a decent kid, Hawk. She's been assigned to me as kind of a liaison since I arrived. I think she'll do the right thing and keep this quiet. She will if I have anything to say about it, anyway."

Hawk smiled. "You're one in a million, Kerri."

She nodded. "Yeah, I know, Hawk. Too bad I'm not the one in a million for you."

Surprised, Hawk had to laugh. "You don't want a tired, mean old soldier like me, Kerri. Believe me."

"You'd be surprised at what I might want." Kerri ran one red polished nail down Hawk's t-shirt and to his surprise, it did nothing for him.

Sure, she was hot. Yeah, a few months ago he may have fallen into bed right there with this woman and never looked back. But things had changed, and without his even realizing it.

Hawk grabbed her hand gently, gave her fingers a gentle squeeze and then removed them from his chest. "Sorry, Kerri."

She smiled. "I hope she appreciates you."

Laughing out loud, Hawk shook his head. "Nope. I can honestly say she doesn't. Not yet anyway. But one day, she will."

"She better. And if she doesn't, give me a call. Now that this little situation has bonded you with my body guard Tony, your phone call might actually make it through to me."

Hawk smiled. "I'll keep that in mind. And thanks again."

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“No problem, sugar.”

Pulling on the blouse he still held balled in one fist, and with socks shoved in one pocket and his pants still not tucked properly into his boots, Hawk took a quick peak outside the door, made sure no brass was around to see him and skirted around the side of Kerri’s tent for his own.

## Chapter Sixteen

Wally's poor judgment and the still looming possible consequences aside, Hawk still walked to the USO offices with a spring in his step. He may have more events with Kerri, the ever-present Tony and the mismatched team of photographers for another day's fun, but he also had another entire day with Emily, and if he had anything to say about it, some more private time with her tonight.

He opened the door to the office and realized, by the look of the full room, he was the last to enter. Used to being the first to arrive most places, Hawk decided to cut himself some slack since the morning had already been fairly eventful and the day hadn't even really started yet.

Kerri, sporting an interesting outfit comprised of a camo flak jacket and black high heel boots, was the first to greet him. "Good morning again, sugar."

His eyes searched the room for Emily as he responded, "Morning."

Spotting her, he turned to go over when Kerri stopped him with her hand on his arm.

"Oh, Hawk. That issue you were worried about? It won't be a problem. She is so embarrassed she made me swear that I wouldn't tell anyone about it, so I think your boy is in the clear."

That got his full attention. Hawk let out a breath

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filled with relief. "Thanks, Kerri. That is really good to hear."

"Yeah, I thought you'd like that." Kerri grinned and then went back to sipping at her water bottle as Hawk made his way over to Emily.

Emily sat at the corner desk scribbling furiously with her head down. Happy to find her separated from the group so they'd have some privacy, Hawk went to her, smiling at the memories that flooded him as he passed what had become "their" desk the evening before.

Hawk lowered his voice so the rest of the room's inhabitants wouldn't hear. "Hey, sweet thing. Mmmm. I missed you last night."

Venom shot from her glare as she said, "Don't you talk to me. Jai will be running things today, as soon as I give him some instructions. And don't worry, Hawk, you won't be seeing me again before you leave."

"What? Why? What's the matter?" Hawk frowned, totally and completely confused. He tried to catch her eye, to read her face, but she looked away. "Emily. Look at me."

Standing, she turned to go and he grasped her arm. "Emily. What's the matter? Everything seemed fine last night. I thought..."

"I saw you," she hissed.

Hawk frowned. "Saw me what?"

She didn't answer but he saw her eyes grow glassy with unshed tears combined with anger.

"Emily, you saw what?" He began again just as a deafening blast rocked the ground they stood upon, so strong he had to reach out with one hand and grab the desk to steady himself.

"What in the bloody hell was that?" Hawk heard the Aussie exclaim. He turned in time to see the idiot man run out of the office door, video camera in hand, toward the undisclosed danger rather than away from it like any sane civilian would.

"Wait. Don't..." Hawk yelled after him, but he was

gone already.

Emily took that opportunity to wiggle from his loosened grip on her arm and make a run for the door herself.

“Emily, no!” Hawk screamed. He didn’t know what had happened, but he did know he wanted Emily near him until he found out.

He tackled her just as she cleared the entrance of the building, taking them both down into the dirt on the ground as the many sirens scattered throughout the base erupted. Amid the garbled loudspeaker announcements, he saw people running everywhere he looked.

“Get off of me!” Emily cried, nearly hysterical.

She struggled against him, unbelievably strong for a female her size. His attention split between the bedlam on base and the hellion beneath him, Hawk somehow managed to grab both of Emily’s flailing fists in one of his hands and pin them above her head.

“Listen to me! I don’t know what the hell is wrong with you suddenly but I’m sorry, I don’t have time to deal with it now. I’m a little busy trying to keep you alive. Now get the fuck back in that building or I’ll put you in there myself.”

He hated treating her like this, resorting to frightening her but it was necessary. Tearfully, Emily looked at him with a mix of hate and fear in her eyes and finally, thankfully, she nodded.

Back in the USO office, Hawk had no time to comfort Emily because chaos had broken out among the group. Hawk released his grip on her arm once she was safely inside and stood stunned, deciding how to deal with this situation just as the Aussie returned.

“The east wall of the prison facility is blown to bloody bits,” the breathless cameraman reported.

Hawk instinctively reached for his M16 and realized it wasn’t there. All he had was a damn pistol, which was better than nothing but damn, he’d give anything for Pettit and Wally right about now, and his

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automatic weapon.

Mel addressed the group. "Look here, mates. We're sitting ducks if they find us here in this office with nothing but Hawkins's pistol to protect six people. I think we should make a run for it. There's a bunker not far..."

Tony shook his giant head emphatically. "No way, we stay here where I can protect Kerri."

"How far is that bunker?" Jai asked over Tony.

Hawk looked at the group—Emily an emotional mess, Kerri in spike heels, the three-hundred pound Tony who probably hadn't run anywhere since grade-school gym class, the yahoo Aussie ready to take on the insurgents single-handedly and one Rastafarian with a camera. The answer to the bunker question was obvious to Hawk—*not close enough to risk it.*

Knowing he had to do something to manage the situation and fast before things spiraled any more out of control, he raised his voice and shouted, "Listen up!"

When the room fell silent, he continued, "When we're taking pictures or up on stage, you all can be in charge. But here and now, for this situation, if you people want to stay alive and get out of here in one piece, I'm in charge. And that means you do what I say quickly, calmly and without question. Do you understand?"

He looked around the room and saw a collective nod from among the assembly. The combined adrenaline felt almost palpable to Hawk's over-tuned senses.

"Now, here's what we know. Someone, most likely a guerilla faction of the Taliban, blew the wall of the base prison. I assume they did that to break out someone important to them who's being held there and until they accomplish that goal, they aren't going to leave."

"And for some even more good news," Mel piped in, "that facility with the giant hole in the wall can

hold up to five hundred prisoners, most of them Taliban or al Qaeda suspects who are not bloody happy to be there.”

*Great.* Hawk sighed.

“But won’t they just want to get the hell out of prison and run for the hills?” Kerri asked.

Mel shook his head. “We have to remember, love. These people don’t care if they live or die, and they will gladly take us with them. In their opinion, the more evil occupiers, meaning us, they kill the better.

Hawk took back control of the floor before this guy frightened them into further frenzy. “So, we have an undisclosed number of insurgents within the perimeter of the base who are obviously in possession of explosives and most likely weapons, we also have the prisoners, as well as, I would assume, probable snipers outside the fences. But we also are within the largest US base in Afghanistan. The troops here are well armed and trained. They can handle this.”

“So, what does this all mean for us, Hawk? What do we do? Tell us what to do, sugar.” Kerri’s unquestioning faith in him put even more pressure on the already overwhelming situation.

Hawk had been prepared for almost every scenario in training and in battle, but he was experienced in leading a squad of skilled professional soldiers, not a laughably diverse group of untrained civilians.

“We stay here and sit tight for now.” He didn’t want to say it but he didn’t know what else to do without putting them all in jeopardy. Here, at least he had some semblance of control. If the insurgents came through the door he had his pistol and knew Tony had some firepower hidden on his person. That made two pistols to at least defend the women with.

If their attackers chose to blow the building instead...Hawk decided not to think about that right now, hoping the baddies were more occupied with freeing the prisoners, possibly five hundred of them if the facility was at full capacity. *Shit.* Maybe he should

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risk a run for the bunker with them all.

Catching Emily's gaze, he saw hate and anger in her eyes before she looked away again. *One problem at a time*, he thought. He couldn't figure out what was wrong with her if he didn't keep her alive first.

"If only we had some weapons," Jai lamented.

Hawk shook his head to disagree. "No. Weapons in the hands of the untrained are worse than no weapons at all."

Jai smiled. "Four years ROTC in college. One tour in the sandbox courtesy of the Army and two more years embedded as an AP photographer in Kandahar. That enough training for you?"

Well, damn. That's what he got for judging a book by its cover. Hawk nodded. "Yeah, it's enough, but we still don't have any weapons."

"I have a weapon and I know how to use it," Tony said succinctly.

And how he had smuggled that on base Hawk didn't even want to imagine.

"I know, Tony, and I'm glad for that at least. But that six-shooter you're not hiding so effectively in that shoulder-holster under your jacket doesn't have enough range or firepower to do us much good against what those guys have out there."

"I have a phone." Emily spoke for the first time since the explosion.

"You have signal? I haven't been able to get shit out here," Tony exclaimed, holding up his own phone.

"Satellite phone," Jai answered Tony's question for her.

This whole thing was too surreal, discussing cell phone signal in the middle of an attack on a supposedly secure base.

Hawk laughed. "Well that's great. And who are you gonna call, Emily?"

"My boss," she answered with unmistakable attitude.

She was being deliberately evasive because she was

angry with him, for what he would love to know.

"Emily. Please. This is not the time..."

She interrupted his lecture. "Task Force Zeta. My boss Katie is engaged to BB Dalton, a Special Operative from Task Force Zeta."

Hawk never thought he'd be happy to hear that name mentioned again but actually, he was...or would be if they were even on the same continent. "Dalton and his boys are too far away to do us any good, Emily. From the States to here is..."

She shook her head violently. "No, they're not. Katie mentioned they're at some training thing in Islamabad this week. Islamabad's not too far, is it?"

Hawk could have hugged her for that piece of information, if he thought she wouldn't slug him. He laughed. "No, that's not too far."

"Call her, Em. Call now," Jai said.

Emily whipped out the phone and dialed with visibly shaking hands. "Katie. I need you to get a hold of BB right away..."

The entire process probably took barely five minutes, but moving in slow motion the way things often did in times of crisis, it seemed more like an hour between the time Emily had quickly told her boss about the situation and when her phone rang again.

She fumbled to pick it up off the desk.

"BB?" Emily's voice broke on a sob when she answered.

Hawk stood and walked to stand nearer Emily as Dalton spoke to her through the satellite phone. With tears glistening in her eyes, she nodded a few times at what he said, then held the phone up to Hawk. "He wants to talk to you."

Taking a deep steadying breath, Hawk held the phone up to his ear. "Dalton, it's Hawk."

"Oh, brother, am I glad you're there. Jimmy's on the line with CentCom now. We've been briefed as to the conditions there and I have to be honest with you, they're not good."

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*No shit.* “Yeah. I had kinda guessed that.”

“What’s your situation? Are you secure?”

“I’ve got five civilians holed up with me in a wood-constructed office building located in the center of the base and we’ve got nothing but two pistols among us.”

Jai cleared his throat and Hawk amended his statement, “One of the civilians is former military, another is hired muscle and knows his way around a gun, two more are women and one’s an Australian reporter.”

“Cameraman, mate, not a reporter, and I did some time in the Australian military myself,” the Aussie corrected him.

Hawk rolled his eyes. Suddenly everybody was a warrior.

He heard Dalton speaking to someone on his end of the line, then he was back. “Matt says he traced the signal from your satellite phone. He’s pinpointed your precise location within the base on the GPS. Wait for us there. We’re already in the air on our way to you.”

So Zeta knew where they were. Great. But what the hell they thought they were going to do once they got there, Hawk couldn’t even begin to guess.

“Roger that, Dalton. You got any suggestions for the meantime?”

“Just don’t move from your present position until you hear from me,” Dalton instructed.

Hawk raised a brow. All of Task Force Zeta’s super secret training, all of their science fiction-worthy state of the art implants, and that was the best advice Dalton could give them?

“Great. Thanks,” he grumbled.

“I’m sorry, Hawk. I’ll get back to you. We’ll have more specifics soon. Keep the phone nearby, okay? I’ll call you back.”

“Copy that. Hawk out.”

Dalton disconnected the call, leaving Hawk staring down at the black object in his hand. His fingers itched for his rifle, but instead, he was forced to depend on a

damn cell phone and Pretty Boy Dalton and the Zetas to save him.

Hawk was not a happy man.

"What'd they say?" the Aussie asked, standing close now.

"To sit tight," he relayed with a frustrated sigh.

"I'm not too good at sitting around doing nothing, mate," the man informed him.

Fists clenched, Hawk's face felt as if it had turned to stone as he asked in a low voice, "And you think I am?"

Kerri stepped between the two and turned to Hawk, laying a hand lightly on his forearm. "Listen, sugar. We know you're doing the best you can. If whoever was on that phone told you to sit tight, then we sit tight."

Hawk heard an irritated huff come from the corner of the office Emily had sequestered herself in since handing him the phone.

What the hell had he done to deserve this? One inexplicably angry and obviously jealous woman, a loose-cannon cameraman, a hung-over, useless and at the moment MIA team leader and, lest he forget, a terrorist bombing and breached prison facility.

So much for his simple modeling assignment...

A camera flash brought him out of his reverie. Turning towards Rasta-photographer, Hawk frowned. "What the hell do you think you are doing?"

Camera still in hand, the man flashed him brilliant white teeth. "Recording this moment for posterity and possibly winning me some photo awards. People love pictures of this kind of shit."

Hawk growled and was about to tell him what he thought about that when the cell phone rang again.

He grabbed it. "Yeah."

"Hawk, it's Dalton. Listen close. We're here. This is what I need you to do. Do not move from that building for any reason. No matter what. Do you hear me?"

"Yeah. What's the plan?"

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"Can't tell you that. This isn't a secure line. You're gonna have to trust us, Hawk."

Trust Dalton? With Emily's life and that of four other civilians currently in his care? Not a situation Hawk wanted to be in, but it looked as if he had no other choice.

"Dalton?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't screw up, or I'll have to kill you."

Hawk heard his laughter through the static on the line. "Zeta doesn't screw up, Hawk. You of all people should know that."

And if Pretty Boy thought that Hawk had forgotten that they were all there in Bagram and in this mess because of that stupid bet made in a moment of insanity in the Alps, he was dead wrong. Hawk only hoped they all lived to regret the decision he made in those mountains some more tomorrow.

"Okay, Hawk, I gotta go. We're ready to roll. Get the civilians under as much cover as possible and away from the windows but do not exit that building," Dalton reiterated over the sound of the helo in which Zeta had ridden to their rescue.

"Roger that." Disconnecting the call, Hawk glanced around the room at all of the people depending on him.

Commanding a group of soldiers was one thing. Hawk could be certain then that his orders would be followed. Now, he could only hope, and he really hated hoping...

Pushing doubts aside, Hawk sprang into action.

"I need the men to pair off and each grab a desk. Move them to the back of the room away from the window." He grabbed the end of one desk himself as Tony quickly moved to take the other side. The two photographers did the same with another piece of furniture.

That done, Hawk ordered, "Everybody, take cover under the desks and do not move, no matter what." He looked specifically at Emily when he added, "Do you

hear me?"

Eyes wide, she nodded and started to move just as Hawk detected the sound of Army Black Hawks in the air.

"Move it. Now. Quick!"

Pinning Emily beneath the leg hole of one desk with his own body, Hawk heard the helicopters open fire as the good guys—at least he really hoped it was the good guys—blasted their own base.

No wonder Pretty Boy wanted them inside. Hawk shook his head at the risky maneuver. As Emily trembled beneath him, Hawk tucked her head beneath his chin and mumbled against her hair, "Hell of a fucking plan, Dalton."

Then he added silently, *I hope to god it works.*

## Chapter Seventeen

From beneath Hawk's bulk, Emily heard the surreal noises coming from outside. The kinds of sounds she'd only heard before when she'd fallen asleep with the television on and woken up in the middle of a late-night showing of an old war movie. Explosions, rapid gunfire, whistling things shooting through the air followed by more explosions, all against the constant whir of helicopters above.

Even after all this time, months later, the memories still did not fade. The dreams, nightmares really, didn't stop either, nor did they let her sleep undisturbed, not for even one night.

The dream always started the same. Emily making her way to the USO tent to check her email just after sunrise. Her catching a glimpse of Hawk, buttoning his stupid blouse while sneaking out of Kerri's tent. The realization of what must have happened between them followed by the feeling of nausea.

Then the scene fast forwarded to Emily taking shelter beneath the desk, cradled in Hawk's arms while, over the clamor outside, he whispered to her that everything would be alright. Even as angry as she was with Hawk, feeling his strength, the heat of his body against hers, she almost believed him.

When Emily heard BB's voice outside she knew everything would be all right as two black clad figures broke through the office door, yelling the entire time

to Hawk not to shoot, that they were the good guys. Against all odds, they were being rescued.

Emily had somehow fought her way from beneath Hawk and run at BB, crashing into him hard with a hug that would have toppled a smaller man.

In the blur of shouted instructions and running that followed, before she could even begin to grasp what had happened, Emily found herself thrust into a helicopter and in the air, flying away from the melee. While the Black Hawks above kept the men who'd attacked the base occupied, BB and his team had whisked Emily and the rest of their small group away, minus Hawk.

Hawk wasn't with them on the helicopter, nor did he arrive later while they waited in the relative safety of the airport in Kabul for word of the situation at Bagram. Unfortunately, Kerri London was there, and that was enough to remind Emily exactly why she shouldn't care if Hawk lived or died. Even more unfortunate was the fact that Emily did still care and she hated that.

Glancing at her bedside clock now, she wasn't at all surprised to see it read four thirty. Why did the stupid dream always seem to come at the same time each morning? For once, she'd like to sleep at least until five thirty. Six thirty would be even better.

With a sigh, she swung her pajama-clad legs from beneath the warmth of her sheets and stumbled blindly toward the kitchen and the coffee pot. She'd long since learned to set up the coffee maker the night before since the pre-dawn awakenings had become her norm.

Yawning, Emily flipped open her laptop on the kitchen table while the steaming brew dripped slowly into the waiting carafe.

This was another habit Emily had gotten into, checking her email immediately upon waking, before work each morning during the week and obsessively, all day on weekends.

Worse, she'd gotten used to receiving the usual email from Hawk. She'd come to expect to find it

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waiting there for her. He'd emailed her nearly every day for the past months since she'd gotten home from Afghanistan. An impressive run considering she had never responded, not even once.

How could she respond when she didn't know what to say? Her pride wouldn't allow her to admit to him that he'd torn out her heart by sleeping with Kerri. She certainly couldn't say she forgave him because she didn't. Yet still she anticipated the correspondence daily.

He'd long since stopped asking her to tell him what had upset her that day back in Bagram—as if he didn't know! Now, he simply told her about his day, the weather, funny things Wally or Pettit had said or done, apologizing profusely when a mission or an internet outage kept him from emailing her for any length of time. And each day she would read the email about twenty times and then save it in a special file to read again later.

*Pitiful.* That was the only word she could think of to describe this long-distance, one-sided, pseudo-relationship with him. Just plain sad.

Emily rubbed her face hard with both hands, then focused her sleepy, bleary eyes on her email inbox. Frowning, she noticed that strangely, there wasn't an email from Hawk.

Fighting the disappointment, she left the other twenty or so emails from friends, family and spammers unopened and went to the cupboard to grab a coffee mug, making excuses for the lack of word from Hawk the entire way. She'd read online yesterday that there were bad rainstorms in Afghanistan. That must be it. No internet because of the weather.

Pouring the steaming hot, silky black liquid into a large ceramic cup, Emily assured herself that tomorrow, the next day at the latest, she would find an explanation and an apology from Hawk. However, that she had obviously become addicted to hearing from him every day was not at all reassuring.

With a sigh, Emily carried the remainder of her coffee into the bathroom. She might as well shower and get ready for the big day. Emily let out a short laugh at that thought.

The big day. No, it was not her big day, but instead Katie's. At least Katie and BB got to have a big day. Emily had started to doubt she ever would. Certainly not with Hawk. And most likely not at all if she didn't get over her obsession with him.

She grabbed her new navy blue dress and hung it behind the bathroom door so any wrinkles would steam out while she showered.

Emily shot the offending items of clothing a dirty look as envy overwhelmed her. While she wore her stupid blue dress today, Katie would be in a long white dress.

Okay, so Katie wouldn't be wearing a traditional white wedding dress with train and veil today, it was still a wedding dress. And Katie would no doubt look beautiful in the champagne-colored, simple, sleek sheath dress. It totally suited her personality and the high empire waist hid her rapidly growing baby bump perfectly.

Of course Emily was happy for her friends, but she still couldn't fight the depression she felt over the fact that Katie had found the love of her life. If Emily had ever really thought she had found "the one" in Hawk, she had been proven very wrong.

Hawk was a dirty, rotten bastard who had slept with another woman the same night he'd made love to her, so why couldn't Emily prevent her heart from clenching each time she thought of him? If she didn't feel so miserable all the time, she'd think she was in love with him, further proof of how pitiful she was.

What had started many months ago as physical attraction and perhaps infatuation had grown into something more as she read his words in her darkened apartment each day.

Emily shook her head. If this was love, it sucked.

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Perhaps she was better off without it. She was definitely better off without him. If only she could learn to actually be without him. That would never happen as long as she used his daily emails as a crutch, but the thought of never hearing from him again sent her into a heart-racing panic attack.

With a head that was beginning to ache from lack of sleep and too much thinking, Emily stepped beneath the streaming hot water. Hopefully it would wash away her mood as well as all thoughts of Hawk so she'd be able to enjoy Katie and BB's special day.

Emily needed to have her wits about her today, because after the nearly two hour train ride to upstate New York, Emily would be serving as Katie's maid of honor. With all of BB's siblings and his team there, Emily alone would be representing Katie's side.

BB may have won the battle to have the ceremony and luncheon afterwards in his hometown in New York with his massive family and his best friends from Zeta in attendance, but Katie had still managed to brutally cut down the guest list to fewer than three-dozen.

Maybe among those there, Emily would meet a nice single man who would steal her heart and make her forget all about David Hawkins.

Yeah, sure. Not likely, but Emily could hope anyway.

~

Hawk listened with a lump in his throat as his first sergeant praised his heroism before pinning the medal on his chest. A frigging medal for saving the lives of five civilians during the Bagram bombing.

The problem was, Hawk hadn't done anything. Pretty Boy Dalton and his Zeta boys had ridden in to the rescue. The most Hawk had done was relay Dalton's damn instructions from over the cell phone and then watch helplessly as they whisked Emily and the others away in the waiting helo.

Having to watch another man rescue his girl...talk about feeling impotent.

The only good thing about Zeta's dramatic rescue had been, with Emily on her way to safety, Hawk was free to run to his tent and grab his weapon. It had felt damn good to finally have the M16 in his hands and be doing something, anything, besides just sitting there. He'd found Pettit and Wally in the nearest bunker and another piece of his scrambled world settled back into place.

The Black Hawk attack had done much to rattle the insurgents within the perimeter. It didn't take long before they were all either captured or fled. Hawk helped when and where he could, always wondering about Emily's location and well being until he finally pinned down Dalton and received confirmation she was safe.

And that was the last he heard about her. Not one damn word in months, and that was no fault of his because he emailed her every damn day. She never once responded, but he did it anyway. Every day he held onto some small hope that there would be a response from her. Every day he found instead disappointment and he finally realized exactly how she had felt when he hadn't contacted her after Germany.

He'd screwed up once, but he wouldn't do it again, so he wrote, every day he could, and he would continue to do so until she changed her mind or he got shipped home and could see her again in person and change her mind.

"You don't look as happy as I thought you would, sergeant. Something wrong?" His first sergeant laid an arm around Hawk's shoulders like they were old drinking buddies.

"No, sir. This is just all a bit unexpected." *Not to mention undeserved.*

His commander laughed. "Most good things in life are, sergeant."

Like meeting Emily had been. How the hell he had managed to screw it up so badly and so suddenly, Hawk still didn't know. And being able to do nothing about it

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besides cool his heels for the remainder of his deployment could possibly drive him insane.

The sound of a helo in the distance captured Hawk's attention. Tensing, he frowned, squinting at the horizon until it came into view and he recognized Lou's chopper. "Could that be supplies already? Seems like we just got them."

His first sergeant laughed. "You looking a gift horse in the mouth? Mail call and supplies can't come often enough as far as I'm concerned!"

Hawk smiled. "Yes, sir."

Lou dropped the chopper in a fast messy landing and came running across the camp, straight toward them.

Hawk's smile faded as instinct kicked in. "Something's wrong."

Taking off in a jog that turned into a full out run, Hawk met the old man not far from where he'd landed.

"Lou. What's the matter?"

Wheezing what sounded like it could be his last breath, Lou gasped, "Satellite's down. Couldn't get word to you. I came to get you." The breathless man shoved papers into Hawk's hand.

He looked down and saw the American Red Cross logo on the letterhead and his heart stopped. AmCross orders only came through when someone at home was dying or dead and the soldier needed to get home fast. And these orders had his name on them.

Hawk was anxious to get back to the States, but not like this. He skimmed down the page and saw his sister's name and his stomach twisted.

Hawk's first sergeant was next to him in an instant. "What's wrong?"

"My sister, sir." Hawk looked up, still in shock. "Our parents are both dead. She's all I have left. I have to get home."

Empathy showed on his commander's face as he took hold of Hawk's shoulders and physically turned him back toward camp. "Go. Throw what you'll need in

a duffle and get on that helo.”

Good thing the first sergeant was there to tell him what to do, because at the moment, Hawk wasn't sure he would have known on his own. It seemed as if his brain had stopped working.

## Chapter Eighteen

“Hey there, Emmie.”

Emily glanced up from her desk as the familiar voice from the past filled the room. In the doorway to her office stood the cameraman, looking different, and pretty good actually, without the head to toe body armor and camouflage he’d worn in Bagram.

“Mel! What are you doing here?”

“I was in New York for a job. Jai and I met nearby for a cuppa and he suggested I stop by and see you.”

Emily smiled. She had actually missed the guy over the past months. Sadly, that was probably because he reminded her of Afghanistan and the last time she’d seen Hawk.

“So how you been, love?”

Emily shrugged. “Okay, I guess. Keeping busy.”

Mel took a step closer and propped his jean-clad bottom on the edge of her desk. “Jai told me you still have dreams about the bombing.”

Emily scowled. “So much for confiding my secrets in Jai.”

“Don’t be like that, Emmie. He and I have been through it ourselves enough to know what you’re feeling. He’s just concerned about you.”

Emily sighed. “I guess.”

“Well if you need to talk, Emmie, you give me a jingle.” Mel dropped a business card on her desk. “If I’m in the country, I’ll come running. If not, there’s

always the phone or email.”

She smiled. “Thanks.”

Mel continued, golden eyes crinkling as he smiled at her, “And if you wanted to give me a call to go out, I would like that, too.”

Emily looked up at him with surprise. “Like on a date?”

He laughed and nodded. “Unless you’re still with Hawkins.”

Now it was Emily’s turn to laugh. “I don’t know what I am.”

“Well, love, I have a policy. If a woman isn’t sure if she’s with a man or not, that is invitation enough for me.” Mel sobered and laid a hand over hers. “What’s wrong, love? Someone as pretty as you shouldn’t look so sad.”

Mel read her too easily, and he already knew she’d slept with Hawk so what the heck. Emily could use someone to talk to at the moment.

She took a huge sigh and began. “The morning of the attack, I saw Hawk coming out of Kerri London’s tent half dressed. Mel, he slept with her...” She left the rest of the horrible truth unspoken. *He slept with her right after he was with me.*

Mel looked surprised. “He didn’t tell you, love? Maybe not since it happened right before the bombing.”

“What happened?” Emily sat up straighter in her chair.

“Pettit found Wally plonked, starkers, and arse over tit with an Air Force Sheila. With Wally in the cactus, Pettit ran and got Hawk out of the shower and brought him to Kerri London’s tent.”

Emily’s heart began to pound. She didn’t understand half of what he had just said, but she grasped enough to know it was important. “Mel. Please, for god’s sake, could you please speak English this once and tell me what happened again?”

Mel grinned. “Sure, love. Pettit found Wally in

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Kerri's tent naked and lying there, drunk with the Air Force woman who was assigned as her liaison. Sex on base is enough to get Wally demoted if not court marshaled and dismissed with a dishonorable discharge. With Wally in so much potential trouble, Pettit ran and pulled Hawk out of the shower. That's why Hawk was coming out of Kerri's tent early in the morning half dressed. He was getting Wally out of trouble."

That she understood. "See now, was that so hard?" Emily grabbed both of his arms. "But Mel, you know all this for a fact?"

"Abso-bloody-lutely," he responded.

"I'll take that as a yes," she smiled.

He nodded. "Spot on. It's a yes. Wally told me himself after I found him emptying the bourbon soaked contents of his belly on the ground outside my tent. Pettit backed up the story. So there's no need to chuck a spaz."

"Yeah, whatever." Emily's mind was already on Hawk. "I have to email him. But I haven't heard from him in two weeks. What if he's mad at me? It's been so long, he wrote to me and I just ignored him. If only I could see him. If he was back in Germany maybe I could fly there, but Afghanistan..."

Emily had forgotten Mel was even there until he spoke again. "Didn't you know, love? He's here."

"What do you mean he's here? Is that some sort of slang again?"

"No. I mean he's here in the States. Emergency leave. His told me his sister was in the hospital for emergency surgery and there were complications. He got sent home to be with her since she's his only living relative."

Emily frowned. "How do you know this?"

"He flew home through Bagram. I saw him there when he was waiting for a flight out."

Emily glanced around frantically. "I need to get on my computer. I have to look up his sister and get an address or a phone number. I have to find out where she

lives. Shit, what if she's married and has a different last name? I'll never find her." Even if she wasn't, how many Hawkins were there in the United States?

Emily's head was spinning. "Wait. I know. Katie. I'll call Katie. Maybe she can use her military connections. But she just had the baby and it's still early. I don't want to wake her up."

Mel held up a hand. "Why don't you let me see what I can do?"

Shaking and desperate by now, Emily nodded, willing to try anything.

Mel whipped out a cell phone that looked nearly as big and complicated as her laptop and punched a few buttons. He rose and walked closer to the door to speak and, curious, Emily had to fight the urge to follow him and listen in.

When a few minutes later she saw him take out a small notepad and pen, she nearly jumped from her seat.

Finally, Mel came back to her desk wearing a grin and holding a piece of paper out for her.

"Is that...?"

"His sister's address and phone number."

"How did you get it?"

"Connections, love."

Finally, Emily got up the nerve and grabbed the paper he held out for her.

"Pennsylvania?" she read.

Hawk was in Pennsylvania. So close. Only one state away. "But what if he's not still there?"

Mel shrugged. "I saw him a little under two weeks ago. They wouldn't send him back so soon. Not counting travel time, which can take days each way, they give the blokes at least two weeks at home for emergency leave."

Emily's hopes surged. "But wait. What if his sister died? I can't bust into her home looking for him while he's grieving. Can I? Then again, maybe he needs me now, if she did..."

## *Model Soldier*

“Emmie. Dial the bloody number or I’ll do it for you.”

Glancing at Mel, she predicted he would do exactly that. She took out her cell phone and dialed the number with shaking hands.

“Hello,” a female voice answered the phone.

“Um, yeah, hi. I hate to bother you. I was actually looking for David Hawkins. I was told he might be there.”

“Can I ask who’s calling?”

“Um, it’s Emily Price. I work with him, not in the Army, but he did a job for my company...”

“Of course, Emily. He mentioned you, and I have to say, it’s a pleasure to meet you, even if it is only on the phone. You are the first woman in thirty years that I’ve ever seen throw my brother off balance. He would never admit that to me, but it was obvious. The man is a goner over you.”

Emily swallowed hard. “Me? Are you sure?”

She heard a laugh through the phone. “Yeah, pretty sure. But I’m sorry to tell you, David’s gone already.”

Her heart fell. “He is?”

“Yeah. I’ve got a girlfriend staying with me to help while I recover from the surgery and he has to get back in a few days.”

“Oh, um. Okay. Thanks. And I hope you feel better.”

“Emily, wait. He doesn’t own a cell phone but he checks in with me a few times a day with his calling card. Give me your number and I’ll pass it along to him.”

But what if he was too mad at her to call? Emily had to take a shot. “Okay. Here’s my work number and I’ll give you my home, too.”

~

Not having a cell phone never bothered Hawk while he was in Afghanistan, or even in Germany. But while in New York City trying to find Emily and having to check in with his sister often, it really sucked.

He had pretty much memorized his phone card number and was very familiar with every disgusting pay phone in the city. And now, leaning against the tiny metal shelf, pen and scrap of paper in hand, Hawk made his third phone call in the last hour. First had been to call his captain to ask him to contact Hank Miller and put Hawk in touch with Dalton.

Then the call back to his captain to get the info he'd obtained from Miller and now the call to Dalton, who had the damn nerve to question Hawk's intentions toward Emily like he was her damn father.

Hawk took a deep breath to steady his temper. "Look, Dalton. I've still got more than half of my time left to serve in Afghanistan. I'm here in the States for another two days and then I'm gone again. But I can honestly say I'll be back here as soon as Uncle Sam lets me. If Emily still wants me, that is. Actually, fuck that, even if she doesn't, I won't leave her alone until I change her mind."

Dalton remained silent so Hawk continued.

"But first I need to know where to find her. I wouldn't mind knowing how big a battle this is going to be, either. I mean, maybe she's seeing someone else." Shit, that could be why she hadn't responded to any of this emails.

Hawk was about to give up on Dalton and try to find a computer to email her on when he finally broke the silence. "I don't think I am spilling any secrets if I tell you this. She attended my wedding alone. She was invited with a date but she chose not to bring one. That was a few months ago but..."

Hawk would take anything he could get, even old information. His hopes raised, he was totally sincere when he said, "Thanks, Dalton."

"You're welcome. But I have to tell you one thing."

"What's that?"

"Emily is like my sister. You hurt her and I'm going to have to do something about it."

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Hawk laughed, figuring that if they really wanted to, Pretty Boy and the Zetas could probably do all sorts of things to him and get away with it quite easily. Luckily, they seemed like a peaceable group, when not dealing with insurgents, that was.

"I hear you, Dalton. I would never willingly hurt her." Although, somehow, somehow, he'd managed to do something that had upset her and he fully intended on finding out what and fixing it.

"I believe you, and that's the only reason I'm giving you her work address. I just hope to god my post-partum wife is okay with this or I'll be paying the price, I'm sure."

*Dalton was intimidated by his wife?*

It was strange to hear one of Zeta's supermen talk about a wife and kids when all along Hawk had assumed they were more like robot soldiers than men. He wasn't sure if he was comforted or disturbed by the fact they were only human.

Dalton relayed the address and that was that. Nothing else stood in Hawk's way.

Hawk wasn't all that familiar with Manhattan, but luckily, the streets were numbered and he had no problem finding the cross street Dalton had said Emily's office building was located near. One quick question of a passing man in a suit and Hawk knew which direction Madison Avenue was and soon he stood in front of Emily's workplace.

A quick elevator trip upstairs and he was walking through the door. And there stood Emily, holding an obviously newborn baby.

*Holy shit.*

The first thought that assaulted Hawk, that nearly took him down to his knees, was that he'd gotten Emily pregnant that first time they'd had sex. The second thought was that a baby was one piece of information Dalton could have let him know about in advance.

But wait? Had it been that long since they'd been

together back in Germany? Surely it wasn't nine months.

It must have been obvious by the look on his face that he was counting backwards because when the shock of seeing him standing in the door finally left Emily's face, she said shyly, "Don't worry, Hawk. Germany wasn't nine months ago. You can relax. This is Katie and BB's baby."

She laughed sadly as she watched him breath a visible sigh of relief.

He itched to tell her that if and when he did have kids, he couldn't imagine having them with anyone else besides her. Instead, he said, "Pretty little thing. She looks like her father."

Emily smiled. "*He* looks like his father. It's a boy."

Hawk raised one eyebrow and mumbled, "That figures."

Even Dalton's kid was pretty.

Emily walked to some sort of stroller thing and gently laid the baby down, covering him with a pale blue blanket and jingling some plastic colored toys that hung in front of his face. When she returned to Hawk, she looked uncomfortable.

"So, I uh, guess your sister told you I called."

"My sister?" He shook his head. "I haven't spoken to my sister yet today."

"Then how did you know where I work?"

"I tracked down Dalton and asked where to find you. I figured he owed me one."

Before she could respond to that, two men and a redheaded female came out of a back room.

The woman arched one eyebrow in surprise when she saw him and then recovered and said, "Staff Sergeant Hawkins. A pleasure to finally meet you." She stepped forward and extended her hand. "Katie Dalton."

"My boss," Emily added.

And Dalton's wife. Well, well. Hawk didn't realize Pretty Boy had it in him to choose an intelligent sexy

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businesswoman for a wife. He had pictured him more with some model-type bimbo.

"Hawk! Our Army man. Of course, I didn't recognize you in civilian clothing," the larger of the two men exclaimed, coming toward him.

"These are the owners of the agency. James Howard and Morris Dean," Emily informed him.

Introductions made, Hawk's hand was shook by both men as the thinner of the two, Morris Dean, asked, "What brings you to our neck of the woods? Or more accurately, the concrete jungle of New York?"

No use lying about it. "I came to see Emily, actually."

Dalton's wife looked very interested at that fact. "Em. Why don't you take the rest of the day to show our new star around the city?"

"Good idea! In fact, take him down to Times Square and stand him in front of that billboard with his ad on it. That should raise some public interest, don't you think?" James Howard asked his partner.

The other man bobbed his head in agreement. "Definitely. Great idea, Jim. A shame he's not in uniform, but I'm sure the tourists will recognize him. Do you need the company limo, Emily?"

Emily looked shocked by the offer. "Um. No, thanks, I think we'll be fine walking. It's a nice day. I'll just grab my coat."

When they finally got out of the office and were alone in uncomfortable silence, for lack of what else to say, Hawk joked, "I actually might have enjoyed the limo."

Sex in a limousine had always been a fantasy of his. But then again, that was probably putting the cart before the horse. Although Emily was acting civilly, they still had things to work out, such as why she hadn't contacted him in months and why she'd been in touch with his sister now.

She blushed. "I'm sorry. I can call the office and have the car sent."

“No. It’s fine. Is there someplace we can go for some privacy, though?”

He watched her throat work as she swallowed. “Um, my apartment isn’t too far. Besides that, privacy is pretty hard to find here in Manhattan.”

Her apartment. Damn, he wanted her so badly he could barely stand it. “Okay. Let’s go to your place then...if you don’t mind.”

Hawk held his breath until she said, “No. It’s fine. It’s even clean. I, um, woke up early and cleaned it before work.”

Afraid he would somehow say something to screw up the welcome but tentative truce between them, Hawk remained pretty much silent on the trip to her apartment save for some awkward small talk.

Until they got inside the door, then they both began speaking at the same time.

“Hawk. I am so sorry that I...” Emily began.

“Emily, I don’t know what the hell I did to upset you but I’m sorry...” Hawk spoke over her until he realized she was apologizing to him. “Wait. What are you sorry about?”

She took a deep breath and glanced into the living room. “Can we sit?”

They could stand on their heads for all he cared, as long as she was finally ready to discuss the two of them. Hawk just wanted to clear the air, the sooner the better. He’d been through too many days and nights of agony already.

Finally seated but not touching on the couch, Emily began awkwardly, “I made an assumption, an incorrect assumption it turns out. I should have confronted you about it right away. Instead, I acted like a child, refusing to email you, wasting all that time.”

“I don’t understand, what assumption?”

“I saw you coming out of Kerri London’s tent the morning of the bombing at Bagram. I assumed you’d...”

“Had sex with her? Right after I’d been with you?” Hawk sat in shock. “Emily. What the hell kind of man

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do you think I am?"

Her eyes filled with tears. "I know. I'm so sorry. It's just, I was so hurt..."

Hawk let out a frustrated breath as he gathered her against him. She came willingly into his arms, which was encouraging. "You were hurting over nothing. I can't believe you spent all this time thinking I would do that to you when all you had to do was ask me."

"I would have said something, I tried to that morning, but then there was the explosion," she sobbed.

He remembered. She had started to say something and then all hell had broken loose. Shaking his head, he squeezed her closer. All those weeks, months of agony on both their parts...

"I was getting one of my men out of Kerri's tent. That's all."

"I know. Mel told me when I saw him."

"Mel?" That name rang a bell. Hawk froze as he put the name with the man. "Crocodile Cameraman?"

How the fuck could he be here in New York? Hawk had just seen him when he flew out of Bagram to get home to his sister.

Emily nodded, laughing tearfully at the nickname. "Yeah."

Hmmm. "So you saw Mel?" the ugly green monster inside Hawk asked.

"Yup. This morning. He was meeting Jai and stopped by to say hello."

Who the fuck was Jai? Then Hawk remembered Rasta-photographer.

Emily continued. "He told me he'd seen you in Bagram, then he told me about you having to get Wally out of Kerri's tent."

Hawk frowned. "So, do you see this Mel often?"

Emily pulled back from him, eyes open wide. "You're jealous!"

"No!" Hawk sighed then opted for the truth. He'd do anything, even admit this, if it would keep Emily in his life. "Yes. I've never been so jealous of any man in

my entire life.”

Of course, he’d probably never felt so much for any woman the way he did about Emily. “He was all over you in Bagram, Emily.”

Emily smiled. “It was an act to make you jealous.”

Now it was Hawk’s turn to be surprised. “You were doing it on purpose?”

She shrugged. “It was Mel’s idea, but I kind of went along with it.”

Relief overwhelmed him, along with curiosity. Although he suspected he knew the answer to his next question. “Why?”

“Because I was jealous of you being with that flirty Kerri London every second of the day.”

That was what he had hoped. Hawk laughed and pulled her closer again. “What a pair we make.” They could maybe even be happy if they both stopped getting in their own way.

“Hawk?”

“Yeah?”

Emily looked up at him with baby blues that could melt a man. “Will you kiss me?”

“Oh, baby. You don’t have to ask me twice.”

Heart pounding, he cradled her face in his palm and lowered his mouth to hers gently, until all the pent up passion of the past months without her rose to the surface and poured through him into his kiss.

Breathlessly, she pulled away long enough to say, “Make love to me, Hawk. I need you. I’ve needed you for so long.”

She definitely didn’t have to ask him that twice, either.

Hawk’s actions served as his answer. His mouth frantic on hers, his hands trying to be everywhere at once. He tugged at their clothes, an annoyance that separated them when he wanted nothing between them.

He needed her so badly, but at the same time he also needed to treasure every second with her and hold it close in his memories for later.

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Tenderly, almost reverently, Hawk undressed Emily, revealing her inch-by-inch, reveling in each new exposed part of her creamy skin. Tasting her, caressing her, kissing the warm soft flesh that had only lived in his memory for so long. Her lips never tasted sweeter, her body never felt more responsive than at that moment.

Compared to their first time together when the attraction was purely physical and they were still nearly strangers, even compared to their frenzied reunion on the desk in Bagram, this joining seemed to be so much more. Perhaps because he felt so much more for her now after thinking he might have lost her, not that he'd ever really had her because he'd been too afraid to commit.

He wasn't afraid anymore and he would never make that mistake again. This time he'd leave her with no doubt of how much she meant to him, how much he needed her.

But now was not the time for words, not when his mouth had so many better things to do.

Struggling out of his jeans and button-down shirt, Hawk finally freed himself of his restraints and pulled a nearly naked Emily on top of him.

He pushed aside the white lace of her bra and drew one taught pink nipple into his mouth as she trembled above him. Slipping his hand into her panties, he found her wet from wanting him. That knowledge drew a groan from deep inside him.

His face buried against her as he took in her warm scent, Hawk pushed aside her panties and slid inside her. The feeling of her heat almost mind-blowing, he plunged into her again and again.

She rocked against him, shaking, gasping, making those tiny noises that drove him insane as she came closer to release. He felt the muscles inside her gripping him so tightly he thought he'd lose his mind.

As he felt her orgasm breaking, she cried out, "Don't stop, Hawk. Please. Don't stop."

*Cat Johnson*

Thrusting her down onto his cock one last time as he exploded inside her, he swore a promise for the future to them both. "Never."

*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 one horse, too many cats, one dog, parakeets, fish, and a 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.**

*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. 107: True Blue

*In the long anticipated sequel to Red Hot & Blue, the true blue men of Task Force Zeta are back...and they're hotter than ever!*

**Bull:** Bull didn't earn his nickname because he has a reputation for being stubborn; he's just a very big boy. But beneath that hard as granite and big as a mountain exterior beats the heart of a caring man. Can a pretty

little thing barely five feet tall capture it?

**Matt:** Technical genius and communications specialist Matt Coleman is sick and tired of watching his friends ‘get the girl’ while the only thing he’s had his hands on lately is a computer console. But perhaps Matt has been looking for love in all the wrong places. Could it be that what he’s looking for has been right in front of him the entire time?

**The Commander:** The men in his unit refer to him as simply ‘the commander’. Hank Miller may have fears, feelings, and desires, but as a leader he refuses to let them show. On more than one occasion Hank has been accused of possessing a heart of stone. When he meets the sexy and smart Lois Gordon, will the normally stoic Hank find himself tempted to break his one rule?

### **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’?

### ***In Witches Night***

Witches Night is the first in our series of anthologies celebrating Halloween night, when the veils between worlds are thinnest and anything can happen. To kick it off properly, we’ve put together a collection of spicy, saucy, magical tales of witches and the people who love them. From the dabblers and charlatans to the full-fledged sorceresses of old, each of these stories is filled with curses and spells, wit and passion by authors familiar to our readers as well as some new, exciting faces. Seven very different witches, seven passionate, engaging stories that will draw you completely under their spell!

***Black Cat by Cat Johnson:*** Lar has existed as a cat for a thousand years, with all the discomforts and indignities that go along with it. But when he is adopted by Belinda and gets a look into her life, can his curse finally be coming to an end?

### ***In Heroes Unwrapped***

*Cuddle up by the fire with **Heroes Unwrapped** - A charity anthology brought to you by the Linden Bay Romance authors. All proceeds are being donated to SOS America, Inc. in support of injured veterans.*

***Under the Covers by Cat Johnson:*** Billy Bob “BB” Dalton thought he left his career as an underwear model behind when he became a Task Force Zeta special operative. Now they want him to be the military’s new poster boy. Will the older woman assigned to manage

the campaign take BB from working undercover to under the covers?

### ***A Few Good Men***

Erotic Romance author Maureen Mullen, aka Summer Winters, is on a quest. She's in pursuit of the last decent man left on earth. Week after week one loser after another has passed through Maureen's ever-revolving dating door. Now it seems opportunity is knocking in the form of deployed Army Staff Sergeant John Blake.

John gets through his days fueled by caffeine and adrenaline. A fighter, not a lover, he relies on years of training and sheer force of will. The last thing he's looking for when he accidentally becomes Maureen's pen pal is an emotional entanglement.

But when emails between the unlikely pair heat up enough to keep them both warm and wanting at night, they have to wonder if their relationship just might have potential after all. Can a hot war-hardened soldier find love in cyberspace with a sweet, hearts and flowers writer of passionate prose?

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## Recommended Read:

### *Something About Maggie* by Rose Middleton

*When the love you've been searching for has been there all along...*

Determined and driven, scientist Maggie Walker is used to getting what she wants—except when it comes to love. Ever since her best friend, Jack, gave her that first embarrassingly disastrous kiss at age fifteen she's yearned for a second chance to show him that they could be so much more.

Now Jack is a jet-setting freelance photographer with an enviable lifestyle. For years he's been travelling around the world to exotic locations, but when he comes home to Melbourne Maggie's always been able to count on him to be the same dependable, predictable Jack...but not this time.

From the moment Jack's plane lands he begins to see Maggie, the one person in his life he's always been sure of, in a different light. Could it just be that for the first time in a long time both Jack and Maggie are single? Possibly, although it seems to be more than that. Something unexpected has happened, something that's awakened long ignored desires and hidden passions, something that can't be ignored. This time there's no denying it, there's *Something About Maggie*...