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Soldier and the Society Girl

VIVIAN LEIBER

Vivian Leiber

Soldier And The Society Girl

«HarperCollins»

Leiber V.

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He's My HeroA protector, a provider, a friend and a lover—he's every woman's hero.MOST ELIGIBLE SOLDIERThe government wanted protocol specialist Chessey Banks Bailey to teach rough-around-the-edges Lieutenant Derek McKenna how to be a gentleman. And though he was her student, Derek was the sexiest, most intriguing man Chessey had ever met. From the moment he kissed her without warning, Chessey knew she wanted to be his bride.But even though blue blood Chessey had him second-guessing his bachelor status, walking down the aisle was the furthest thing from Derek's mind. Could Chessey enlist the reluctant soldier for a lifetime of love?

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“If I’m going to do this, you have to play by my rules,” Derek said.

“Rule number one is we use first names. Rule number two is no getting emotional. This is just business. Nothing personal. Rule number three,” he said, sitting down beside Chessey, “I give you thirty days of my life. Not a second longer.”

Chessey drew in a sharp breath. Derek knew what she was thinking and he felt like a heel. She was thinking about their last kiss and whether she meant anything to him. He should explain.

He should tell her that she wasn’t the kind of woman who could have an affair and say goodbye without a whisper of regret. And she certainly wasn’t the kind of woman he could take home to live on a farm. And he wasn’t the kind of man who could kiss a woman and not want more. A lot more.

It was better, far better, not to start.

Dear Reader,

March roars in like a lion at Silhouette Romance, starting with popular author Susan Meier and Husband from 9 to 5, her exciting contribution to LOVING THE BOSS, a six-book series in which office romance leads to happily-ever-after. In this sparkling story, a bump on the head has a boss-loving woman believing she’s married to the man of her dreams....

In March 1998, beloved author Diana Palmer launched VIRGIN BRIDES. This month, Callaghan’s Bride not only marks the anniversary of this special Romance promotion, but it continues her wildly successful LONG. TALL TEXANS series! As a rule, hard-edged, hard-bodied Callaghan Hart distrusted sweet, virginal, starry-eyed young ladies. But ranch cook Tess Brady had this cowboy hankerin’ to break all his rules.

Judy Christenberry’s LUCKY CHARM SISTERS miniseries resumes with a warm, emotional pretend engagement story that might just lead to A Ring for Cinderella. When a jaded attorney delivers a very pregnant stranger’s baby, he starts a journey toward healing...and making this woman his Texas Bride, the heartwarming new novel by Kate Thomas. In Soldier and the Society Girl by Vivian Leiber, the month’s HE’S MY HERO selection, sparks fly when a true-blue, true-grit American hero requires the protocol services of a refined blue blood. A lonewolf lawman meets his match in an indomitable schoolteacher—and her moonshining granny—in Gayle Kaye’s Sheriff Takes a Bride, part of FAMILY MATTERS.

Enjoy this month’s fantastic offerings, and make sure to return each and every month to Silhouette Romance!



Mary-Theresa Hussey

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Soldier and the Society Girl

Vivian Leiber



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VIVIAN LEIBER's

writing talent runs in the family. Her great-grandmother wrote a popular collection of Civil War-era poetry, her grandfather Fritz was an award-winning science fiction writer and her father still writes science fiction and fantasy today. Vivian hopes that her two sons follow the family tradition, but so far the older boy's ambition is to be a construction worker and own a toy store, while the other wants to be a truck driver.

Dear Reader,

Even with magazine and moisturizer labels exhorting me to defy my age or at least turn back the clock, I've always felt four hundred years too young. I'm meant for the days when a lady could turn to a knightly hero for protection, poetry...and passion.

But although I haven't seen any armored knights traipsing through my neighborhood or dragon slayers in my local supermarket, I'm starting to wonder if I'm just the right age for heroes. After all, there are heroes all around us. Like the paramedic who popped the quarter out of my son's throat, saving his life. Or the fireman who coaxed my elderly neighbor out of her house as its top floor burned. Or even the crossing guard who, day after day, makes sure that every child gets to school safely.

Silhouette is proudly honoring our modern-day American heroes, and I'm thrilled to be part of the celebration! My contribution to HE'S MY HERO! is Lieutenant Derek McKenna, a very traditional hero—he brought back his men alive from a dangerous mission overseas. But he's not very traditional when he's taking a gander at Chessey Banks Bailey's slim showgirl legs or when he's kissing her within an inch of her life in a Kentucky airfield, a State Department office or the White House!

Maybe I'm not so young. Maybe I could use a little of that moisturizer to defy my age. Maybe I was born at just the right time, the time of heroes in our own neighborhoods, heroes in our hometowns, Silhouette heroes. Open this book and meet Lieutenant Derek McKenna, a real hero. When you've finished the final Chapter, walk down the street where you live—you might just meet another!

Best,

Prologue

The head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff shrugged a thank-you to the secretary who placed his coffee on the low table in front of him even as he remained transfixed by the flickering images on the television screen set inside a bookshelf panel across the eighth-floor office of the State Department.

"I've watched this tape a hundred times over the weekend and I still get goose bumps," he said, leaning over a low-slung mahogany coffee table to get sugar for his coffee. "A hero. A real hero. Don't get too many of his type these days."

He dropped three cubes into his cup, affecting irritation when his aide reminded him that sugar had already been added. The general didn't like to admit that he really wanted six sugar cubes, more if possible. A sweet tooth was a weakness—he didn't have many.

"We've seen enough, I think," the congressman from New York said, flipping off the television set with the remote. An aide closed the armoire doors.

The congressman sat on a comfortable armchair by the window.

"I want this guy in Manhattan for the Fourth of July," he said.

"We get him in Washington," corrected the general. "Can't have a hero in New York on the Fourth of July—he's got to be in his nation's capital."

The New York congressman narrowed his eyes.

Winston Fairchild III pulled a sheaf of papers from a manila envelope and cleared his throat to get the meeting started. The group was ordinarily of a type not given to listening. In addition to the general and his aide, an assistant undersecretary to the Defense secretary had been sent over by the White House, and three congressmen who held key chairmanships of committees affecting the military had asked to attend. His office facing Twenty-third Street had been transformed into a gentleman's tea party, with real china instead of foam cups and dainty pastries instead of the stale bagels sold at the basement cafeteria.

But while it all looked very cozy, this was a serious meeting about a serious opportunity and everyone was paying close attention to the soft-spoken Fairchild because he had something that everyone wanted—a real-life honest-to-God true blue American hero.

Winston was descended from a long line of behind-the-scenes advisers—his great-great-great-grandfather had served as George Washington's aide-de-camp, his great-grandfather had advised Lincoln to shave his mustache, and his father had told Franklin Delano Roosevelt that cigars were bad for his health. Fairchilds had seen generals and presidents come and go. Winston had some perspective on the men gathered in his office—any one of them could be retired, disgraced, dishonored or just plain tired of Washington within the year.

But a hero! A little of the stardust of heroism could rub off on any or all of these men and a career could be made.

"McKenna could reinvigorate the military's image," murmured the honorable congressman from Arizona. "We sure need that."

"Absolutely," the general snorted.

"Let's begin, shall we? Lieutenant Derek McKenna is thirty-three years old," Winston said, nodding to the summer intern to pass out copies of the fact sheet he had prepared over the weekend. He pulled his wire-rimmed glasses from a small tortoise case. "He was born and raised in Kentucky on a farm in the mountains between Elizabethtown and Bowling Green."

"E'town," corrected the general.

"Pardon?"

"Kentucky folks call it E'town," the general said. "You don't pronounce the L, the I, the Z, the A, the B, the E, the T as the H."

"I see," Winston said, and dutifully crossed out the unnecessary letters on his copy of his report. "Thank you, General. Now, continuing, he received good grades in school, but dropped out of his first year in college at Bowling Green University in order to help his father on the farm. Two years

later, the farm back in order, he joined the Army. He is a career soldier with a distinguished record. A list of his medals is Appendix B on page seven of your handout.”

Everyone except the general turned to page seven.

“And then there was Iraq,” Winston said.

An uncomfortable silence. Everyone knew about Iraq and the terrible fate that had befallen McKenna and his men. Part of the team sent in to help with humanitarian relief for Kurdish rebels on the border with Turkey, he and his men had been presumed killed in a firefight with Iraqi Republican guards. A United Nations resolution condemning the killings, the President expressing outrage in his weekly radio address, a Congressional team of negotiators failing to get the bodies back, a darkly foreboding article in the New York Times and then...nothing.

Lieutenant McKenna’s story faded from public consciousness, replaced with the Los Angeles celebrity trial of the week and new scandals at the upper reaches of government.

Until last week, when Derek McKenna—sporting a chest-grazing beard, a tobacco-colored tan, native chuprah dress and a haircut as crude as a caveman’s—stepped across the Turkish border. He led his men, having not lost a single one, on an impossible journey to freedom from a Baghdad prison. By the time the Wiesbaden military hospital in Germany gave him a haircut, lent him a razor and issued him a new uniform, America remembered it had a hero. The television news conference from Wiesbaden where Derek McKenna announced that all he wanted was to go home and live a quiet life had put a lump in the throat of the most cynical of Americans.

And the men gathered in the well-appointed State Department offices knew they had a solid gold, all-American, apple-pie opportunity.

“The President’s position is that we have him by rights,” the undersecretary said. “We put him on every news outlet, every parade, every ribbon-cutting ceremony. every graduating class...”

“And every campaign fund-raiser?” the general asked archly. “After all, this is an election year.”

“No, of course not,” the undersecretary said, placing his hand over his heart as if to quell his outrage. “But we can at least agree that we all want a piece of him. The only question is how to divide the hero pie, right, gentlemen?”

The men gathered around the low table nodded, and Winston, sensing that his briefing on McKenna’s attributes was over, laid a large appointment calendar on a space he cleared of clutter.

“Gentlemen,” he said, shoving his glasses to the bridge of his nose. “May I present Derek McKenna?”

And for the next four hours, the men argued, cajoled, coerced, ranted, threatened and bargained behind the locked doors of the office of Winston Fairchild III until they had every minute of Lieutenant Derek McKenna’s next six months accounted for.

Chapter One

“No,” said Lieutenant Derek McKenna.

He looked around the swank State Department corner office. The men he addressed hadn’t quite absorbed the word he had uttered, but their baffled expressions suggested their brains were working feverishly. Derek would be patient—after all, no wasn’t a word any of these men heard all that often.

Any right-thinking soldier would be scared to tell the gathering that he wasn’t going along with their carefully laid plans. Who was Derek McKenna to say no to the general at the helm of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, two congressmen, several State Department officials and somebody from the White House who had been identified as the undersecretary of the undersecretary of the chairman of something that had been lost in the rush of handshakes and salutes that had started this meeting?

But Derek had spent two years in hell and wasn’t scared of a few suits or a chestful of medals.

“No,” Derek repeated, in case anyone in this room still didn’t get it.

They didn’t

Just stared at him, the congressmen from New York worrying a pencil with his teeth, a bubble of dribble erupting on the open mouth of the congressman from Arizona, the State Department official whose office this was rubbing his glasses on his tie.

“Did you say no, son?” the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff asked.

“Yes, sir. I mean, that was a no, sir,” Derek said. And then he lifted his chin, challenging the general to disagree. He was going back to the farm. No more of this see-the-world, broaden-your-horizons, more-to-life-than-this for him.

Kentucky was just fine.

“I said no and, with all due respect, General, I meant it,” Derek said. He shoved the appointment calendar off his lap. An aide rushed to pick it up. “I’m not doing any of this.”

“But, soldier...”

“General, I didn’t dream every night in my prison cell about going on Barbara Walters or hitting the rubber chicken lecture circuit or even having dinner at the White House and getting a photo op with the first family. I didn’t dream of shaking hands, parades or even giving stump speeches to the League of Women Voters.”

Actually, Derek had spent most of his daydreams back in the green, lush fields of Kentucky. Planting and replanting in his head the plot of land that belonged to his father. Feeling the soft tender shoots in his hands. Smelling the heavy, damp air of morning. Hearing the cicadas’ nighttime mating call and the creak of the rocking chair on the front porch.

Sometimes his dreams had been so real, so fresh, so vibrant that he had thought the hellish prison cell was itself the dream and that he could awaken. A deep and brooding loneliness would overtake him when he would realize the truth. That he couldn’t awaken, he could only endure. And find a way out.

The fact that he was in Washington was proof enough to these men that he had indeed found a way out.

But Derek knew they were wrong.

And that’s why he had to say no.

“Besides,” Derek added, bringing out his trump card with a devilish smile. He had figured this one out about six months into his captivity. “General, you can’t tell me what to do because my enlistment expired while I was away.”

A bespectacled suit who had been seated in a folding chair next to the ficus plant pulled a yellow legal pad out of a briefcase.

“Joe Morris, Justice Department,” he introduced himself. “Lieutenant McKenna, a soldier may be called back to active duty or held back from a discharge under special circumstances.”

Morris glanced at his notes.

“The case of Green versus Grant is most instructive on this point,” he said. “And I’ll just read you a quote from the Supreme Court opinion. Justice Thomas, writing on behalf of the court, states that—”

“I don’t think we need the legal mumbo jumbo at this point,” the general interrupted. Joe Morris looked crestfallen, having lost his moment to show off what he had produced in a week of research into legal lore. “Just give us the bottom line.”

“The bottom line, sir?”

“Yes, the special circumstances.”

Morris swallowed and then looked at Derek.

“All it takes is a request from the President to reinstate you, Lieutenant. And he can actually reactivate the request repeatedly, for as long as he feels that your services are required for the national interest. In other words, as the Supreme Court stated—”

“Get the President on the phone,” the general told his aide, slyly adding another cube of sugar to his coffee.

Derek lifted his hand. The aide hesitated, a slim, manicured hand held aloft at the phone.

"All right, fine, I'll give you two weeks if you don't call," he said.

"Three months," the general countered.

"A month."

"All right, a month, but we're going to shuffle this schedule so that it's heavy. Very heavy. That means appearances every day."

Winston leaned his head back and signaled to his aide.

"Get an alternate schedule produced stat."

"Yes, sir. I'll have it by tomorrow, sir."

"No, you'll sit down at my desk right now and put it together while we wait. A month divided into three-hour appearances, four a day, comes out to..."

"Fairchild, even combat soldiers get some rotation time," Derek said.

"This isn't war," the general said archly. "This is a pleasure."

"A pleasure in which I'm not so sure I want to indulge," Derek said, leaning back in the comfortable pillows on the couch. He lifted his boots, noting with joyful mischief that they carried just a few drops of tar from the recently repaved streets of Washington. "I'm willing to start next week."

"Tomorrow, soldier."

"Three days from now."

"Hey!" Winston exclaimed. "You can't put your feet there. That table was purchased by the wife of Martin Van Buren! It's a national treasure."

The upper-floor offices of the drably modern State Department building had been recently refurbished with elegant furniture, rugs, paintings and fixtures from the early 1800s.

Derek crossed his boots comfortably on the priceless table. A globule of tar was dislodged from the sole of his right boot and dropped onto the leather writing pad of the congressman from Arizona before he could snatch it away. Ignoring the elected official's distress, Derek snagged a soda can from a hospitality tray next to the couch.

"Can I borrow your pen?" he asked the Justice Department lawyer. Joe Morris held out a Mont Blanc.

"My mother gave it to me as a graduation present," he explained.

Derek rejected it in favor of a disposable ballpoint in the hands of the undersecretary.

He turned the pop can over and stabbed the pen's point into its bottom. Then, holding the can aloft so that the tab was scant inches from his open mouth, he popped it open and removed the pen. The soda shot downward in a violent stream. Derek's Adam's apple bobbed only five times as he swallowed the entire contents of the can.

He had had two years to practice this chugging method, learned in college but then fallen into disuse. But the Iraqis love American colas and chess. Coached by his men, Derek had become a master of the latter in order to bargain for the former. He and his men had been living on sodas, smuggled-in food and a strong solidarity. The small pleasures and fun they created daily had been their salvation in a hell that civilization forgot.

Still, he could be a gentleman if he wanted.

But for his purposes, being a gentleman didn't suit.

After emptying the can, he put it on the hospitality tray. He returned the pen.

And then he let loose a burp.

Not a grotesque burp, but loud, clearly satisfying and utterly unrepentant.

"Mr. Fairchild, are you sure you want me to continue working on this calendar?" the aide said.

Her words hung in the air. Winston stared in horror. Derek shifted his crossed legs just a bit so that another drop of Washington street tar divebombed onto Mrs. Martin Van Buren's precious coffee table.

“Don’t you think it would be a mistake to send me anywhere?” he asked, letting loose another burp. Resisting the urge to put his hand over his mouth.

“General, maybe this isn’t such a good idea. After all, he’s not housebroken,” the representative from Arizona pointed out. “He could do anything out there.”

“I could,” Derek agreed and burped for emphasis.

“He does that once on Larry King Live and we’ve got a real situation,” the undersecretary said.

The congressman from New York gnawed at his pencil.

The general glared at Derek, willing him into an embarrassed apology.

“Soldier,” he warned.

“General,” Winston Fairchild said, leaning forward in his seat. “If I might offer a possible solution...”

“What?” the general snarled.

“Call Protocol,” Winston said to his aide. “Get Chessey Banks Bailey on the phone. Gentleman, this man needs the functional equivalent of Mary Poppins.”

On the other side of the building, in a basement office of an annex to an annex with a single six-inch-square dusty window near its ceiling, Chessey Banks Bailey arranged ten linen envelopes on her gunmetal government-issue desk. Each proper and perfect envelope had her name on it, and each one posed a problem.

Chessey was a Banks Bailey of the Banks Baileys whose ancestors crossed over on the Mayflower, the same Baileys that had made a fortune in diamonds or furs or maybe it was farming—but it was so far in the past that no one could remember. However, the family members were pleased with the way their money doubled and tripled and quadrupled over the years. Banks Bailey women appeared regularly in the pages of *Town & Country*. Their husbands were featured in *Forbes* and *Fortune*. Their homes in *House Beautiful* and their pets in *Pedigree*.

It would have been a surprise to the columnists of any of these papers to learn that none of the Banks Bailey money had ended up in Chessey’s purse.

The linen envelopes were this June’s invitations to family weddings and christenings and dinner parties. For each and every one of them, Chessey would come up with something to wear and something to give. The former was not too much of a problem, because her cousins were quite generous about last year’s clothes. Although the Chanel suits and dresses by Dior ran short because Chessey inherited her legs from her mother, Chessey kept these hand-me-downs neatly mended and pressed. She was quite confident that she’d manage to have something appropriate to wear for every occasion she was duty-bound to attend.

The second problem, what to give, was more daunting. Her cousins had, in quite rapid succession upon reaching their twenties, married men of highly developed pedigrees and portfolios. Chessey was always thrilled by love matches and considered the fact that every cousin had married a millionaire a wondrous statistical oddity. Still, weddings required a gift and millionaires marrying Baileys expected more than a toaster from the local housewares store. And christenings—well, something engraved was always nice. She snuck a peek at her checking account balance.

In a toss-up between eating and presents, she’d pick presents. Besides, she could always make up for her choices by eating well at the parties. She made a list of the RSVP’s she’d have to return, the presents to select and the times of all these events.

She picked up her phone on its first ring. “Good morning, Chessey Banks Bailey, Protocol.”

“Get up to the eighth floor, stat,” a voice snarled and then hung up without waiting for a reply.

She recognized the trademark charm of her boss’s aide.

“Good morning to you, too,” she said to the dial tone. “I’m just fine, and how are you?”

She put down the phone.

A summons to Winston Fairchild's office. She made a quick check of her lipstick, satisfied that none of it had ended up on her teeth. Then she grabbed her briefcase, on impulse throwing in her clutch purse.

Winston Fairchild III. Everything a woman could want in a man. Intelligent, refined, cultured. A Harvard graduate. Distinguished family. He was exactly the kind of man her family would welcome for Sunday dinners, holiday weekends. So suitable that she might even be considered a normal Banks Bailey were he escorting her. Even her grandmother had asked her why she didn't invite him to the family compound.

Chessey allowed herself the briefest of fantasies. A fantasy involving classical music, reading the hefty Sunday New York Times together, drinking cappuccino.

Completely unattainable, Chessey concluded, knowing that she was not like any other Banks Bailey cousin and therefore Winston Fairchild had a habit of looking at a point just above her head, far, far away, whenever they passed each other in the hallway.

Chessey knocked first on the wood paneled door and, on hearing a vague response, entered the corner office. She had only been summoned once before, two years ago for Winston Fairchild III's one-minute "glad to have you on board at the State Department, fill out your withholding form at my secretary's desk" talk. She noted that the ficus in the enamel planter still looked dead.

The office was more crowded than she remembered.

The head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, two congressmen and a Defense Department undersecretary. Chessey quickly recovered from her gee-whiz reflex. She held out a slim, manicured hand to introduce herself to the general, Winston having conceded the duty with a vague you-know-everyone-here wave.

As she exchanged introductions with the New York representative, she saw what looked to be a circus performer with his feet up on the table.

He slouched against the cushions of the chintz couch and reared his head back to catch the peanuts he threw in the air. He never missed. After four such dazzling feats, while explaining to the horrified congressman from Arizona that he once did this two hundred times in a row, the performer did a double take in her direction. A peanut landed in his lap.

He was breathtakingly handsome—but only if you went in for strong, primitive types. The kind with hard, square jaws. Frankly appraising blue eyes. Sharply defined muscles. Coarse, callused hands. Incongruously boyish smiles.

Which Chessey didn't.

She stood a little closer to Winston, whose scent was familiar because she had smelled it just the day before on a scent strip in Town & Country magazine.

"I haven't had the pleasure of meeting you," she said, holding out her right hand to the stranger. "Chessey Banks Bailey."

Rather than shake, he gave her the once-over—twice—and then howled.

"Whooee! I knew there was something I've been missing for the past two years!"

His words were delivered with an inappropriate leer. Chessey bristled and then gaped first in reproach and then astonishment.

"You're Lieutenant Derek McKenna!" she exclaimed.

"One and the same, darlin'," he said. He uncrossed his ankles, dropped his boots to the floor and rose to take her into his arms.

Before she could marshal a protest, he kissed her. Full on the lips, enduring her small fists against his chest as he would an annoying but helpless fly. His mouth possessed hers, claimed her as the spoils of a conquering hero and when he abruptly let her go, she felt strangely bereft, as if she were a doll cherished and then discarded by a child.

She steadied herself with a hand on the back of the wing chair in which Winston sat.

If she had been given time enough to hope that Winston would come to her aid with gentlemanly rebuke, she was to be disappointed.

He said nothing.

Kisses like this didn't happen to Baileys.

Nor, she would suspect, to Fairchilds.

She wondered if Winston might harbor the ridiculous notion that she had provoked the lieutenant. If she were at fault for this appalling behavior. The other men were shocked—shocked!—but they gave her no mind. Indeed, their eyes followed Derek, who sprawled on the couch.

Winston, on the other hand, shook his head disapprovingly.

"Totally untrainable," Lieutenant McKenna announced. "Not suitable for American audiences. Bound to cause more trouble than I'm worth."

"Soldier," the general said sternly.

Chessey touched her chest to still her galloping heart. Shock was being replaced with outrage, outrage that was all the more potent because it contained the niggling iota of attraction. McKenna barely noticed her, which made her outrage spiral upward like a tornado.

He had no right, no right at all!

"You don't want me, General," Derek pleaded. "First time I land a kiss like that on a Junior League matron, you'll have to hide your head in shame for having set me loose."

"Soldier," the general repeated. "I've had enough of this nonsense."

"I'm telling you, send me home," McKenna said, with enough pleading in his voice that some of the men looked at their shoes, a single spark of decency within them realizing the unfairness of asking a man who had given so much for his country to simply do more.

And Chessey's outrage deflated into a puddle of bewildered pity. He was clearly suffering. A man in pain. All that he went through... Whether from some kind of posttraumatic disorder or the simple and honest longing homesickness, he simply wasn't in possession of his senses.

But he kissed me! Her outrage whimpered. He humiliated me in front of these men! And in front of Winston!

The general nodded in her direction.

"Ms. Banks Bailey, you deserve an apology for that behavior," he said. "But I suspect this soldier isn't going to give it to you. So I will. I am very sorry. He's acting like a savage."

"That's why we need Chessey," Winston said.

Need me? Chessey sat on the oak captain's chair beside Winston. He handed her a briefing folder. The aide behind the desk passed her a calendar covered with pencil scribbles.

"Soldier, you're going out there for one reason and only one reason," the general said.

"And just what is that reason?"

"Because the enlisted men need you," the general said evenly. "The enlisted men need to know that officers like you will lead them out of harm's way and that officers like you won't leave a man behind."

"They already know that, just because we're out of there," he said. "I'm leaving."

He stood up.

"Get the President on the phone."

Derek uttered an oath.

"Give him the schedule."

Winston handed McKenna the appointment calendar, which matched Chessey's.

"We can play around with the dates so that you begin in three days," Winston said. "And Chessey will be with you. You've already introduced yourself. Next time you want to introduce yourself to a woman, try shaking hands."

Chessey endured McKenna's frankly hostile gaze. It was hard to believe that moments before, they had been locked in an intimate embrace.

“Why do I have to take her with me?”

“She’s an assistant protocol specialist,” Winston said. “You need to be housebroken. She’s the best, like Mary Poppins without an umbrella and that silly hat. Trained the entire delegation to Zanzibar last month on how Zanzibarian table customs work.”

Chessey squelched a smile at the praise.

But Mary Poppins?

“And she’s a member of the Banks Bailey family,” Winston continued. “Can’t get a better pedigree than that. If there’s a right way to do it, the Banks Bailey family knows how—whether it’s tea parties, formal dinners, receptions or meeting a Queen.”

“I don’t need her,” McKenna said, gazing at Chessey levelly. “On my farm, she won’t do me any good milkin’ cows or driving a tractor. And even if I were to go off on your little tour of America, I’d prefer a woman who looks a little less wholesome than this Girl Scout.”

The gathering stared at Chessey, seeming to expect her to suddenly make a fire out of two sticks or sprout a green sash. Chessey felt a crimson blush flare on her cheeks.

“If Lieutenant McKenna needs a party girl to accompany him,” she said, “I am certainly not the appropriate choice.”

“Party girls he can get anywhere,” the general snorted. “He needs to be returned to a civilized state—being in that Baghdad prison must have warped him.”

“Or maybe he was always this primitive,” Winston observed. “In which case, Chessey, you’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“I won’t disappoint you.”

“I don’t want this woman,” McKenna said, looking at her. “Even if I was going on your tour, I wouldn’t take her.”

“Soldier, we know you’re not going to embarrass us with a cross-country display of your soda chugging and peanut tossing abilities,” the general said. “And I can only hope that you’re not going to kiss every single female in your path. But the schedule does present some very different experiences for you. Different social stratas.”

“Excuse me, General,” Chessey said, looking up from the folder. “My assignment is to go on the road, alone, with him?”

“Think of yourself as an animal trainer,” Winston said.

The general chuckled. “My guess is that if you succeed at housebreaking this hero, you can pretty much pick your job here at the State Department,” he said. “Am I right?”

“Absolutely,” Winston agreed. “All he needs is a dress uniform, a stump speech you can toss off in a minute, and a quick, but thorough, course in manners.”

She stared at McKenna bluntly.

Definitely the manners. He needed the manners.

“I can have any job?” she asked.

Winston started to mumble about civil service requirements.

“I think the fine state of Arizona would be delighted to have you on board in its congressional offices,” the congressman from Arizona said. “How about New York?”

The New York congressman bobbed his head.

“If you pull this one off, you can have my job,” added the general.

“Chessey,” Winston said, in a voice soft as suede. “I’m counting on you.”

“You are?”

“Absolutely,” he said, and he took off his glasses. When his big brown eyes gazed into hers, Chessey felt as if he were seeing her—really seeing her—for the very first time. “Chessey, your country... I mean, I really need you.”

She looked down modestly but then did a one-eighty, boldly meeting his gaze.

Such a nice man, her grandmother had said once, when Chessey had described her job.

“The Fairchilds don’t have money,” her grandmother had added wistfully. “But they have more than made up for it in good breeding.”

“That settles it,” Chessey said. She looked at her charge boldly, determined to make sure the balance of power was established early. He hadn’t had the luxury of the good breeding of the Fairchild family, but he could learn. And she could teach him. “Lieutenant, we will start with lesson one. You are never to kiss me again.”

And she swept out of the room.

Not quickly enough to avoid hearing his reply.

“All right, all right, I’ll wait till you ask me.”

Chapter Two

“We’ll start with the uniform,” Chessey said, leafing through the schedule folder as she led him down the linoleum-tiled hall. Her sensible but stylish heels clicked smartly. “I know a tailor three blocks away who can have your dress uniform ready in one day. After your fitting, we’ll compose a five-minute speech that you can use for your first three appearances. That speech will be your new best friend. It will become as familiar to you as the pledge of allegiance, and you won’t need to use note cards. You’re going to want to keep eye contact with your audience.”

She could barely contain her delight—any job in the State Department! Offers from Congress! The top general of the country guaranteeing her future! She might end up with an office above ground and, maybe-just-maybe-oh-maybe, a window! She had no doubt that this was the kind of moment that came just once in a career. It certainly had never happened before.

The excitement of the assignment accounted for her skittering heartbeat and quickened breath.

She was so thrilled with her good fortune and so touched by his plight that she had nearly—but not quite—forgiven him for his boorish behavior. Probably had gotten flustered at the sight of a female—although his kiss had all the confidence of a conqueror taking his due.

Flustered, that’s it, she thought.

The darker prospect, that he was a natural-born jerk, she did her best to ignore.

Still, if they were going to spend the next thirty days together and if she was going to make a career move on her success transforming him into a gentleman, she’d have to let go of her indignation.

She wouldn’t even tell him that she could have done without the Girl Scout comment, that she had enjoyed being a Girl Scout and she didn’t see what was wrong with them.

“We’ll sit you down with a table arrangement,” she continued, balancing the schedule folder, calendar and her briefcase as she walked. “Even if you ordinarily are the sort of man who requires a seven-piece place setting with every meal, I’m sure you could use a refresher on manners. Conditions at the Baghdad prison were primitive, I’ve heard. By the way, I wanted to tell you that I saw you on television as you were taken to the Wiesbaden military hospital and, literally, I felt tears of pride welling up in my eyes. You really prove that Americans can overcome any...hey, where’d you go?”

She whirled around to see...nothing.

Nothing but an empty hallway that stretched the length of two city blocks. The State Department was big, with a total of twelve acres of office space spread out over eight floors.

If he had taken a wrong turn, it could take her hours to find him!

“Lieutenant McKenna?” she asked. “This way. I’m over here! Lieutenant? Lieutenant?”

Master of escape.

That’s what the news had called him, noting that after months of planning and several failed attempts, McKenna had slipped all thirty-two of his men out of the jail without a trace and had even gotten a day’s lead on the manhunt that followed.

He hadn’t taken a wrong turn—he had given her the slip.

But the corridors of Washington office buildings were Chessey’s home turf, and she had an advantage. She stilled. And listened. And shook her head.

The telltale echo of cowboy boots treading on stone-cold government-issue linoleum.

“Lieutenant McKenna, you get back here right now!” she exclaimed, trotting down the hall at the fullest speed possible in her heels. She ignored the shocked stare of a secretary coming from the opposite direction. She knew, she knew...as a Banks Bailey she was ordinarily so dignified.

But dignity shmignity, that man was her future! Without him, she’d be stuck in a basement closet of an office until she reached the age of retirement! Without him, Winston Fairchild III would never look at her again and he’d certainly never bring his suitable self to the Banks Bailey compound for holidays. She’d still be the black sheep of the Banks Baileys, without the approval and respect of her family. This job, this lieutenant, this assignment meant a lot.

“Lieutenant McKenna, you’re not leaving! We have work to do.”

She ran down the stairwell at top speed. With a half-dozen frantic excuse me’s, she pushed her way through a crowd of schoolchildren and their chaperones gathered in the Diplomatic Lobby. Out on Twenty-third Street, she looked left and right.

And then she saw him.

“Lieutenant McKenna, I said we have work to do!”

She trotted after him, regretting her heels, desperate not to lose him as a Japanese tourist group clogged the sidewalk. He walked away with no more regard for her frantic shouts than he did for any other street distraction. The cabdriver leaning on his horn and bellowing at the driver in front of him. The jackhammer grinding cement on the next corner. The youth with a boom box playing heavy metal.

Still, he was not the type she could lose in a crowd. He stood out—taller than anyone on the street. He wore a pair of worn-out jeans that fit low on his hips and a button-down shirt that showed the wrinkles of a twelve-hour transatlantic flight. It was white—the kind of white that reflects that dazzling sun. He had a muscular build, surprising given his time in prison, but Chessey remembered reading somewhere that he had required all his men to maintain absolutely peak physical conditioning. And had required nothing less from himself. His hair was cut a little longer than regulation. His skin was ruddy and sunburned, which only accentuated his blue eyes.

He garnered his share of second looks from women in his path, but not a flicker of recognition since, courtesy of an Army shave and a haircut, he bore little resemblance to the ragged hero who had led his men to the Turkish border.

“Derek McKenna, you stop right there!” Chessey shrieked, grabbing his elbow as he came to a stop at the crosswalk.

He glanced at her with a sorrowful expression that made her back off. Made her think, right then, right there, that maybe it was cruel to take a man like this and parade him around the country for a month. But then he followed his haunted-eye look with something approaching a leer and then pridesmashing dismissal.

“I’m not going with you,” he said. “Save your animal-training tricks for some other sucker.”

“They’ll call the President.”

He tilted his chin thoughtfully. For a scant second, as the sun played across his face, Chessey thought she saw warmth and longing in his eyes. On the other hand, it could have simply been glare.

“I’ve been giving the President some thought. I don’t think he will reinstate me. He can’t afford the bad publicity. So I’m going to do what I’ve wanted to do since the moment I got captured by the Iraqis. I’m going home.”

The light changed. He stepped forward. She held her ground in front of him. He took another step, invading her space with the natural scent of bay leaf and musk. She tilted her chin up, balanced on her toes, rued the fact that even with her heels he was a good six inches taller than she was. It was hard to look like an authority figure when she could hardly keep her balance and she still had to look up at him.

His mouth was scant inches from her, his sweet minty breath a whisper at her forehead. She wondered if he was going to kiss her again.

She wondered what she would do if he did.

“You have a problem with me going home?”

“I do. What about the enlisted men?” she asked, remembering how he had been thrown off balance by the general with just the same concern.

His eyes narrowed.

“What about ‘em?”

“Their morale.”

“If the men don’t know that their officers will stick by them, then the military’s got a bigger problem on its hands than I could ever solve in a month of stump speeches.”

“You can’t go!”

She didn’t realize until he looked at his chest that her fingers, perfectly manicured in ballet slipper pink, were splayed along the rock-hard definition of his chest muscles.

“Darlin’, I didn’t know my kiss could affect you like this,” he drawled.

She jerked as if he were a hot stove. He reached to the sidewalk and handed her the schedule she had dropped. He lingered a nanosecond at her long legs.

“I’m just trying to do my job,” she said stiffly. “It’s nothing personal.”

He stood up.

“Then you’ll understand that it’s nothing personal, but I’m going home.”

He stepped around her and walked across the street.

“But you’re a hero!” she cried, scrambling to keep up with him.

“I’m done with this hero business. Want nothing more to do with it.”

He held his hand straight in the air. A cab screeched to a halt in front of him.

“Where are you going?” Chessey demanded.

“The airport. It’s faster than walking to Kentucky.”

“I’m going with you.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” he said, getting into the cab. “My pappy told me a long time ago that any woman I brought home with me had better be bride material.”

In a split second pondering the gray, sunless office she called her own and the sense of personal failure that was her constant companion, Chessey decided she didn’t care what a man named Pappy said.

She opened the cab door, took advantage of the lieutenant’s reflexive good manners by nudging him over to give her room and told the cabdriver to take them both to Dulles Airport.

“Here you are, sir,” the ticket agent said, handing McKenna a ticket envelope. She tilted her face to the side and smiled winningly. “One-way to Louisville, Kentucky, connecting with the commuter flight to the Elizabethtown airfield. Have a nice trip, sir.”

“Thanks,” McKenna said, fingering the envelope reverently. Home. He was finally going home. He grinned, knowing the ticket agent misinterpreted his expression as interest in her but being powerless to stop himself. “Thanks, ma’am.”

She blushed.

And then the protocol specialist shoved her way past him, throwing her briefcase on the counter.

“I’ll have what he’s having,” Chessey said.

“Oh,” said the ticket agent “Are you two together?”

“No,” Derek said.

“Yes,” Chessey said.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“This is a free country!”

“We’ve already discussed freedom in the cab,” Derek said impatiently. “I’m going home. You’re not going with me. A free country means I don’t have to be with you.”

“A free country means I can go anywhere I want,” Chessey corrected. “Miss, I’ll be going with him. Wherever he’s going.”

The ticket agent’s magenta nails poised above her computer keys.

“Sir?”

“Don’t give her a ticket. I don’t want her going with me.”

“You can’t tell her what to do.”

“Ma’am?” He pleaded.

“I want to go with him!” Chessey wailed.

Derek shook his head. Considering this woman was a maximum of five-five and had less than half his weight on her frame, she wasn’t intimidated and certainly didn’t back down.

The third man in the line waiting to buy tickets harrumphed.

“If she loves you and is willing to make a go of it, you should give it another chance, young man,” he offered. “Too many young people think that they can just walk out on marriages without—”

“I’m not married to her!” Derek roared. “She’s a protocol specialist at the State Department who’s aching to make a promotion on baby-sitting me for a month. She followed me in a cab and talked my ear off all the way here about duty to my country and freedom meaning that she could go anywhere I went.”

For emphasis, he jabbed his fingers in Chessey’s direction and wasn’t comforted by her smile.

On any other woman it would have been a come-on, but on this protocol specialist he figured it was pure trouble.

“Why, Lieutenant Derek McKenna,” she said, slowly and carefully enunciating every syllable of his name. And she added for the benefit of the few people in the line who didn’t immediately do a double take, “Derek McKenna. It must be the stress of being a hero that’s making you act so erratically. You need rest. And some reassurance that America loves you. Oh, Lieutenant Derek McKenna, we all think you’re wonderful!”

“Derek McKenna?” The woman behind Chessey repeated.

“Derek McKenna,” Chessey confirmed.

The woman stared. Derek felt a queasy feeling in his stomach as he watched her dawning recognition.

“Derek McKenna!” she shrieked. “I’m so delighted to meet you. Could I get your autograph?”

As the woman yanked apart her carry-on luggage to find something to write with, the man who had given him a lecture on marital behavior pumped his hand.

“Just shaking hands with you is a privilege,” he said.

The rope-cordoned line surged toward Derek, with requests for autographs, kisses, pictures and handshakes running pretty much even. Derek craned to catch Chessey’s eye, to give her some indication that he held her directly responsible for this calamity or at least to make her feel miserable about herself—as she should! But Chessey coolly turned her back on him and pulled out her employee ID card.

“State Department, official business,” she said briskly, holding her ID out to the ticket agent. “I need a spot on the plane next to him.”

“One way or round trip?”

“Actually, let’s start talking flights from Elizabethtown to New York three days from now.”

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