

JUDY DUARTE

The Soldier's
Twin
Suprise

MILLS & BOON
True Love

Judy Duarte

The Soldier's Twin Surprise

Серия «Rocking Chair Rodeo», книга 4

Серия «Mills & Boon True Love»

Аннотация

Eternal bachelor? Soon to be father. For hotshot Army pilot Clay Masters, dating an enlisted woman was always off-limits. And when Rickie appears with news that she's expecting his twins, Clay's dreams of military glory are dashed. She's has craved a family for years but can she count on Clay to be her partner in parenthood and love?

Содержание

MILLS & BOON

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Off-the-clock cowboy becomes...daddy?

Even though his night of passion with Erica Campbell was incredible, for hotshot army pilot Clay Masters an enlisted woman's off-limits. Until a fresh-out-of-the-service Rickie appears with news: she's having his babies. Two of them. Rickie's dreamed of her very own family for years. But can she count on Clay—a man whose dreams of military glory have just been dashed—to be her partner in parenthood...and in love?

Since 2002, USA TODAY bestselling author JUDY DUARTE has written over forty books for Mills & Boon, earned two RITA® Award nominations, won two Maggie Awards and received a National Readers' Choice Award. When she's not cooped up in her writing cave, she enjoys traveling with her husband and spending quality time with her grandchildren. You can learn more about Judy and her books on her website, www.judyduarte.com, or at Facebook.com/judyduartenovelist.

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The Soldier's Twin Surprise

Judy Duarte

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THE SOLDIER'S TWIN SURPRISE

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To my son, Jeremy Colwell,

who serves as a medic in the United States Army.

I'm so proud of you and all you've accomplished.

You make this mom army proud.

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[Chapter One](#)

If Captain Clay Masters hadn't been so focused on the sexy brunette wearing a red bikini, he might not have been nailed in the head by a spiraling football.

Damn. He glanced at his old high school buddies, both of whom were laughing like hell, and then he retrieved the ball.

Over the last thirteen years, he'd stayed in touch with Duck and Poncho via email, texts and occasional phone calls, but they hadn't spent any real time together since they'd all gone off to college. But you'd never know that. The moment they got together last Saturday in the baggage claim area of the Honolulu airport, it seemed as if they'd never gone their separate ways.

Now here they were, spending their well-earned vacation time

on Oahu's North Shore. The surf season had ended weeks ago, so the beach was secluded and nearly empty, other than the three friends and the petite brunette stretched out on a towel on the sand.

Poncho nudged Clay's arm and nodded toward her. "She sure is rocking that red bikini."

He had that right. Clay hadn't been able to keep his eyes off her ever since she set out her towel on the sand. And when she'd applied her sunblock? He'd been tempted to ask if she wanted his help.

But he hadn't come here to hit on the first woman he saw. He wanted quality time with his buddies. Once they arrived, he'd traded in his flight suit for board shorts and flip-flops. He hadn't even bothered shaving the past two mornings, which gave him a shadow of a beard. And instead of answering to sir or Captain, he'd reverted to the nickname he'd earned as a star quarterback at Wexler High—Bullet.

"Remember what I told you when I picked you up at the airport," Clay told his buddies. "This week, I'm just a good ol' boy from Texas, soaking up the sun and enjoying the surf."

"We heard you," Poncho said. "But hell, Bullet, maybe you should reconsider and proclaim your military status. Just look at her."

Clay *had* been looking. She was stunning, with long brown hair and a body shaped to feminine perfection.

But ever since he'd gone to West Point, he'd been assigned

to a military installation. And it hadn't mattered where he was stationed, there were always plenty of local women who wanted to latch on to a military man, particularly an officer, for the bragging rights. And the benefits package wasn't bad, either.

That didn't mean Clay hadn't had his share of romantic flings, but whenever he left the base, he usually kept his Army status under wraps.

"She looks lonely." Poncho nodded toward her. "I'm going to talk to her. Maybe she'd like to join us for a cold beer."

Duck laughed. "Just leave it to me, y'all. I've had more luck with the ladies than either of you."

"Maybe so, but she doesn't strike me as being your type." Clay stole another glance at the bikini-clad brunette. "She doesn't look like a buckle bunny or a rodeo queen."

At that, Poncho gave Duck a nudge. "Don't get carried away, man. She's got her eye on Bullet. I've seen her stealing peeks at him every so often."

Clay had noticed that, too, which was more than a little tempting. But he wasn't about to desert his friends, no matter how gorgeous a lady was. "Come on," he said. "This isn't supposed to be a week of nights on the prowl. We're here to relax and have fun—with each other. So are you going to stand around gawking at our neighbor or play ball?"

Poncho snatched the football from Clay's hands, and the game picked up right where they'd left off. But like before, Clay had a hell of a time keeping his focus on throwing passes. Or catching

them.

“Hey, Bullet.” Poncho slapped his hands on his hips. “You’re lagging, old man.”

Clay shook off his hormone-driven thoughts, realizing he’d gotten sluggish. So he threw a hard spiral to Poncho, who dropped it. “Ha! Look who’s lagging now.”

They continued to toss the ball, but how was Clay supposed to keep his mind on the game when he couldn’t keep his eyes off the sexy brunette?

Finally, he decided to throw in the towel. So he called a time-out to his friends. “I’m ready for a cold beer.” He was also ready to start the grill.

As his buddies trudged through the sand to the place where they’d left their stuff, two other young women, a blonde and a redhead, arrived at the shore and began setting out their ice chest and towels.

“What do you know,” Poncho said. “Looks like we have company. And if Duck and I play our cards right, we could all get lucky tonight.”

Poncho and Duck might be willing to sidle up to the newcomers, but Clay was still drawn to the olive-skinned brunette who could’ve modeled for the latest *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue. Not that she was doing anything especially sexy or alluring. Hell, she was just reading a book.

“It’s clear that Clay has scoped out the brunette,” Poncho said, “which is fine by me. I’ve always favored blondes. That is, unless

Duck wants to arm wrestle me for her.”

“No problem,” Duck said. “I’ll take the redhead.”

“Okay, guys.” Clay folded his arms across his chest. “What if they’re not interested?”

“Oh, they’re interested. They keep looking over here and giggling. But you’ll have to work a little magic on the brunette.” Poncho chuckled. “Something tells me you’ve gotten a little rusty at laying on the charm.”

“I’ve still got the touch. There are some things a guy doesn’t forget.” But Clay wasn’t in the mood for romantic fun and games tonight, especially if his friends struck out with the new arrivals. In fact, he had half a notion to go back to their rented beach house, open a cold one, turn on the TV and hang out inside. Alone.

“While you light the grill,” Poncho told Duck, “I’ll lay a little *buenos días* on the lovely twosome and invite them to our barbecue.” Then he glanced at Clay. “What are you waiting for? Go offer the brunette an invite. Or would you rather I lay a little groundwork for you first?”

“I don’t need your help.” Clay stole another glance at the brunette. Chances were, she was on vacation, too.

Oh, what the hell. He supposed it wouldn’t hurt to talk to her. Maybe she’d be interested in the cowboy type and in sharing a night they’d both remember—long after they each went their own ways.

* * *

Sergeant Erica Campbell lay on her back, her open historical romance novel held up to shield her eyes from the sun's glare while she read.

Earlier this afternoon, she'd noticed the three hotties who'd been splashing in the water and playing football on the shore. The one called Bullet had glanced her way, and when their eyes met, he tossed her a big, Texas-size grin. She meant to ignore him, but he seemed so boyish and charming that she couldn't help returning his smile.

All three of them were attractive and well built, but Bullet either spent a lot of time at the gym or had a job that required strength and vigor.

His light brown hair was short, much like his friends'. Water glistened on his broad shoulders. Six-pack abs and a taut belly drew her undivided attention like a sharp, crisp salute. Now there was a real hunk. And a drop-dead gorgeous one at that.

But the last thing she needed to do, especially this weekend, was to give someone the idea that she wanted company. So she quickly averted her gaze, reached into her small tote bag for the spray bottle of sunblock and applied it. Then she lay back down on the towel and reached for her novel.

Male laughter erupted yet again, drawing her from her story as it had several times since she'd come outside her rented beachfront bungalow to catch a few rays. As much as she'd wanted to ignore the three men who were sharing the same stretch of beach with her, she found that next to impossible. Two

of them had a slight southern drawl, and she suspected they were Texas natives, just as she was. One of them also appeared to be Latino. So was she, although she couldn't speak a lick of Spanish.

Their short haircuts suggested they might be in the military. That wouldn't be unusual. There were quite a few bases located on the island.

She made it a point to avoid men stationed on Oahu, even though that wasn't easy. Men often approached her, even when she was in uniform, and tried to hit on her. So the bikini she was wearing today was a little risky, since it might draw even more attention to her.

It's not that she was stuck-up or prudish, but she'd witnessed firsthand how deployments and conflicting duty assignments could take their toll on a relationship, especially when both people were in the military.

She loved being stationed in Honolulu. She didn't much like being downtown in Waikiki, though. It was too much like other big cities. But the North Shore, as far as she was concerned, was paradise on earth.

Again, she glanced at the handsome tourists. They seemed to be in their late twenties or early thirties. And they shared a playful camaraderie she found interesting.

Listening to their conversation, she'd picked up on their nicknames. She and her sister Elena had done the same thing, calling themselves Rickie and Lainie when they were girls. She wondered if they would have continued doing that until

adulthood. Probably. They'd been so close. And for the most part, they'd only had each other.

As the guys teased each other about a dirt-bike crash that resulted in Bullet getting a gash in his head and Poncho puking at the sight of blood, she realized they'd grown up together. That they'd been friends for a long time.

She wished she'd kept in contact with some of her high school friends, but when she enlisted nearly six years ago, she'd lost touch with them. Not that she hadn't made new ones. It's just that the Army had a way of shaking things up with regular deployments or reassignments.

Again, the three laughed at something that had landed them in detention, further convincing her that they were high school buddies who'd come to Hawaii on vacation. Not that it mattered. Erica wasn't here to gawk at hot guys. She was here to think, to regroup and to kick that shadow of guilt she felt as she grieved for her adoptive parents.

She'd cried when she'd gotten the news of the accident and then again at the funeral. She'd loved them. How could she not? They'd rescued her from the foster care system when she'd been in the third grade.

Still, it had taken a long time for her to bond with the couple. But that was probably due to the hospitalization and the death of her twin sister that same year. Now there was a crushing loss that had struck hard, leaving a void that would never go away.

Needless to say, the Army was Erica's family now. And in

a couple of months, when her contract was up, she'd eagerly reenlist without giving it a second thought.

She'd just reached an especially steamy part of her novel when a shadow crossed her face, drawing her from the heated love scene. She assumed the sun had passed behind a cloud until a man cleared his throat.

Startled, she glanced up. When she spotted one of the guys standing over her, the hottie she'd heard them call Bullet, she slammed the book shut and set it aside with the cover facedown. Her cheeks, already warmed by the sun, as well as the words on the page, heated to the boiling point.

Talk about getting caught red-handed—or rather red faced! Had he realized she'd been in the middle of a love scene?

"I'm sorry," Bullet said. "I didn't mean to surprise you or interrupt your reading."

She sat up and combed her fingers through her hair. "You have nothing to be sorry about. That book wasn't very good anyway. I was just about to throw it into the ocean."

"I could do that for you," he said. "I've got a pretty good arm."

"So I noticed. I assume that's why they call you Bullet."

His lips quirked into a crooked grin, and he gave a little shrug.

Arrogant guys were a real turnoff. Usually. But she loved football and found this particular quarterback intriguing. But there was no way in hell she'd hand over that blasted book to him. And even though she'd claimed otherwise, it had been a great story, one she intended to finish, although that wasn't going to

happen this afternoon.

Neither of them spoke, and as he studied her, she felt vulnerable. And half-dressed. If her swimsuit cover-up was handy, she'd slip it on now.

She blamed the self-consciousness on that damn love scene, but in all honesty, Bullet wasn't making it easy to forget the words she'd read. The bare chest. The heated kiss. The hand slipping into the slick, silky folds...

"You on vacation?" he asked.

She rarely shared intimate details about herself with strangers, but the guy seemed like a friendly sort. So she nodded and said, "Yes." She had to report at the base before midnight on Sunday.

"My buddies and I are checking out on Sunday morning," Bullet said.

She used her hand to shield the afternoon sun from her eyes. "I noticed your accents. Are you guys from Texas?"

"Yep. We grew up in Wexler. It's in south Texas, about two hours from Houston. Ever hear of it?"

"Actually, I have. I was born in Houston and went to high school in Jeffersville, which is about fifty miles from there."

"No kidding? Small world."

"In some ways." But it could be a great big world, too. And lonely.

Bullet swept a muscular arm toward the water. "How 'bout that ocean? Ever see anything that blue?"

"It's amazing, isn't it?" In fact, that's why she spent a lot of her

free time at the beach on the North Shore.

“You here with friends?” he asked.

“Not at the moment.” She glanced at the two women sitting together on a blanket in the sand. It might be nice to have someone with her today, someone to offer solace and a diversion. But she didn’t.

“Just spending some alone time?” he asked.

She didn’t see a need to reveal that she was staying by herself this weekend, although she was pretty damn good at defending herself—with a gun or in hand-to-hand combat. “I have two vacation days left,, so I rented that bungalow behind me.”

“That makes us neighbors.” Bullet nodded toward his friends, who’d stopped playing and now stood with their hands on their hips, talking to two other women who’d just arrived. “We’re staying in the house next door.”

She’d already come to that conclusion, but she didn’t comment.

“We’re going to be grilling brats and hot dogs,” Bullet added. “And we’ve got plenty of beer on ice. Sodas, too. We even have a bottle of vodka and some OJ. You’re welcome to join us.”

Erica looked at his buddies, her gaze returning to Bullet, her attraction growing by leaps and bounds.

“Just so you know,” he added, “my friends and I are nice guys. Trustworthy and honorable. Especially Poncho. His day job is driving a squad car down Wexler’s main drag, keeping the residents safe.”

One of them was a police officer? She hadn't expected that.

Erica was usually skeptical of flirtatious men, but something told her Bullet was honest. And that she'd be safe with the three Texas tourists.

So in spite of her plan to spend the rest of the day and evening alone, she agreed to join them.

"We'll be starting the grill soon," Bullet said. "How does an ice-cold beer sound?"

Every bit of common sense she'd ever had prompted her to say that she'd reconsidered, that she was going to pass on the barbecue after all. She wasn't especially fond of hot dogs. But the loneliness and grief were getting to her, so she felt compelled to say, "Sure. Why not?"

"I'll bring a beer over to you," he said. "Unless you'd prefer a soda or mixed drink? I could make you a screwdriver."

"Actually, the beer is fine."

"You got it." Then he turned and walked away, gracing her with a view of his broad shoulders and swim trunks that rode low on narrow hips and outlined a great pair of glutes. Dang. The guy had a heart-stopping swagger.

Moments later, after she'd shoved the novel into her tote bag and brushed out her hair, he returned with two ice-cold longnecks and handed one to her. She looked at the label. It was the Longboard Island Lager, made by the Kona Brewing Company. Apparently, these guys wanted the whole Hawaii experience.

"Mind if I sit here?" he asked.

“Go ahead.” She moved the ice chest, making room for him to sit beside her on the towel.

Instead, he chose the sand. She appreciated the humble move. She hated it when men tried to push boundaries. And the fact that Bullet seemed a bit shy and cordial was a bit of a turn-on.

Who was she kidding? It was more than a little alluring.

She took a long, refreshing drink. It had taken her a while to get used to the taste of beer, but after some time in the Army, she’d come to enjoy it after a hard day in the field.

“Tell me something,” she said. “Honestly. Is Poncho really a cop?”

“Yep. In fact, he was just promoted to detective.”

“I suppose he looks more like an authority figure in his uniform.”

Bullet laughed. “I don’t blame you for being surprised. Poncho used to be the rowdy one who led me and Duck astray, but once he turned twenty-one, he shocked the entire town, if not the high school, by joining the Wexler Police Department.”

“And Duck?” she asked. “Is he in law enforcement, too?”

“No, he’d rather be a lawbreaker.”

“Seriously?”

Bullet chuckled. “Maybe back in our high school days, but not so much anymore. Actually, he’s a rodeo cowboy. And a good one.”

She tended to be skeptical by nature, especially of men she’d just met, but Duck had a soft Texas twang and a lanky, muscular

build. Of course, looks could be deceiving. Yet something in Bullet's eyes suggested he wasn't giving her a line of bull.

"What about you?" she asked, more curious about Bullet than the others.

He didn't answer right away, then offered her a charming smile that dimpled his lightly bristled cheeks and made him appear both rugged and boyish at the same time. "Let's just say that I can outride, out rope and outshoot both of them."

That surprised her, although she wasn't sure why it would. And he'd admitted that he was a better cowboy than the others, which just might be true. At least he hadn't bragged about the number of silver belt buckles he'd won in the rodeo.

Erica had pretty much outgrown the type of guys she'd known as a teenager back in Jeffersville. Nevertheless, she found Bullet far more attractive than she should.

"How long will you be in Hawaii?" Bullet asked. Erica wasn't about to reveal too many personal details with a guy she'd just met, no matter how hunky he was or how trustworthy she thought he might be. But then again, she didn't see any reason not to be somewhat honest. If she kept the story simple, he wouldn't have enough information about her to find her again—if he turned out to be a jerk. He didn't need to know that she was stationed in Honolulu for the time being.

"Actually," she said, "I just flew in from Houston." It was the truth, of course. And it supported her comment about having two days left of her vacation. But she'd actually just returned from

bereavement leave.

Several weeks ago, she'd gotten an early-morning call from the Texas hospital where her parents had been taken after the accident. Her father had suffered a massive coronary while driving home from church. The car had crashed through a guardrail and rolled down an embankment. He was pronounced dead on arrival, and her mom died from her injuries a few hours later.

Erica sucked in a deep breath and slowly blew it out. It had been a long month, a sad and lonely one. She'd gone to Texas to bury the parents who'd adopted her.

But the worst was past. She had two days left of her leave before she had to report to duty at Schofield Barracks, so she'd rented the bungalow through Airbnb, where she hoped the warm sun, the soft tropical breeze and the sound of waves lapping on the sand would provide a healing balm.

She and Bullet sat there awhile, both caught up in their own thoughts. Or so it seemed.

"What's your name?" he asked.

She could have told him anything at that point—Jennifer, Heather, Alexis. She'd heard that it was a game some women played. They'd create fake careers and backgrounds, too. But Erica wouldn't go that far. Instead, since he and his friends referred to each other with nicknames, she'd offer him one, too. The one her twin sister had given her years ago. "My name is Rickie."

He nodded, as if making a mental note, then took a chug of beer. Since he hadn't offered up his real name, she didn't ask. What was the point? She didn't expect to see him after she checked out and returned to base.

It was weird, though. She hadn't been called Rickie since the night Lainie had gone to the hospital for the surgery that failed. At the memory, at the thought of the final words they'd shared with each other, a pang of grief shot through her, reminding her that she'd lost her entire family. Two of them, in fact. Not many people could claim to be orphaned twice, but this time around, at twenty-five, it was a lot easier than when she and Lainie had been eight.

Under the circumstances, she probably should keep to herself tonight so she could dwell on her emotions and come up with a good game plan to face the future. Wasn't that why she'd come to North Shore this weekend?

For someone determined to keep to herself, she couldn't explain why she'd let herself be enticed by the hunky, football-playing tourists. Maybe it was some sort of coping mechanism preventing her from dealing with her own issues, her own sadness.

If she could distract herself with the antics of a trio of strangers reliving their glory days on the beach, then she wouldn't be forced to think about her recent loss.

But she'd much rather laugh than cry. And these guys were playful and entertaining. Intriguing and handsome. Especially

Bullet. Besides, she didn't have to tell him that she was in the Army and actually lived nearby.

Why get so personal when, after Sunday morning, she'd never see him again?

Chapter Two

By the time the sun went down, and a couple of automatic porch lights from the nearby beach house kicked on, Clay's buddies had moved closer to the blonde and the redhead. But Clay was right where he wanted to be, sitting on the sand and enjoying a second cold beer with Rickie. Things seemed to have clicked between them, which was a little surprising.

He hadn't planned to hook up with any women this week, but he also hadn't expected Rickie to be so easy to talk to. She was a little on the quiet side, but she was bright. And her laugh, which he'd only heard a time or two, had a mesmerizing lilt.

Hey. The night was still young...

Of course, that didn't mean he wasn't being realistic. She'd be returning to her life in Texas soon, and after he drove his buddies to the airport Sunday morning, he'd head back to Wheeler Army Airfield. Still, that left them thirty-six hours. More or less.

"Are you ready for another beer?" he asked.

She looked at her nearly empty bottle. "No, I think I'll switch to soda—if you have any left."

Clay got up, headed for the ice chest and retrieved two cans—one cola and a lemon-lime. Then he took a moment to walk to the grassy area near their beach house, where Duck had set

up the small grill about fifteen minutes earlier. The coals were coming along okay.

He glanced over at his buddies. Duck, who'd just said something to make the redhead laugh, glanced up and caught Clay's eye. Clay nodded at the grill, gave him the thumbs-up sign and returned to Rickie.

He offered her both cans. "Take your pick."

She chose the cola. "Thanks."

"We'll be putting those dogs on the grill soon," he said. "Are you getting hungry?"

"A little." She scanned the beach, her gaze landing on the others, who'd moved over to the grassy area, near the grill and within the perimeter of light coming from the porch. "You know, even though I said I'd join you guys tonight, I'm not really in the mood for a party."

Neither was Clay. In fact, he'd rather sit here all evening, enjoying what little time he and Rickie had left. "Why don't I bring over a couple of hot dogs for us once they're cooked?"

"That'd be nice. Thanks." She made a little hole in the sand, one big enough to hold the bottom of her can. Once she set it down, she turned to him and blessed him with a pretty smile. "So what was it like growing up in Wexler?"

"I doubt it was much different from your neck of the woods. I lived on a ranch, though. So I had a lot of chores to do each day, plus a cow to milk and a couple of chickens to feed."

"That's cool. I never had any pets."

Clay wouldn't call an old milk cow or four harpy hens pets.

"Do you still live in Wexler?" she asked.

"No, after high school I moved on." He nearly added, *to bigger and better things*, but there was no reason to share his West Point experience. And his military career was still off the table.

"Do you miss it?" she asked.

"The ranch? No, not at all." He didn't consider himself a small-town boy anymore. He was a soldier now. And Army proud.

"When I was in high school, I lived on a quiet street in Jeffersville," she said. "The houses were all two-story and pretty similar, except we were the only ones who had a pool in our backyard. Actually, I guess I still have one."

The comment struck him as a little odd. "So you live with your parents?"

"No, they both passed away recently. In a car accident. So the house belongs to me now."

"I'm sorry. That must have been tough."

She shrugged. "It was, but I'm dealing with it."

He was about to say something, but the shadow that touched her gaze passed faster than a ghost, so he let it go at that. He didn't want to stir up any sad memories for her.

Apparently, she didn't want to dwell on them, either, because, after a couple of beats, she asked, "Does your family still live on that ranch?"

"My mom does. My dad died when I was young. When I was

a teenager, she and I moved in with my paternal grandfather and my step-grandmother.”

Rickie turned toward him, her knee drawn up and bent, her hands clasped around her shin. “Tell me about her.”

“Who? My mom?” He hadn’t seen *that* coming.

“Yes, I’m curious about her. My real mother died when I was really young, so I never had the chance to know her.”

“I thought you said your parents died recently.”

“They did. I was orphaned the first time when I was eight and then adopted when I was nine.” She cast a glance his way. When their eyes met, she seemed to reel him into her story. Into her life. “My adoptive mother was good to me, but she wasn’t very maternal. At least, not the way I imagined a mom should be. Know what I mean?”

Not really. But he nodded just the same.

“I’m not complaining. It’s just that I had a super-cool foster mom once.” She seemed to brighten from the memory, rebounding easily, which was a relief. Clay didn’t like the sad, pensive look that had touched her expression a few moments ago.

Hoping to prolong the happier thoughts, he asked, “What was cool about her?”

“Pretty much everything.” Rickie’s smile deepened, her mood transformed. “Her name was Mama Kate—at least, that’s what we called her. I have no idea how old she was. Probably in her sixties. She was heavyset with an easy laugh and a loving heart. She never turned down a kid needing placement, so her house

was packed with children. Yet she always found special time for each of us. And she was a whiz in the kitchen. She made the best meals—healthy and tasty at the same time. And her cookie jar was always full.”

Clay’s mom was a good cook, too, although she didn’t do much baking anymore. At least, he didn’t think she did. It had been a long time since he’d seen her face-to-face. They talked on the phone, of course. Usually on Sundays. But he didn’t go home too often. Just for Christmas—and only if he wasn’t deployed or stationed too far away.

“How long did you get to live with Mama Kate?” he asked.

“Not long enough.”

She didn’t explain, but Clay sensed a sadness about her. Without a conscious thought, he reached out and placed his hand on her bent knee, offering his comfort and support. Or maybe he just wanted an opportunity to touch her.

“It sounds like Mama Kate set a good example for you,” he said.

Rickie smiled, and this time, when their eyes met, something warm surged between them. If he didn’t know better, he’d think they’d made some kind of emotional connection, one that might linger indefinitely. But they really hadn’t. How could they? They’d just met. And they’d never see each other again.

Yet the longer they sat in the soft glow emanating from the porch lights, the more surreal the evening seemed. Sure, Rickie was just as pretty, just as sexy as ever, but there was so much

more to her. And if she lived around here...

But she didn't.

Reluctantly, he removed his hand from her knee. "I grew up without a father, but my granddad tried to set a pretty good example for me. He was tough as nails, but he also had a soft side."

Again, she smiled. "So you grew up with a lot of love."

"Too much at times."

Her brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"My mom was one of those helicopter parents. She hovered over me, hell-bent on keeping me safe, close to home and under her wing."

At that, Rickie drew up both knees. Her smile deepened, sparking something in her pretty brown eyes. It felt pretty damn good to think that he'd done or said something that had caused her pleasure. But for some reason, he didn't want her to get the wrong idea about him or his mother.

"You might think that's cool," he said, "but you have no idea how tough it was to live with a mom like mine. Our relationship was pretty strained most of the time, which caused me to rebel every chance I got."

Rickie cocked her head to the side, causing her curls to tumble over her shoulder. He was tempted to reach out, to touch them, to see if they were just as soft as they looked. But this time, he kept his hand to himself.

"In what ways did you rebel?" she asked.

He thought for a moment, wanting to choose the right example to share. For some dumb reason, he didn't want to tell her about the time he and Duck got caught drinking Granddad's Jack Daniel's behind the barn. Or when he and Poncho lit up cigars in the old lot near the ball field and set the dried grass on fire.

"When I was just a little kid," he said, "maybe four or five years old, my grandparents came to visit. It was right before Halloween, and Granddad's wife made me a purple superhero cape to go with my costume. Even days after I'd gone trick-or-treating, I wore that silly thing all the time. And whenever I'd see my mom standing at the kitchen sink and gazing out the window, I'd climb one of the nearby trees and jump out of it. I knew I couldn't really fly, but I'd pretend to. And my mom would really freak out."

"Surely you don't blame her for doing that. You could have broken your neck."

"Yeah, I know. But she used to hit the roof about a lot of things. And the older I got, the more protective she seemed to get. I can't tell you how many camping trips I missed because she couldn't go and didn't want to let me out of her sight." Clay took a sip of his cola, wishing he'd gotten another beer instead.

"I'm surprised she let you play football," Rickie said.

He laughed. "I grew up in Texas. We love high school football."

"You're damn straight," Rickie said. "*Friday Night Lights* and all of that. Did your mom go to your games?"

“Hell, she sat in the front row for every single one. And once, when I was sacked especially hard, she ran out on the field to make sure I was okay. The coach had to tell her to back off and return to the bleachers.”

Again there went that pretty, heart-strumming smile that lit her honey-colored eyes. “Your poor mom.”

“Maybe so. But she would have been better off having a girl.” One like Rickie, who would have enjoyed baking cookies with her or sitting in a cozy chair reading storybooks. A girly-girl who wouldn’t mind sticking around the house all day instead of messing around with the guys and getting ready to jump on any wild-ass idea that Clay or his friends thought would be fun and exciting.

“Hey, Bullet!”

At the sound of Poncho’s voice, Clay looked over his shoulder to see his buddy manning the grill. The ladies had moved over to the grassy area, too. And from the looks of it, the evening’s festivities had begun.

“The hot dogs are just about ready,” Poncho called out. “Come and get ’em.”

“I’ll bring a couple of plates back for us,” Clay told Rickie.

When he returned, one plate was loaded with hot dogs. The other held a couple of paper cups filled with condiments.

“Oh my gosh.” Rickie laughed. “Who do you expect to eat all of that?”

He shrugged. “I thought you’d want more than one.”

“No, I’m not very hungry—or a big fan of food that comes wrapped in a bun.”

He handed her the empty plate. She took it, then reached for a hot dog from the stack. When he sat beside her, this time sitting on the edge of her towel, he asked, “So what kind of food *do* you like?”

“Anything served in a tortilla.”

“Tacos and burritos, huh? I like Mexican food, too.” Clay reached for a hot dog, just as Duck turned up his iPod, which he’d programmed with all his favorite country-western tunes.

“Ooh,” Rickie said. “I love Toby Keith.”

“Me, too. Apparently we have a lot in common.”

“We do?”

Clay nodded. “We both grew up in small Texas towns. And we like football, Mexican food and country-western music.”

“That’s true,” she said.

Rickie was a girl after his own heart—at least for the rest of the weekend. He was batting a thousand when it came to finding things to like and admire about a woman he wasn’t ever going to see again.

Yet that didn’t matter. Not on a night like this. Maybe it was the tropical breeze, the moonlight glistening on the water or the soft sounds of a sultry ballad that played in the background.

Hell, maybe it was her. Or just him.

Whatever it was, the air was filled with sexual promise.

A glance at his buddies proved that. They’d already formed

couples.

Had Rickie noticed? Was she feeling it, too?

As another tune began to play, something alluring and suggestive, Clay cut a glance at Rickie and tried to read her mood. She was still seated, but she'd closed her eyes and was gently swaying to the music.

Clay got to his feet, and when she looked up at him, he held out his hand. "Dance with me."

Her lips parted, and for a moment, he thought she was going to decline. But she surprised him by slipping her hand in his and letting him draw her to her feet, away from the light—and the others.

* * *

Clay couldn't believe his luck. He'd wanted to get his hands on Rickie ever since he first laid eyes on her, and now he was dancing with her in the sand.

She felt so good in his arms. Their swimsuits left little to the imagination and didn't provide much of a barrier, so he held her skin to skin.

The coconut scent of her sunblock mingled with the tropical fragrance of her shampoo, something floral. It was an interesting combination. And intoxicating.

Her breasts, soft and full, pressed against his chest, and her cheek rested on his shoulder. But they weren't just swaying to the music, lulled by the beat. There was a lot more than that going on. Pheromones filled the night air, and his hormones were pumped

and at the ready.

He ran his hands along her back and over the tiny bow she'd tied to hold her bikini top in place. It wouldn't take much to remove it. Just a little tug on one of the strings.

It might be a tempting thought, but it wasn't one he'd put into action. Instead, he continued to caress her sun-kissed skin until he came dangerously close to the small piece of red fabric that barely covered her lovely backside. It took all he had to refrain from moving lower, from stroking her...

Watch yourself, man. Don't ruin the moment.

He wished it would last forever, but it wouldn't. Minutes from now, the last chords of this song would fade. Then they'd return to where they'd been sitting in the sand. Or maybe Rickie would say good-night and leave him out here alone.

If that happened, he'd deal with it. Like they said, all good things must come to an end.

And then they did. All too quickly. The music that followed the love song had a lively beat, one that lent itself to a Texas two-step. Something better suited for a crowded dance floor on a rip-roaring Saturday night than a moonlit tropical beach.

Rickie was the first to draw away, breaking their embrace and dashing the romantic mood—until Clay took a close look at her face in the soft amber glow of a distant porch light.

When she looked up at him and smiled, his body hardened with desire for her, and he damn near stopped breathing.

“What do you think?” she asked. “Should we take this inside?”

“Good idea.”

Granted, she might only be suggesting that they go indoors, turn on her favorite playlist and dance in private, but right now, with his hormones raging, he'd follow her anywhere.

She took him by the hand, led him across the grass and to the front of the bungalow. After opening the door, she stepped inside and flipped on the light switch. He followed her in.

He still wasn't sure what she had in mind until she crossed the room, headed for the sliding glass door that provided a beach view and drew the shutters, securing their privacy.

Apparently, they were both on the same page. He scanned the single room that provided a sitting area, a kitchen and a double bed. It was small, but nice. Clean and cozy.

He took a moment to check out the simple island decor, the framed surf posters, a watercolor of a sailboat on the high seas, a display of conch shells on a shelf near the wall-mounted television.

“This place is pretty small,” Rickie said, “but big enough for me.”

She'd implied earlier that someone might join her here. He suspected she hadn't wanted him to think she was all alone. But apparently, she felt comfortable with him now.

She closed the distance between them and studied his face, his mouth. She lifted her index finger and wiggled it at him. “You have a smidge of mustard on your lip. Do you mind if I...?”

He probably ought to be embarrassed and swipe his hand

across his face to remove any smears or brush off a lingering crumb, but he longed for her to touch him. "Go ahead."

She placed her finger against the side of his mouth and gave it a little rub. If he had anything there, it wasn't much.

As her hand lowered, he reached for her wrist and held it firm. "I'm not sure where this is heading, Rickie, but I know where I'd like it to go."

She gazed at him for a couple of beats before tossing him a breezy smile. "Looks like we're both in agreement."

He could have swept her into his arms right then and there, but it wasn't that easy. He released her wrist. "There's only one problem. I don't have any condoms."

She bit down on her bottom lip and furrowed her brow, apparently stymied by their dilemma.

He supposed they could walk into town and look for a drugstore. But that was going to put a big damper on the mood.

Suddenly, she brightened. "I just remembered. I have one in my overnight bag."

"Then we're in luck." And not just because of the condom. Rickie was a sexy little package, and he was glad she was prepared.

"I've had it for a while," she confessed. "I don't make a habit of inviting men home."

He believed her. And somehow that made tonight even more special. He opened his arms, and she stepped into his embrace. As she wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed their

nearly naked bodies together, he cupped her jaw and drew her lips to his.

The kiss began sweet, but within a heartbeat, it deepened. She opened her mouth, allowing his tongue to mate with hers, dipping, twisting and tasting as if they were so hungry they'd never get their fill.

He let his hands slip along her neck, to her shoulders and down to her waist, where he stroked her skin and explored her curves. When he reached her breast, his thumb skimmed against the red fabric, across a taut nipple, and her breath caught. A surge of desire shot right through him. With one hand still kneading her breast, he used the other to reach around to her backside, cup her bottom and pull her close, against his erection.

She pressed back, rubbing against him and heightening his arousal until he was tempted to lift her into his arms and carry her to bed. But before he had the chance, she ended the kiss.

"I'd better go find my tote bag. We're going to need that condom." She strode across the room and to the sofa, where a blue canvas bag rested, and reached inside. Moments later, she turned to him with a smile, holding the small packet like a prize. "Got it!"

Silently thanking whatever island god was looking out for them, he took her by the hand and led her to the bed. She placed the condom on the small nightstand. Then she reached behind her back, removed her skimpy bikini top and dropped it to the floor. As she peeled off the tiny bottom piece, his gaze never left her.

If he'd thought she was gorgeous before, he found her flat-out breathtaking now, standing before him in all her naked glory. Feminine perfection at its finest. And tonight, she was his.

Following her lead, he slipped off his board shorts, then joined her on the double bed and eased toward her, determined to please her and to make sure she wouldn't have any regrets in the morning. He sure as hell wouldn't. Not when their chemistry was off the charts.

She reached for the packet and handed it to him. He tore it open. Once he'd protected them both, she reached for his erection, opened for him and guided him home.

Okay, not *home*. That sounded too permanent, too lasting. This was a temporary relationship, a fling, one that was as short-term as a beachfront vacation rental. Here today, gone tomorrow.

He shook off the stray thought as he entered her. As he thrust deep, her body responded to his. She arched up, matching the tempo, creating their own.

As she reached a peak, she cried out and let go. He shuddered, releasing with her in a sexual explosion, their very own display of fireworks. He almost wished the rush could last forever—

No, *not* forever. This was just a one-night deal—or, hopefully, two. He'd have to make a drugstore run first thing in the morning and purchase a box of condoms. They'd never have the time to use them all before they said goodbye on Sunday morning and went their own ways. But after what they'd just shared, he suspected they'd need quite a few.

* * *

Erica never slept with anyone on the first date, let alone the first *meet*. But she'd been through a lot in the past month, suffered a tragic loss. And for some crazy reason, she'd wanted to feel a connection to another human being. To be held. To be...

Well, she didn't expect to find love or anything like that. But she'd thought it would be nice to feel liked, valued and appreciated.

And wow. She'd gotten so much better than that.

She wasn't a virgin, but neither would she consider herself to be sexually experienced. That was, until tonight. Bullet had taken her to a place she'd never been before—and one she feared she'd never go again.

She felt beautiful. Special. Adored.

Their lovemaking had turned her world on its axis—in a good way. While basking in his arms during a stunning afterglow, she'd been able to forget the funeral, the grief, the meetings with her parents' attorney, the house that needed a slew of repairs before she could sell it or find renters.

But more than that, she'd found herself reevaluating the future.

Not her decision to reenlist, of course. That wouldn't happen. She'd found strength and courage in the Army. She also had a sense of pride in herself and her accomplishments. There was no way she'd go back to Texas and to the small-town life she'd once known.

But that didn't mean she couldn't see Bullet again. Maybe visit him sometime. She might even be able to spend her next leave with him in Texas.

Of course, she had no idea how he'd feel about seeing *her* again after this weekend. Either way, a future together didn't seem likely. Not many men would want to follow their wives from base to base.

Okay, so she was putting the proverbial cart before the horse. Their heartbeats had barely slowed to normal, and they'd yet to say a word about what they'd just done, let alone discuss what might come next.

So she continued to lie with him, cuddling in bed with their legs entwined. But she wasn't ready to move, unless it was closer to Bullet.

When he pressed a kiss on her brow, she finally spoke. "That was amazing."

"I couldn't agree more."

She'd hoped he'd say that, although she had every reason to believe he felt the same way she did.

"I could stay here forever," she said, then wished she could reel in her words. She hadn't meant to overstep or to imply something that might frighten him off. So she added a bit of a disclaimer. "I meant stay here on the North Shore. In this cute little bungalow. And if I didn't have to go back to work, I'd stay in bed with you."

He stroked her shoulder, which suggested he hadn't let her comment bother him.

What would he say if she suggested they meet up in Texas in the near future? She could take personal leave so she could find renters after the handyman had made the repairs to the house. Up until now, she'd planned to hire a property manager so she wouldn't have to do it herself.

Still, if she oversaw things on her own, she could look up Bullet. Would he be up for something like that?

He said he no longer lived on the family ranch in Wexler, but he hadn't mentioned where he lived now. So it might not work out the way she thought it would.

Actually, there was a lot she didn't know about him. It hadn't mattered earlier, but it did now. She supposed they'd have to talk about stuff like that.

She glanced at the clock on the nightstand. Did they have time for that kind of discussion now? Or should she let it go until morning? She propped herself up on her elbow and glanced over Bullet's shoulder to get a better look.

Apparently, he must have realized what she was attempting to do, because he asked, "What time is it?"

"Almost twenty-one hundred."

He stiffened. "What'd you say?"

"I'm sorry." She sighed softly. "Military time comes naturally to me."

He didn't respond right away, but the muscles in his arm seemed pretty tight.

"Were you in the military?" he asked.

“Actually, I still am.” She supposed it wouldn’t hurt to lay her cards on the table, to have that little talk now. “I’m going to make a career of it. Why?”

His biceps twitched. “Something tells me we just came to a place where the old don’t-ask-don’t-tell line would be appropriate.”

Uh-oh. Now it was her turn to stiffen.

“What branch of the service are you in?” he asked.

A sense of foreboding crossed her mind, and her heart hammered in her chest as if trying to break through her rib cage. “I’m in the Army.”

He inhaled deeply, then slowly blew it out. “Where are you stationed?”

“Schofield Barracks. Does that matter?”

“It might.”

Oh, for Pete’s sake. Surely he wasn’t in the Army, too. If so, was he stationed in Texas? But wait, that’s not what he’d said. Was it?

She rolled away and practically shot up in bed. Then she folded her arms across her chest and turned to him. “You lied to me. You’re not a cowboy from Texas.”

“I grew up on a ranch in Wexler, and I’ve ridden plenty of horses over the years. But I never claimed to be a cowboy.”

“So you’re in the Army, too?” she asked, dreading the response.

“Yeah, I am. And apparently, I wasn’t the only one to withhold

some details over the last few hours.”

“I *am* on vacation,” she said. “But only until tomorrow night, when I have to check in at the base.”

Bullet sat up and scrubbed his hand over his hair. *Please don't let him be an officer.* It was against regulations to fraternize.

That sense of foreboding grew, casting a shadow over her. Over them.

“What’s your rank?” he asked.

“You go first.”

Bullet swore under his breath. “I’m Captain Clayton Masters. I command a Black Hawk squadron on Wheeler Army Airfield. And you’re...?”

Rickie blew out a sigh, plopped back down on the mattress and placed her hands over her face. “Sergeant Erica Campbell—enlisted.”

What rotten luck. Her lover wasn’t a cowboy from Texas. Nor was he a tourist on vacation.

Instead, he was a Black Hawk commander. An officer in the US Army.

And they’d just fraternized.

It hadn’t been intentional. And as long as they didn’t do it again, she supposed it was no big deal.

“I guess we screwed up,” Bullet said. “Ah, no pun intended.”

She blew out a weary sigh. “Big-time. If I’d known who you were, I never would have invited you back here.”

“And if I’d known who *you* were, I wouldn’t have come.”

"I never expected more than one night anyway," Rickie said, although, just moments ago, she'd begun to hope for more. To wonder how they could possibly pull that off. "So no harm, no foul. Right?"

"That's what I'm thinking." Bullet—or rather, Clay—raked a hand through his hair. A military cut, she now realized.

Damn. Should she call him *Captain*? After what they'd done, that felt awkward.

"I guess we really are neighbors," he said, as he got to his feet and reached for his discarded board shorts.

"That's about the size of it." Wheeler Airfield was just across the street from Schofield Barracks.

Rickie figured she'd better get dressed, too, and climbed out of bed. Rather than put on her swimsuit, she rummaged through her suitcase and pulled out a green T-shirt and a pair of black shorts. She wouldn't bother with a bra or panties.

"What's your MOS?" he asked, referring to her military occupation specialty.

"I'm a sixty-eight whiskey."

"So you're a medic."

"I work at a clinic unless I'm sent out for training ops." And those often began on Wheeler, especially when she and her unit had to fly out to the Big Island. Damn, what a disappointing—not to mention *awkward*—mess this was turning out to be.

She slipped into her clothes, covering herself quickly as if they could pretend none of this happened. But good luck with that.

The sex had been too damn good to forget.

“I suppose that means we could run into each other.”

True. So far, she hadn't been on any missions with him, although she could. The Black Hawks usually flew soldiers out to the Big Island, where a lot of training took place. And since he was the commander of a squadron, it could happen in the future.

Yep. Definitely awkward.

“You know,” he said, “we can't do this again.”

She wasn't stupid, although she felt like it. “I've never done this before—made love with a guy I just met. This was just...one of those things. So I wasn't expecting any more than one night.”

“Neither was I.”

She stole a glance at Bullet. Or rather Clay. They hadn't actually lied to each other. They'd just withheld information that would have helped them avoid doing something like this.

“Are Poncho and Duck in the military, too?” she asked.

“No, they're actually civilians visiting me. And I took a week off to stay with them. I didn't mean to trick you...”

At this point, she figured it didn't matter. But for some reason, it did. “I wasn't trying to pull the wool over your eyes, either. I flew in from Houston last night and don't have to sign in until tomorrow night. I didn't see any point in sharing my life story.”

Although, to be honest, she wished they still had one more day together. But it wouldn't be right.

“Well,” he said, nodding toward the door. “I'd better get out of here. Otherwise, I'd be tempted to climb back into bed.”

She smiled, clinging to the admission like a compliment.

“I wish things were different,” he added.

So did she. Their chemistry was off the charts. At least in bed. And before reality struck, she'd been ruing the thought of going back to her barracks and him flying back to Texas. But this was different. Worse.

So close, yet so far away.

She managed an unaffected smile. “I guess I'll see you around.”

He stood in the center of the room for a couple of beats, as if he was struggling with reality and ethics and everything else. “Take care.”

“You, too.” Rickie watched him walk toward the door.

While it was possible they'd run into each other again, she hoped not. It would be awkward at best. Not to mention disappointing.

But an officer fraternizing with an enlisted soldier was against Army regulations, and since she wasn't about to make any changes to her career plan, their short-term affair was officially over. Wham, bam, thank you...sir.

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