

Chapter 1

26 November, 1600 Hours

The ride to Walter Reed Army Medical Center took longer than expected. The large numbers of holiday shoppers clogging the highways at every mall entrance along the way was the cause. Lieutenant Colonel Deanna Peterson and her partner DEA Special Agent Katie O'Malley were on their way to pick up Tracy Kidd, a good friend who was to be discharged from Walter Reed that afternoon.

As they neared the military hospital, a silent reminder of injuries incurred during their recent encounter with terrorists entered Katie's mind causing her to shiver at the memory. "You know, we were pretty lucky on that op. It could have ended a lot worse."

Nodding, Dean concentrated as the traffic became more congested. "I know what you mean. This country could be embroiled in a war on multiple fronts right now if Gentry had been successful in taking over those warheads."

Katie shivered again. "If even one of them had gotten through..." She didn't need to finish the sentence as she shook her head and exhaled.

Dean considered the targets chosen by Gentry. "It would have been pandemonium, no matter which one got through. Taking out the President and Vice President would have plunged this country into political chaos, not to mention the damage and loss of life Pensacola Naval Air Station would have sustained."

"And if the one that targeted Havana had hit...the retaliation would have had world-wide effects."

Dean nodded her agreement. "I hate to say it, but probably the least comprehensive damage would have resulted from the warhead that was aimed at the Red Stone Arsenal. There'd have been a lot of collateral military damage — loss of life and such — but the civilian casualties would have been minimal."

Katie looked over at Dean as she drove through the rush of traffic. "Jeez, when you think about it, it's amazing that the only injury our team sustained was the bullet Tracy took."

"And, the loss of a perfectly good helicopter!" Dean began laughing as she remembered Tracy's words when she'd rescued her from the sinking craft.

"I didn't realize that the situation was that humorous," Katie said failing to see the humor in the crash that could have taken both the lives of her lover and their very good friend.

"Do you know what Tracy said to me when we surfaced from that sinking helicopter?"

Curiosity piqued, Katie turned toward Dean. "No. You never told me she said anything."

Dean controlled her laughter long enough to say, "She said: *Damn. You sure know how to show a girl a good time!*"

Both women broke out in smiles, then chuckles, and finally belly-shaking laughter as Dean eased the SUV into the entrance for Walter Reed and managed to find a parking space fairly close to the entrance. "Well, here we are, at last," Dean commented, removing the key from the ignition and wiping the tears from her eyes.

Glancing at her watch, she sighed. "I sure hope the discharge papers haven't been processed yet. I know how impatient Trace can get when she wants out of some place. She'll be having a cow if she could have left by now."

"Oh?" her young blonde companion drawled, wiping the tears from her eyes too as she exited her side of the SUV. "You mean she can be worse than you?" Katie smiled at the frown Dean shot her as the two women walked toward the hospital entrance.

"What do you mean? I'm not impatient at all," Dean bantered good-naturedly, holding the door for her partner.

Katie looked up into Dean's twinkling sapphire eyes and smiled back knowingly. "Okay. You just remember that the next time you have to go in for your annual physical." Katie wagged a finger at the taller woman as she passed inside. "I don't want to hear one word of complaint from you."

They headed for the first bank of elevators, pressing the button for service as they waited. Dean stood facing the elevator, hands clasped behind her back, rocking on her heels as she waited. Katie was mentally counting off the seconds, certain that before she even reached twenty,

Dean would make a comment about the slow service. Her count was interrupted by the arrival of Colleen Shore, Tracy's partner.

Colleen spied the two women as she came out of the coffee shop across from the elevators. "Hi, guys! Nice tans. Glad you were able to get something nice out of that so-called vacation."

"Hey, Col! Thanks for the use of the condo for the week. We managed to wind down pretty well on that island. Of course, Tom and Tiny were excellent companions and guides." As the elevator doors opened, Dean added, "Has she been released yet?"

"Nope. The doctor has to come up to give her a final once over, before he'll sign the paperwork for the discharge. He was quite intrigued by the story of her injury," she teased.

Katie began chuckling. "Yeah, I'll bet he was! Did she tell him it was her first time actually flying a helicopter?"

Colleen nodded, trying to stifle her laughter. "You should have seen his face when I told him that she had only flown one in simulation and had crashed every time she tried to land!"

"Oh, I bet that was rich," Dean added, chuckling. "I would have loved to have been there."

The three women entered the elevator along with several hospital staff, who just looked at them wondering at the source of their mirth. "Yeah, his mouth really dropped open as she told him how she nearly bought the farm until you released her seatbelt." She grimaced wryly. "He doesn't seem to have had much experience with the military, but he seems really nice. He's young, but quite competent."

"That's right, General Carlton was going to assign someone special to her case. What's his name?" Dean asked as the elevator stopped on their selected floor.

Colleen answered the question as they arrived at Tracy's room. "Captain O'Brien."

Stepping through the doorway, they noted that the privacy curtain had been pulled around Tracy's bedside, but they could hear a male voice giving her instructions for the home recuperation period.

"Now make sure you get those stitches out on Friday. You can just come to the outpatient clinic, and one of the PA's will take care of it. Then you can start on some therapy next week," the voice instructed. "And no more flying!" he added with a chuckle. "At least not until you take some hands-on flying lessons. I'll send your therapist my orders today. That way, they can line up your treatment schedule so you can start on Monday." He paused before continuing. "Now, any questions before I go sign those discharge papers?"

"Um, none I can think of right now," Tracy began, "but if something comes up, I've got your number. Thanks, Captain, and good luck to you."

"Captain... Hmm, I don't know if I'll ever get used to that," the doctor muttered softly. "Thanks for being a model patient, Tracy. Now, just do what we talked about for the next few days, and you'll be fine. I'll go get your paperwork started. A corpsman will be here in about an hour to escort you out."

The curtain slid back along the ceiling track, allowing the young doctor to exit the area. As he turned, he noted Colleen and the two other women standing by the door. "She's all yours..." He stopped speaking as he recognized the two women. "Hey, Colonel Peterson...Agent O'Malley. What are you two doing here?"

"Pete?" both women mouthed together as they recognized the young doctor.

"Yeah, it's me. What a surprise, eh?" He beamed at the slack jawed women who were just staring at him in disbelief.

"What...how..." Dean stammered.

"Long story," Captain O'Brien noted. "But the short of it is, your general is a pretty fast talker and an even faster paper pusher. I've been here for ten days now. Tracy was my first patient." He looked over at Tracy who was now redressed and interested in the conversation. "I take it you know these two?" He pointed at Dean and Katie.

"Yeah, Doc. That tall one over there is the one responsible for my getting in the way of that bullet," Tracy quipped, as she walked over to Dean and gave her a hug. "But I don't hold it against her."

Dean looked over at Tracy and gently poked a finger into her chest. "Hey, you're the one who said you could fly the damn thing!"

They all laughed and then proceeded to get a quick rundown on Pete's new commission as a medical corps officer.

“General Carlton contacted me a day or so after we met in the warehouse. She said she had checked into my medical training and wanted to talk to me.” He shook his head. “How could I pass up a trip to the Pentagon? Anyway, after meeting with her I signed up. I can finish my residency right here at Walter Reed, then finish my service either here or another post. Best thing is, I get officer’s housing for the family and she even got my wife a civilian position at the Pentagon...day care for the kids included!”

“That’s terrific Pete. The general is an ace at spotting quality soldiers. And working for the military isn’t a bad deal. Good pay, good experience and you could even make a career of it,” Dean said as she patted his shoulder. “Next time I need to get patched up, I’ll know who to ask for.”

They chatted for a bit longer, then, Captain O’Brien excused himself so he could get Tracy’s discharge in motion.

“Wow. That’s pretty cool of the general,” Katie admitted. “Pete can get his residency finished and get paid well in the process. No more crummy jobs to provide for his family.” Dean nodded and smiled, making a mental note to thank the general.

As promised, the corpsman showed up within the hour, providing a wheelchair for Tracy’s departure. Tracy eagerly sat in the chair for her ride down to the lobby, telling her friends that she was not about to spend any more time than necessary in the hospital. Regulations were regulations, after all, and she knew she would have to give in to the ride sooner or later anyway. As soon as the corpsman came into the room, Dean left to get the SUV. Parking by the curb, she helped as the corpsman got Tracy settled into the back seat. Once they were all in, Dean cautiously pulled out and headed the SUV back to the house in Occoquan.

“You’re sure you guys don’t mind us crashing with you until Friday?” Colleen asked for the third time. “We could get a hotel room.”

“No way!” Katie said turning to face them in the backseat. “There’s plenty of room, and the cats will love to have company for a few days. Besides, we got to use your timeshare in the Bahamas while you were up here getting fixed up, so let’s just call it even.”

“Even, it is,” Tracy agreed. “How was the rest of your vacation, anyway?”

“Fantastic! I can see why you guys go there every year. It’s so laid back and restful,” Dean said checking their faces in the rear view mirror.

“And the beaches are great, too,” Katie chimed in, a bit too eagerly, which elicited a wide grin from Dean.

“I hope you guys remembered the beach blanket!” Tracy teased, which caused them all to burst into laughter. The ride continued in relaxed companionship as the women exchanged information from the past week, and they were soon pulling into the driveway at Dean and Katie’s new home.

A small, camouflaged body crept stealthily through the trees surrounding Dean’s property. At a distance of fifty yards, it stopped and slid into a prone position behind a series of small evergreen shrubs that had been planted in a random pattern along both sides of the property. The house was a magnificent building very similar in style to Frank Lloyd Wright’s Fallingwater home in Pennsylvania. The back of the house had multi-level decks that perched over the hillside that led to the reservoir below. The land used for the building site was very private with trees and the deep ravine on the back providing natural privacy. The house design however, included many windows and allowed the intruder to see directly into the kitchen where the foursome was gathered. A gnarled right hand pulled a pair of binoculars out of a backpack, the magnification allowing the voyeur to feel as though they were sitting amidst the four laughing people.

“So, that’s the grand tour,” Katie pronounced as she led Tracy and Colleen back into the kitchen before taking the tray of snacks out to the living room.

“Nice place you’ve got here Dean, but aren’t you worried about privacy? There’s not a curtain in the place.” In testament to her statement, Colleen gestured at the undraped floor to ceiling windows.

“Hey, just take a look outside, Col, do you see anyone watching?” Dean joked, then turned serious. “Not to worry my friend. Besides all the trees between here and the next property, I had this little item installed.” Dean walked over to the main control panel for all of the electronic toys she’d added for security, and pushed a series of buttons. Instantly, the windows went from a clear view of the outside, to an opaque view, allowing light, but no sight, to filter through.

"Awesome!" Tracy and Colleen chimed in together. Dean pushed the buttons once more, and the windows returned to their clear view mode.

"I saw this at a home show up in Philadelphia. I thought it was the coolest thing ever devised. Saves a lot in window dressings, too," Dean explained. "Of course it was a bit pricey to add, but I think it's worth it." Dean led her guests to the living room where Katie had put out the tray of cheese, fresh fruit and crackers, along with some hot cider.

"So, Tom and Tiny took good care of you two, huh?" Tracy asked as she sipped her cider.

"They were terrific hosts," Katie said with a smile. "We went deep sea fishing and dove an old wreck and generally just enjoyed the boat. At night, we'd get together for dinner. They know some really awesome places that are not on the tourist lists."

"Tiny does like to eat well, so he's ferreted those back alley places out over the years and that's where we usually go too," Colleen said as she picked up another slice of cheese and a cracker.

"How did you ever run into those guys?" Katie asked.

"Long story," Tracy began, but was interrupted by Colleen.

"No it's not dear, it's a short one." She looked over at Dean and hiked a thumb back at her partner. "Ms. I-know-how-to-do-everything over here decided that we'd rent a sail boat and sail out to one of the little cays for some private snorkeling. Well, getting out was fine, the wind was at our backs so it was smooth sailing so to speak. But the wind died down to barely a breeze and it wasn't looking like it was going to come up again. Tracy," she hiked her thumb again at her partner who was now looking very embarrassed, "didn't think to check the small outboard motor for fuel before we left and of course it was dryer than the Tortugas. Top that off with not even an oar aboard and we were stuck. If it hadn't been for Tom and Tiny coming around the point of that small cay, we would have been there for a very long night. The rest is history."

"Turned out, as you know, that they and their boss are all ex-military so we've gotten along really fine since that first meeting. Tiny and their boss, Nick Davos are both from Texas. Tom and Tiny served under Nick in the Marines. They pulled some really heavy assignments. I'm surprised you never ran into them on some of yours," Tracy said as she set her cup down.

"Well, I certainly would have remembered Tiny, that's for sure," Dean replied.

"So, why do they call him Tiny?" Katie asked and added, "You never did tell us."

Tracy smiled, "Well, the story Tom tells is that one of the guys in their unit was a little runt of a guy who kept calling him 'tiny' and one night after a few too many brews, one thing led to another and the two got into a fight. Well, the runt won so the name stuck."

"I can't believe a guy the size of Tiny could lose to a smaller guy. How small was he?" Katie asked.

"I asked that too, and Tom said he was barely five foot three, but wiry and sneaky like a fox. Now Tiny can move well for his size and weight, but the little guy was just quicker and smarter from a lifetime of having to defend his size."

Dean nodded, "The bigger they are the harder they fall."

Katie reached over and patted Dean's leg softly. "That's right hon, you know that from experience, don't you?"

Dean turned toward Katie and grinned. "I sure do."

Eventually the conversation turned to the subject of their invitation to the White House and their upcoming visit there, Colleen asked, "Have you ever been asked to the White House before, Dean? I mean, it's a bit unnerving and...well, what should we wear and all?"

"Well, that's an easy one for me, I'll be in uniform; you guys can just wear something casual," Dean snickered.

"Casual? To the White House? To meet the President?" Colleen objected.

"Sounds good to me Col, you know me. Best I'll do is a pair of slacks and a jacket," Tracy admitted.

"Sure, that'll be fine. It's a private meeting, no press or anything," Katie offered. "The general said he just wants to meet us, and thank us...again." Katie's mind whirled back to nearly a year before, when she'd first met the President in Dean's hospital room after her partner had come out of surgery. *Now, that was an interesting experience. Watching the President thank Dean for saving the day, even though she was acting on her own initiative and technically against orders. I don't know who was more intimidated in that brief meeting, the President or Dean. My gut, though, tells me it was the President — for not taking her warnings seriously.* Katie returned

from her thoughts to be greeted by a knowing smile from her lover. "Speaking of the general, shouldn't she be here soon with our feline brood?"

Outside, beneath the evergreen shrub, the silent figure continued a vigilant watch, listening to the conversation through the small transmitters that had been planted earlier in the week. "You're getting really good at saving the day, aren't you?" the camouflaged body whispered. "Well, we'll just see how good you are, won't we." Then the phantom packed the binoculars back into the backpack and slipped away into the silence of the night.

After bidding the general goodnight, then giving Sugar her evening medication and making their guests comfortable for the night, Dean and Katie finally and thankfully made their way to their bedroom. After brushing their teeth and washing up for the night, Dean doused the lights before the two naked women exited the bathroom. "I think I need another vacation, just to rest up," Katie moaned as she crawled under the fluffy comforter.

"Mmm, me too," her tall lover replied, following Katie into the bed. "It's nice to be home, though."

"Yes, it is. And the cats seem to be glad to be home, too." Katie had no sooner finished the sentence, than Butter jumped up on the bed, stalking her way over to her mistress and eliciting an "urf" from the woman as the cat plopped down all sixteen of her pounds on Katie's chest. Sugar quickly followed her sister and took over the lower section of the bed, purring with contentment. "Gotta put these cats on a diet," Katie gasped, as she moved Butter from her chest.

"Looks like you were missed," Dean stated as she stroked the tortoise shell colored cat that now took up residence between them.

"Mmhm. And it looks like she wants to keep an eye on both of us." Katie looked around the room in anticipation of Spice joining them. Not seeing her, she shrugged her shoulders and rolled over to face Dean. "I guess Spice is still angry about being left behind."

"She's probably down with Tracy and Colleen," Dean offered. "Colleen really does attract all sorts of animals. If there's a stray animal around, she'll find it. Just like those puppies in the woods outside their timeshare resort. Remember how they took right to her?"

"Yeah, they just swarmed over her like ants over melted ice cream." Katie giggled at the memory and was about to make another comment when the two women heard something slide across the hardwood floor and bounce off the molding, followed by the sound of a cat pouncing on her prey.

"Meow!" Bat...slide...crash-thump. "Meeooowww."

"Good grief! What has she got now?" Katie threw off the comforter and grabbed her robe, slipping it on before turning on the lights. Scanning the room, she found the source of the noise crouched in the corner, tail smacking heavily back and forth on the wood floor, eyeing an unseen object under a chair. Going over to check out what treasure Spice had conjured up this time, she bent down and reached under the chair and came up with a totally unexpected surprise.

"Dean...you'd better take a look at this." Katie took the object over to Dean's side of the bed, offering it to her lover as she sat up. "I think Spice may have gotten into some of your techno toys."

"What the..." Taking the small item in her hand, sapphire eyes darkened. "It's not one of ours." Dean looked at the tiny transmitter, turning it over in her hand several times. "It's a European model, maybe a NATO issue."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Is it working?"

"Not now." She pointed to fresh teeth marks in the small object. "Spice took care of that." She looked up into alert emerald eyes as she got out of bed, slipping on her nightshirt. "But, if there's one, there's probably more where this came from," she added in a barely audible whisper.

Silently, Dean headed for the exercise room, flipping on the light as she entered. Katie followed, knowing that Dean was heading for her secured closet where she kept a variety of high tech equipment on hand for short notice assignments. Dean entered the ten-digit combination, turned the handle, and entered the closet, emerging in a few seconds with an electronic "bug" detector. The item was not much larger than a portable tape player, but had an eight-inch tube protruding from one end. She turned the instrument on and began a thorough sweep of her entire house, inside and out. Katie, in the meantime, went to Tracy and Colleen's room and silently

apprised their guests of the situation. Within thirty minutes, Dean had found fifteen other transmitting devices, bagged them, and relegated them to the freezer, before joining her friends in the living room.

The tall woman sat heavily in the chair by the fireplace. "Okay, it's safe to talk; I've got them all."

"Just a typical night in an intelligence officer's life?" Colleen queried as she took in the exhausted look on her friend's face.

Dean sighed. "Guess you could say that."

"Any ideas?" questioned Tracy as she readjusted herself on the couch, careful not to aggravate her injured shoulder.

"Not a clue." Tired blue eyes looked up at the three people staring at her. "We'll have to wait for daylight before I can check the grounds more thoroughly. Until then, I suggest we try to get some sleep."

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