

## Chapter 1

1455 Hours, 20 October

Lieutenant Colonel Deanna Peterson sat rocking in her oversized leather desk chair, looking out the window that overlooked the courtyard of the Pentagon. The chair was the only luxury she allowed herself in her large but spartan office. There was a sharp rap on the door. She swiveled her chair around and straightened the papers that were scattered about her desk before she called out, "Enter."

A brilliant smile quickly replaced her formal military countenance as she recognized the civilian who opened the door. It was her long time friend, Tracy Kidd, with whom she had recently been reunited while on detached assignment in the Catskills. That New York assignment was one that she would remember for the rest of her life; it had led her to finally reconcile with her past, and take a bold step into the future.

"Hey, Colonel," came the quick salutation from Tracy, "how about lunch?"

Stepping around her desk, Dean greeted her old friend with a fierce hug instead of a handshake, and a barrage of questions. "Tracy! It's good to see you! Are you here alone? Where's Colleen?" Not allowing Tracy time to answer, she added, "So, what brings you to Washington?"

Tracy grinned at her friend's obvious delight at seeing her. "Oh, just one of the perks of being Director of Parks and Recreation. We brought a busload of senior citizens down to see the sights of D.C. for the weekend. We just barely got in, when I left them in Linna's capable hands and hopped the first cab over here to see you. Colleen couldn't make this trip, but she sends her love." Tracy answered all of the questions as Dean waved her to a chair by the desk and returned to her own. "We haven't heard from you in a while, so I just took a chance you'd be here and not out on assignment in some backwater. And before you ask, I ran into Captain Jerral at the Information Desk, and he got me the visitor's pass and directed me to your office."

"Good old Jerral. That's right, you were posted together at Fort Sill. Yeah, I've been here plowing through paperwork for what seems like eons." Dean gestured at the stacks of papers littering her desk. "I really hate paperwork. Much rather be out in the field. I was just rocking in my chair and contemplating how bored I am, when you knocked."

"So, why aren't you out doing fieldwork?" Tracy asked directly.

"With the loss of General James, the higher ups decided that his replacement, Brigadier General Carlton, needed an aide who was well versed in intelligence work in the field. Guess who they picked?" Dean tapped her chest with a sad smile.

"Carlton? Is that Mary Carlton? She's a one-star now?"

"Yep. Nice to see a woman progress to such a good posting, but it's sure cramping my style. General Carlton is a top-notch administrator — great with budgets, proposals, planning, and staffing, but unfortunately she has never been in the field herself. So now I get to help her make those assignments, track their progress, recommend changes, etc., etc."

"Hey, it can't be that bad. At least you get to spend more time with Katie, don't you?" Tracy's comment was accompanied by a broad smile. "How are the two of you doing, anyway?"

Dean brightened visibly. Katie had become the stable force Dean needed in her life, and they grabbed every chance they could to be together. However, working for different government agencies was not helping their relationship to develop on a normal track. Katie was often out in the field, while Dean was swamped with paperwork.

Dean knew full well that nothing she said to her friend would leave her office. "Katie has been in the field for a while now. She was undercover working on a case out in El Paso. Her team finally broke up a drug ring that was using illegals to process the meth in their makeshift labs. The Texas Rangers were at a dead end trying to solve several deaths from lab accidents so they asked the DEA to put in an undercover agent."

"Please tell me that they didn't try to pass off your lovely little blonde as a Mexican illegal."

Dean grinned and shook her head. "She's good, but not that good. No, she was the handler for the guy that went undercover. She'll be here this weekend. She's just finishing up the paperwork on the case and will be arriving at National on the red eye from Dallas late tonight. I know she'll be glad to see you...and Linna, too. What's your schedule like with the seniors?"

"Not too bad. We bought a packaged tour this time. The company is providing a tour guide for the whole weekend. Linna and I came along just to participate and see whether it's a good deal or not...for

future reference. So I can slip out any time, but Linna will be available only in the evenings. What'd ya have in mind?"

"I know a great restaurant down by the river. Best crab cakes you've ever tasted. Maybe we could all get together there. It's called The Crab Pot."

"Hey! That's where the tour has us scheduled for tomorrow night. Dinner is at seven."

"Great. Katie and I will meet you there at seven."

The two friends talked a bit longer and were about to leave for a short tour of the Pentagon when they were interrupted by a phone call requesting Dean's presence in General Carlton's office.

"Guess I'll have to bow out on the tour, but we'll see you at The Crab Pot tomorrow." The women stood and hugged again before they left Dean's office, each heading in a different direction.

One thing about Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, it was almost always busy. Dean parked her SUV in the short-term lot and ran in to the airport, scanning the monitors for Katie's arrival gate information. *Damn! They're early. Must have caught a good tailwind. Okay, Dean, let's see how fast you can sprint down to the gate.* As she hurriedly turned from the bank of monitors, she ran right into Katie, who had been quietly standing behind Dean and was just about to tap her on the shoulder.

"Ufff! Sorry, I didn't..." Dean reached down to assist the traveler she had just laid out on the floor. "Katie! Why didn't you say something?" Dean sputtered as she lifted her lover into her arms.

"Yeah...I'm glad to see you, too," Katie said, reveling in the warmth of Dean's embrace.

Releasing Katie, Dean put on her very best puppy dog look. "I am so sorry that I'm late. I had a very long, last minute meeting with the general, then I had to run home to give Sugar her medicine, and I swear that the traffic on I-95—"

Smiling, Katie reached up and placed two fingers on Dean's lips to stop the litany of excuses. "It's okay, Dean. We got in early. I slipped the pilot an extra twenty bucks to floor it all the way home, 'cause I missed you so much!" She winked. "I've got my bag, so let's just go home." *Home, she thought, losing herself in Dean's eyes. That sounds so good, and after this weekend, it'll be even better.*

"Hey, love, penny for your thoughts," Dean said, drawing the blonde out of her reverie.

"Mmm, I was just thinking about how nice it is to be home."

Dean gave her lover another hug before she led her out into the warm October night toward where the SUV was parked. "Are you hungry?" she asked, as she pulled out into the southbound traffic on I-95.

"Do birds fly? Of course I'm hungry...but, no beef or Mexican food, okay? I've pretty much hit my limit on those." Katie reached over to hold Dean's hand. "How about some Chinese, or Thai, or Indian, or—"

"Hold on!" Dean shouted. A limo came up quickly on her left, then zigzagged between their SUV and the vehicle just in front of them. Dean made a quick defensive maneuver to the right to keep from being sideswiped.

"Holy horse pockey! Where the heck did he come from?" the blonde exclaimed, as the strong restraint of her shoulder harness kept her from bouncing around on the slick leather seat.

"Damn!" snarled Dean, carefully controlling her SUV on the loose gravel of the right shoulder. Looking into her rearview mirror, she noted that the vehicle that had been in front of her was not as lucky as she had been. It had pulled violently to the left to avoid the limo and wound up sliding sideways into the median, kicking up a spray of dirt and grass before it came to an abrupt stop. "We'd better check on the people in that other vehicle. Make sure the driver is all right."

The two women got out of the SUV and waited for a break in the traffic to hurry across the highway. When they got to the unlucky car, they found that the occupants were an elderly couple who looked to be in their early seventies. The male driver was slumped over the steering wheel, and his female passenger was holding the right side of her head and mumbling what they assumed was his name, but was unrecognizable at the time. Dean noted that they both were wearing their seatbelts, so she hoped any injuries would be minor.

"Check her out, I'll check him," Dean instructed. Katie nodded and hurried around to the passenger side. Each worked quickly and skillfully, assessing their charge.

"She seems to have hit her head on the door and has a bump and a small cut," Katie called over. "But she seems to be all right otherwise."

Dean carefully checked the man for bleeding, pulse, and breathing. Though she saw no visible sign of physical trauma, he wasn't breathing and had no pulse. "Quick, give me a hand. I've got to start CPR."

Katie rushed back to the driver's side, and together they unhooked his seatbelt, carefully moved him to the grass, and began CPR. Dean performed chest compressions while Katie provided the breaths. By the time they finished the third round, other vehicles had stopped to lend assistance.

"Does anyone have a cell phone?" Dean shouted to the gathering crowd. "Someone call 9-1-1."

A young teenager who had stopped, quickly pulled out his cell phone and dialed for help, while his date went to check on the elderly woman. A truck driver helped the teen with the woman, who was bordering on hysteria as she watched Katie and Dean working on her husband.

By the time the ambulance arrived, the man's heart was beating and he had recovered sufficiently to breathe on his own. A Virginia State Police vehicle arrived at the same time as the ambulance. One officer went to interview the woman, while the other crossed over to where the EMT's were taking over from Dean and Katie.

"Excuse me," called the officer, as the two women turned the care of the driver over to the ambulance crew. "May I have a word with you two?"

"Certainly, Officer." Katie nodded as they walked over to him.

"I'm Sergeant Dooley." He offered his ID for their inspection and then pulled out his report pad. "May I have your names, please?"

"Deanna Peterson," Dean said, then motioned toward Katie, "and this is Katherine O'Malley."

The officer made a notation. "Do you have any idea what happened here?"

"We were on our way from Washington National when a silver stretch limo, I believe it was a Lincoln, sped between my SUV and this Mercedes, driven by these folks. The limo had to be going at least ninety miles an hour when he cut between the two of us."

"Did you notice the plate or get the number?" Pen at the ready, he waited expectantly for their reply.

"At ninety miles an hour?" Katie asked, incredulous. "We were lucky Dean was able to maintain control of the car."

"Yes, ma'am, but did you notice anything significant about the car? There's got to be at least two hundred silver stretch limos in Washington alone. Anything that could identify this particular one would be a big help."

"It had embassy flags," Dean said. "I can't be sure which embassy...went by too fast, and it's too dark."

"Well, that narrows it down a little, but if it was an embassy vehicle, we might as well hang it up now. We'll never see justice done. At least there were no fatalities." He jotted a few notes in his pad before closing it. "Well, thank you, ladies. Is there somewhere we can reach you if we need to?"

Each woman took her business card case from her coat pocket and handed a card to the officer. He took them, read the information, then whistled. "Well, thank you, Colonel Peterson, Agent O'Malley. If you think of anything else, please give me a call." He handed one of his cards to each woman and returned to his squad car.

As they walked back to the road, Katie asked a contemplative Dean, "You actually saw flags on that limo?"

"Mmhhh. I think they were Algerian, and I may have seen the guy in the passenger seat before. If I'm right, he's a mercenary named Scott Gentry."

"You could get all that and still keep the SUV under control?" Katie shook her head in wonder. "So why didn't you give that information to the officer?"

"Like he said, if they were embassy flags, you might as well forget about it; it's a lost cause." Dean shrugged. "C'mon, there's a break in traffic, let's get back to the truck." She grabbed Katie's arm and steered her across the highway. Once the SUV was back on the road, the young blonde turned in her seat to face her partner. "Dean?"

"Mmm?"

"Why do you think the limo was in such a hurry that it would risk cutting us off like that?"

"Don't know, love. Could be they were late for a meeting, or maybe the driver just likes to speed and knows he can get away with it. We'll probably never find out." Dean glanced over at Katie, winked, and gave her a crooked smile. "I need more time to process what I saw. But, if there's a way to figure it out, I will."

Katie smiled at her lover and put a hand behind Dean's neck and began a gentle massage on tight neck muscles. "You know, hon, I just bet you will."