

BB Dalton: Under the Covers
A Red, Hot & Blue BONUS READ
Cat Johnson

Billy Bob "BB" Dalton thought he'd left his career as an underwear model behind when he became a Navy SEAL assigned to a team of special ops where no one is supposed to have a past or an identity. Now the military wants him to be the poster boy for their new recruitment marketing campaign, and during what was supposed to be his Christmas leave no less.

Luckily his 'handler' turns out to be hot enough to melt icicles in winter, but can BB convince this slightly older and definitely jaded career-focused marketing executive to let him go from working undercover to working her under the covers?

Chapter One

A few years before the events of Model Soldier (a Red, Hot & Blue novel)...

“Dalton!” BB sat up a little straighter at the sound of his name being barked from the doorway by his commanding officer. “In my office. Now.”

“Yes, sir.” Oh, shit. What the hell had he done to get called into the commander’s office right before a team meeting? There was no way this could be good.

He’d arrived on time for the o-eight-hundred meeting.

In fact, he hadn’t even been the last one in the door. That honor belonged to his teammate Jack Gordon. BB knew that Jack’s girlfriend was visiting, so it wasn’t a surprise he looked like he’d just rolled out of bed after getting not a hell of a lot of sleep.

BB tried to ignore the raised eyebrows and interested looks of the other guys as he rose and made his way into the commander’s office.

Damn it. It just figured he’d somehow get into trouble right before his leave started. He was supposed to go home to his family in New York for the holidays. As he walked into the commander’s office, feeling very confused, he hoped he’d still be waking up Christmas morning in his old bed.

The fact that he found a woman sitting in the chair opposite the commander only compounded his confusion.

Now, if he’d been one of the guys on base who hung out at the local bar until they had to crawl home, he might wonder if he’d had the pleasure of this woman’s company, perhaps gotten a little wild and then forgotten about it.

But he wasn’t that kind of guy. It was a rare day he even had an alcoholic drink. He thought for a moment.

His last drink, and it was only one, had been to celebrate the return of Jack’s brother Jimmy to active duty after he’d been injured on an op. And that was months ago.

Besides, this woman looked less like a barfly and more like said barfly’s lawyer.

He stood at attention and waited until the commander indicated he should sit in the other chair.

“Yes, sir.” BB evaluated his commander’s mood. Not good, but he’d seen worse.

It was almost an amused annoyance that came across in the commander’s voice as he continued, “Central Command...”

Uh, oh. That was never a good start to a sentence. The commander hated Central Command.

“...has decided to begin recruiting its special operatives from the civilian sector.”

BB raised an eyebrow. He himself had been a Navy SEAL when he’d been recruited for one of the Special Task Forces formed after the terrorist attacks on September eleventh. These units were comprised of the best of the best from all branches of the military. But civilians?

The commander sent a paper sailing across the desk at him. “Read.”

It was an NBC News article dated earlier that year. It looked like it had been printed off of the internet. The headline read, “*Navy SEALs: Demand for specialized units grow.*”

He silently read on.

“Navy SEALs, counted among the best commando forces in the world, are at the forefront of the Pentagon’s war on terror as modern warfare continues to evolve...”

Nothing BB didn’t already know. He skimmed down farther.

“In the next several years, the Pentagon wants to add nearly 400 more to the approximately 2,600 SEALs now in service. But with a 60 percent dropout rate, the SEALs have had to turn to a more efficient method of identifying and recruiting potentially successful recruits. As befitting an unconventional fighting force, the SEALs have come up with a creative recruitment tactic looking beyond the Navy for potential recruits. It sends SEAL mentors to high schools, air shows and sporting events to seek out potential candidates.”

BB read, amazed. He skimmed the rest and learned they’d even sent a SEAL to compete in an Ironman Triathlon in Hawaii to recruit from among the athletes.

At least now he knew what was up the commander’s butt. What he didn’t get was how it involved him.

Yeah, he was in excellent physical condition, but so were the other guys. And each one had their own special skills that had led to their recruitment.

Matt Coleman was a computer genius. Trey Williams was a language expert. Jimmy Gordon was a sharpshooter with the ability to blend in anywhere. Jack Gordon had choirboy looks and charm, but lethal hands that could snap a man’s neck with the flick of a wrist. Bull had his sheer size, on top of being an explosives expert.

But BB was the superior swimmer and deep-sea diver on the team. He sincerely hoped he wasn’t already signed up for any damn triathlon, although he wouldn’t mind going to Hawaii.

He wondered what the woman had to do with all of this. She had sat there in complete silence while he read.

Taking a minute, he glanced at her now. She was cute. No, he couldn’t exactly say that. Cute was a good word to describe cheerleaders and prom queens. This woman was beautiful, with cool, sophisticated, self-assured, polished good looks.

Her brown hair was pulled back in a severe bun in the back. The fluorescent lights added red highlights to the top of her head. He’d like to see that hair down. He bet she’d look smoking hot then.

She was probably a few years older than him, but that didn’t stop him from glancing at the rest of her. Short skirt, high heels, and tight little tank top exposing some nice cleavage beneath the jacket. Warm brown eyes, with obvious intelligence behind them.

Nothing wrong with a woman who could make a business suit look that sexy.

Then he remembered the commander. He glanced up.

“Sir, I still don’t understand.”

“Dalton. You’ve read the da...article?”

“Yes, sir.” BB could tell the commander was editing his usually more than colorful language because of the female guest in the office.

“Well, I am so very happy to be the one to inform you that you have been selected as the special ops recruiting poster boy.” The sarcasm practically dripped from each word the commander spoke.

He opened his eyes wide. “Poster boy, sir?”

The commander laughed. He was so obviously not happy with Central Command. “Yeah. I’ll let Ms. Katherine Jorgenson here have the honor of explaining it.

By the way, she’s your ‘handler’.” The commander actually used air-quotes.

Handler. BB’d had handlers before, people dedicated to making sure that the ‘talent’ was happy, glorified babysitters, really. That had been in another life, another time.

He’d left that life far behind. He turned to her now, wondering if there was any way to get out of this.

Ms. Jorgenson extended her hand to him in a very business-like manner. She raised a brow. “May I call you William?”

Not even his mother called him William. “At home they call me Billy Bob, but the guys here call me BB, ma’am.”

She seemed to wince, but then nodded. “BB, then. Please, feel free to call me Katie rather than ma’am, since we’ll be spending a lot of time together.”

Spending a lot of time together. Really? Well, that wouldn’t be a hardship. Maybe this gig had an upside, after all.

Katie continued. “When hired, I did extensive research from the military personnel database...”

BB interrupted her. “Um, excuse me.” Then he swung to look at the commander. “I thought the special ops personnel database was confidential?”

The commander snorted, but let Miss Jorgenson—Katie—continue.

“Don’t worry. I’ve been checked front, back and sideways by the FBI and Homeland Security. I’ve done marketing campaigns for the sitting president as well as other high profile government personalities I’m not at liberty to name. I’ve been retained by Uncle Sam to develop a recruiting campaign focusing on the glamour of the special ops units.”

Now it was BB’s turn to snort. Glamour. Yeah, right.

Maybe he’d take her on his next twenty-mile run and see how glamorous she thought it was with a ninety-pound pack strapped to her back.

His not-so-high opinion of her idea didn’t escape her.

“It’s a whole new world out there, BB. The military needs to change with the times and market itself just like any other business. The SEALs have already started. But I can do it so much more effectively...with your help.”

“Why me?” he asked.

“Well, as I was explaining before, when I was shown pictures of potential candidates, I recognized you.”

She pulled a photo out of her briefcase and handed it to him. He didn’t even need to look at it. He did anyway, inwardly cringed, and then handed it back to her.

The commander was smiling now, practically laughing at him. “I knew you’d modeled before joining up, Dalton. But I guess I just assumed you’d been modeling actual clothes.”

“It sure threw Madison Avenue for a loop when you left,” Katie said to him. Then she turned to the commander. “*No one* quits being the Andre Milano underwear man. That is, until BB.”

The commander was just outright laughing now. He wiped a hand across his face and tried

to sober up. "I'm sorry, son. I can see you're not any happier about this than I am."

Katie shook her head at them both. Stubborn, short sighted men. Stuck in their ways, just like her ex-husband. God forbid they take a step into the twenty-first century or—gasp—try something new.

BB was the perfect choice for this campaign. He was hot in a boy-next-door didn't-even-realize-it kind of way.

He came with modeling experience and was a real-live special operative. He'd changed little since his modeling days, and actually the past few years in the service had given him an edge that made him even sexier. Just beneath the surface of that pretty face lurked something deep, maybe even dark.

She could see the print ads now. A larger-than-life sized picture of BB on the side of a midtown bus, shirtless, camouflage pants opened wide to expose the white briefs. His green eyes smoldering. His brown hair cropped close in a military cut. The tag line reading something like, "Women love a man in uniform, and out of one."

Her heart beat faster remembering the excitement when she'd first recognized BB and come up with the idea. She'd contacted the Andre Milano executives herself and they'd been willing to pay enough for BB's image to foot the bill for this entire recruiting campaign plus some. The timing had been perfect, just as they were about to launch their new active men's undergarment line. *Andre Milano, proud sponsor of the US Military.*

Central Command had loved saving the money. The exposure the military was going to get out of the connection with Milano was bigger than anything she could have arranged on her own. It was a win-win for both entities.

But first she had to convince BB to go through with it. She'd never considered he wouldn't be willing. She looked from one man to the other. "I really cannot even imagine why the both of you are being so resistant to this idea." She was being rude. She didn't care.

The commander smiled at her. "Oh, Ms. Jorgenson. I believe you'll convince Joe Public that being in the military is glamorous. And then we'll get an influx of recruits who yesterday couldn't be bothered to get off the couch to tie their shoelaces, but who today think they're going to sail through Hell Week and come out the other side a SEAL. But you know what? They won't. All they'll succeed in doing is bog down the boot camps and cost the taxpayers money."

She shook her head at them. "You're wrong. We're going to make it the *in* thing to be Special Forces. And *that* will attract the best of the best. Star high school and college athletes will give up a chance at pro-contracts to join up. Former Olympians will run to sign on. The Paris Hiltons of the world aren't going to lust after rappers and rock stars anymore. Instead, military guys will be the new *It Men*."

BB had to laugh at that. Women already lusted after military guys, without this crap marketing campaign. He could go to the bar off base on any given night and get laid. The ironic thing was, it was when he'd been modeling that he couldn't get a date. Everyone assumed he was gay, and the only girls he was around, other models, were too self-absorbed or emaciated to even get his juices flowing.

No, thank you. "Ma'am...uh...Katie. May I speak with the commander privately?"

She sighed audibly and stood. She paused in the doorway. "The camera loves you, BB."

Unfortunately, he didn't love the camera.

She gave him one last look, and then left the room through the door that led to the hallway.

"Do I have to do this, sir? Is it a direct order?"

"Yes, and yes. What's wrong, Dalton? You're going to get monetary compensation. She just didn't get a chance to tell you."

"Money is not the issue." If it had been, he would still be wearing nothing but his underwear and a smile. "What about my undercover career, sir?"

"I've already considered that, and it won't be a problem. If the offer had been made to Williams, let's say, it would be different. He's already gone undercover and met with a target. We couldn't plaster his picture all over the country promoting the US Military. But your specialty is getting in and out quickly, usually underwater. It's not going to make a damn bit of difference if you're famous."

BB sighed.

"Smile, Dalton." The commander hooked a thumb in the direction of the door through which Katie had just exited. "That one's a real looker and she's got a schedule that has her holding your hand practically 24/7. And after she's done with you, you get a week off for holiday leave."

"I just never thought I'd be back in that life again, sir."

The commander got up and slapped him on the back.

"Tough life, I know, Dalton. Being around beautiful women, getting your picture taken in tighty whities. I'll be feeling bad for you during our ten-mile run today while you're flying off to New York with your handler."

Hmm. OK. Maybe this wasn't going to be too bad after all.

Chapter Two

That morning, BB had been just another taskforce team member. That afternoon, he was sitting next to his handler in business class, and sipping a complimentary beverage while flying to New York.

He hadn't been on a commercial flight in years, and then it had been in back in coach, not up here with the yuppies. But besides that, there was a big difference between this jumbo jet, with its television screens in every seatback, and a military transport, which didn't even have seats.

He glanced at Katie next to him. She'd insisted he take the aisle because his legs were longer. She obviously wasn't aware he was used to far harsher traveling conditions than this.

She was busy frowning at her laptop, so he flipped the channels on his own little TV screen and found some sitcom reruns. He leaned back in his seat.

"You all right?" Katie looked over at him.

"Sure. Why?"

"You just sighed like you had the weight of the world on your shoulders," she informed him.

"Sorry." He hadn't realized.

That was funny. He did have the weight of the world on his shoulders when he was actively battling the terrorist threat with his team and he loved his job. But now that he was eyeball deep in this meaningless marketing fluff, he was unknowingly sighing and feeling pretty useless and very miserable.

"I know you hate this," Katie commented.

What could he say to that? Honesty was the best policy, he guessed. "You're right."

Now she laughed. "Ah, BB. What I like about you most is that you are the exact opposite of every other model I've ever met. They run toward the limelight, and you run away. And that is also going to be my biggest challenge with you."

The only response he could think of was, "I'm not a model."

She laughed again and her smile took ten years off her face. "Whatever you say. Can we go over your schedule for while we're in the Big Apple or do you want to rest now and wait until we land?"

Rest? He'd gone three days with no sleep once while on a mission. Not much food, either. Although, this whole thing was becoming way more exhausting than that op had seemed.

"That's fine. I don't need to rest. Go ahead." He flicked off his tiny screen that made the people look two inches tall and turned his attention to Katie, which was really no hardship since she had taken off her jacket for the flight and he noted that her boobs would make fantastic floatation devices. Almost made him wish they'd crash into the Atlantic.

"We've got a tight schedule. I hope you're up for it."

She really had no clue what his life was normally like, did she? He didn't bother to explain and just nodded.

Katie watched BB as she outlined what she considered an aggressive schedule of

appointments, press interviews, photo shoots, and live appearances. He didn't bat an eye. Any other model would have been ranting, raving and calling their agent by now to demand 'down time'. Not BB.

She wondered when he would finally stop surprising her. "So, what do you think?" she asked when he didn't offer any comment besides a nod during her entire run-down.

He shrugged. "Fine."

She huffed out a breath. He wasn't complaining, but she could tell he sure wasn't happy, either. "Are you really fine?"

"No, but that doesn't mean I'm going to take it out on you."

"What's the problem here, BB? Why are you so against doing this? Talk to me."

"I don't like attention."

"Then why did you become a model in the first place?"

"Because I'm the youngest of nine kids and I couldn't afford college otherwise. I wasn't super smart, so I couldn't get an academic scholarship. I was a good athlete, but not good enough to get a free ride. What I was, was pretty."

She watched him give this very enlightening speech. He'd said the word *pretty* like it made him ill. She guessed being pretty didn't get you any favors in the Navy. "Wouldn't the Navy have paid for college for you?"

"I didn't know I wanted to join up back then."

"And what made you realize you did want to join?"

She was getting personal, but she was too fascinated to stop.

"I was in the city for a photo shoot on September eleventh. I watched the North Tower fall. I enlisted the day after."

Wow. "You joined up, knowing almost for certain we'd be heading into a war?" she asked.

He nodded again.

Still waters did run deep. "That was very brave of you."

This time he shrugged and rolled his eyes.

Damn. Modest, brave, gorgeous, sexy as hell—and too damn young for her to be thinking of him like that. He had to be what? Twenty-six. Twenty-seven if she were lucky. And she was hanging on to thirty-nine just by the skin of her teeth. Sure, she wasn't old enough to have birthed him, thank god for that, but still, she couldn't forget how he'd called her ma'am when they'd met.

He turned more fully toward her now. "What about you?"

She raised a brow. "What *about* me?"

He smiled, the kind of smile that probably made women fall into his bed without a second thought. "Tell me about yourself. You don't wear a wedding ring, so I'm guessing you're not married."

He didn't pull any punches, did he? Was this payback for her prying into his past?

She felt she had no other choice but to answer him.

"There's not much to tell. I'm divorced, no kids, no pets, not even a houseplant. My job is my life. That's it."

He looked a little surprised at her brutally honest answer. But only for a moment, then he smiled again. "So then you're available." He said it as a statement, not a question.

She laughed. "Why, you want to fix me up with your father or something?"

"Well, first of all, my mother would definitely object to that. But on top of that, a date with you would probably kill my father."

That could be the most intriguing compliment she'd ever received. Then he continued with a confident smile.

"So, where do you want to eat dinner tonight after we land?"

Why did it seem like their professional relationship had just taken a sharp left turn toward personal? And, dammit, why was her heart suddenly beating faster?

Katie considered this all the way from the airport to the hotel, where she checked herself and BB into adjoining rooms. That had seemed like a good idea when she'd booked earlier, in case they needed to get work done in the room. It was seeming less so now as she glanced guiltily at the locked door separating them and wondered what BB was doing over there.

The ringing of her cell phone saved her from picturing him in the shower, for too long, anyhow. "Katie Jorgenson."

"It's me." She heard the voice of her assistant come through the line.

She had been so flustered; she'd forgotten to look at the caller ID. She hadn't been around this kid for even a full day yet, and she was acting like an adolescent.

"Hi, Emily. I was just about to call you." Yeah, sure she was.

"So? Tell me. Is he as gorgeous in person as he is in those pictures you showed me? Is he a stuck-up asshole?"

Does he wear actual dog tags? Is he wearing camouflage?"

Katie laughed. "Yes, no, I don't know and lastly, no."

There was a brief pause as her overly energetic personal assistant digested her answers. "Wait, I confused myself. Tell me again."

Emily was loyal and organized, but she was also twenty-three with far too much joie de vie. Sometimes just speaking with her made Katie tired.

She stifled a sigh. "He's absolutely perfect for the campaign. He's very good looking and not an asshole, as you put it, at all. He wore jeans and a t-shirt on the plane, and the flight attendants, both male and female, were all drooling over him. And I don't know if he's wearing dog tags or not, I haven't seen him without his shirt yet."

"Yet? Woo hoo! You go for it, girl." Emily whooped.

Katie laughed. "I mean we have the photo shoot tomorrow."

"Oh. Too bad. I got excited there for you for a minute. I thought you were making your move. I did book you those adjoining rooms."

As if she needed reminding. "Well, don't get excited. He's way too young for me." Katie considered that Emily, as painfully young as she seemed, was much more BB's dating demographic than herself. Talk about painful.

"What are you talking about? All the Hollywood actresses are dating, even marrying, younger guys. It's the new in thing."

"Yeah, well, they can. I'm a marketing exec, not some star in Hollywood. My boobs are

real and they sag, and my face has never seen Botox and it shows.”

“You’re crazy. You look great and you know it. And it’s been way too long since your last date. So I am going to make you promise me that you’re not going to close yourself off to the idea of letting something develop with him.”

Katie sighed.

“Promise...” Emily prompted.

Katie closed her eyes and sighed. Sometimes it was just easier to give in to her. “Promise.”

Taking a deep breath, she pictured the hoards of beautiful young women who would be drooling over him after the ad campaign hit. She might as well go stand on the tracks and wait for the next train. That would be just as stupid as falling for BB. It would probably hurt less, too.

Chapter Three

“Relax.” Suddenly Katie’s voice was beside his ear.

He jumped, not because he was nervous about the photo shoot, but because he wasn’t prepared for how her breath against his ear would run right through him. And considering he was standing in a roomful of people in not much more than cotton briefs, it was no time to be reacting to her closeness.

They’d had dinner together the night before, and sat at the bar and talked much longer than they should have considering they had an early call for the shoot this morning. But he hadn’t wanted to leave her. Besides, no one could see if there were shadows under his eyes with all the makeup they’d slapped on him.

“I am relaxed.” He took one step away from her and her sexy whispers.

He was happy he’d put some distance between them so he couldn’t smell her shampoo and picture her in the shower anymore.

She laughed. “You don’t look it.”

Well, he sure couldn’t tell her it wasn’t the photo shoot that was making him nervous. He’d fallen right back into modeling like he’d never left it. It was that he’d had one hell of a dream about her just before waking this morning that had left him alone in bed, red-faced and with a raging hard-on. He’d thrown himself quickly into the shower to deal with the physical aspect, but the mental anguish remained.

Of all mornings to have an underwear shoot.

He backed away another pace and said, “I’m really fine.” He needed to get far away from her. “Do you think I could maybe get a bottle of water?”

“Of course.” She rushed off and he breathed a sigh of relief. The feeling, however, was short lived. No sooner had she returned than the photographer started discussing the shot with her, and what BB heard Katie say next nearly made him run in the other direction.

“You’ve gotten great shots of him alone, Pierre. It’s exactly what I imagined when I planned the campaign. The dog tags on his bare chest, the camouflage pants open to show his abs and just the edge of the briefs. But I just thought of something. What if we got a few with a woman standing behind him, while he’s facing the camera? You don’t see her at all except for her hands wrapping around him and kind of groping.”

Pierre nodded. “Do it. Let me see.”

Suddenly, the discussion became very hands-on and quick as a wink, Katie was pressed up behind him, groping. The photographer grabbed his camera and started shooting. BB set his jaw and tried to think of something else as Katie’s manicured nail traced the line of hair on his abdomen that led down to his...

“Perfect! I love the facial expression, BB. Look mean and tough,” the diminutive Frenchman demanded.

Great. BB was so glad Pierre was happy. Meanwhile, since the studio was so hot because of all the lights, Katie had taken off her winter overcoat and suit jacket and was now down to just a sleeveless top. So her flesh was pretty much adhered to his. In fact, they’d been just like this, only reversed and naked, in his dream.

“Katie. Try slipping one of your hands into the elastic of the briefs,” Pierre instructed.

The minute BB heard that, he knew he was in trouble. His mind went to bad, bad places and his body followed.

He grabbed her hand in his and jumped away from her. "I need a break."

Katie immediately came around to stand in front of him.

"What's wrong? Are you OK? Are the lights too hot?" Then her eyes dropped for barely a second and she blushed. "Oh."

Katie was looking everywhere except at him when he said, "I'm sorry. That was totally unprofessional and shouldn't have happened." He was so appalled, the situation had pretty much remedied itself already.

"Don't be silly. It's my fault. My hands were all over you. *I'm* sorry." A little furrow appeared in-between Katie's brows when she finally made eye contact again.

Even her frown was starting to look cute to him. He was in sorry shape, and over one stupid dream. But actually, he hadn't dreamed like that in a long time, and it had been one hell of a dream.

Pierre threw his hands in the air. "He's sorry. She's sorry. But I'm going to be sorry if I don't get these shots done. The schedule you've set up is nearly impossible. Transit ads up in twenty-four hours. I've never heard of such a thing. Come, Katie. Look and see if we've got something you can use so soldier boy can change for the next shot."

With a final glance at him, Katie followed the photographer to his computer while BB looked longingly at the ice in the bucket across the room and considered a cold shower.

The remainder of the day was filled with activity and people. He changed clothes more times than he could count. He posed for some holiday shots where Pierre had him in nothing but white briefs with Christmas garland wrapped around his neck.

Katie had enjoyed that. She was calling out suggestions of what the ad could read while he posed. She was torn between "What will be in your stockings this holiday?" and "Some packages just can't wait to be opened." Humiliating. He remembered very vividly why he'd quit this to crawl around in the mud instead.

And speaking of crawling in the mud, he posed for shots to be used for the recruitment campaign, too. He went from wet suit to camouflage pants and shirtless, smeared with greasepaint. Every shot was taken in front of a blue screen and the various backgrounds would be added later with a computer.

Katie spent the morning choosing the shots to be used, working with the graphic designers, and giving final approval to the proofs before sending them to the printer.

It was hard to believe the Milano holiday ad, the embarrassing garland-wearing one, would be rush printed overnight and hanging in every subway car and even on the sides of a few buses by morning.

Katie sure did move fast. The only problem was, as much as he respected her business capabilities, he couldn't help thinking he'd like them to be moving fast in another direction.

They ate dinner with some execs from Andre Milano who spent the evening being corporate idiots with who he had nothing in common. But at least it gave him a chance to observe Katie unnoticed as they talked demographics or whatever.

And now, looking exhausted but pretending she wasn't, Katie was still all business, briefing him for the TV talk show interviews the next morning. The last thing he wanted to do

was talk about work, but she looked too tired to do what else he had in mind, anyway. And he definitely wanted her as an active participant if and when that happened.

“Katie. Let’s go to bed.” He let the suggestive sentence hang in the air, just to see how she reacted. It sure shut her up.

She raised a brow and hesitated. Unfortunately, her business-half overtook her feminine-half and she protested. “But you have to be at The Today Show by seven for makeup, then over to Live with Regis and Kelly before nine. And then to The View for an eleven o’clock show.

We won’t have time to go over this in the morning.” She held up a list of questions.

“Katie, I wake up at five every morning because that’s what I’m used to doing. Give me your questions and I’ll go over them then. We can review them together while I’m in the makeup chair tomorrow morning.” He was sure the guys on the team would just love to jab fun at him sitting here talking about being in makeup.

Hopefully, they’d never find out.

“You’re okay with that? You’re not nervous?”

He was, actually. Modeling was one thing, but live television interviews quite another. Besides that, he was concerned about what he should and shouldn’t say. He’d spent his entire career with the task force avoiding telling people what he did. Now he was supposed to get up and talk about being a special operative without spilling any state secrets. On top of it all, he had to remember to plug their sponsor, Andre Milano. This was probably going to be his most difficult assignment to date.

But Katie looked ready to drop so he shrugged. “Worrying about tomorrow won’t help any. Come on. Go to bed.”

He got up and took her elbow to make her do the same. And the look that blazed in her tired eyes when he touched her made him think she might actually say yes if he did ask her to join him in his bed. Or hers. He wasn’t picky.

BB was amazing. Katie stood off-stage and watched with awe, and something that felt an awfully lot like lust perhaps.

She’d been a little worried. After all, he was a model.

It was the rare specimen of that breed that could string two sentences together coherently, forget about carry on witty banter and field questions thrown at them by morning talk show hosts. But BB had held his own with The Today Show team. Even though she could tell he had been a bit nervous that morning, he’d gotten quickly over it. He was a natural.

And now, on the set of Live with Regis and Kelly, Katie watched as BB stripped off his shirt and dropped down for a push-up contest against Regis Philbin. The crowd cheered wildly while Kelly Ripa counted the repetitions.

The audience loved it. Hell, even the producer Michael Gelman loved it. They’d be replaying clips of this on every ABC affiliate all day long, Katie was sure of it.

She laughed as Kelly sat on BB’s back to even the odds, and he good-naturedly accepted the handicap and still went on to win the contest. He graciously complimented Regis on giving him a run for his money, presented him with a gift package of briefs and the segment was over.

He was back beside her, pulling his knit US Navy shirt back over his head as an associate

producer led them to the green room to retrieve her briefcase.

When they were deposited there and alone, Katie was so happy with how things were turning out, she threw her arms around his neck. “You were so great!”

He wrapped his arms around her waist. “Really?”

Shy and modest to the end. “Yeah, really.”

He smiled. “Thanks.”

Then he leaned down slowly. Katie watched his mouth move closer. He hovered near her lips, watching her. His arms around her tightened, just a bit.

She swallowed. She couldn’t do it. She couldn’t close that small gap between them. She didn’t have the guts.

Her insecurities overcame her. She was too old, he was too young. They had a professional relationship that would be jeopardized if they crossed this line.

Every thought must have shown on her face, because he leaned closer, brushed just the corner of her mouth chastely with his and pulled away.

“On to the next show?” he asked as if nothing had happened.

She managed a nod.

Chapter Four

A one-hour talk show later and they'd checked out of the hotel and started the two-hour drive north to BB's hometown. He was behind the wheel of the rental car, half listening to the Christmas carol being played on the radio while Katie read emails on some tiny computer thing the size of a wallet while speaking on her cell phone. BB was once again glad that the equipment for his job usually entailed guns and/or oxygen tanks. This poor woman couldn't get away from her assistant's phone calls day or night.

BB glanced at the winter-brown scenery around him. He hadn't been home for nearly a year. It had been too long and he was looking forward to his holiday leave.

"So here's the plan..."

Oh, she was off the phone and speaking to him now.

"Shoot."

"We've got an interview with a local radio station broadcasting live from the Poughkeepsie Galleria Mall tomorrow at six for the morning drive-time."

Great, he thought. Nothing like the mall a week before Christmas. He watched her cringe and guessed why. "Not a morning person?" he smiled.

"Well, there's morning, and then there's *morning*. I prefer my mornings to start about eight, seven the earliest." She continued. "After that, we have a photographer and reporter from the local newspaper meeting us at the recruiting center where they'll take a few shots of you with the guys there."

He nodded. "And what about tonight?"

"You actually have a night off. Drop me off at the hotel. You can take the rental car. Just don't forget to get me tomorrow early enough to get to the mall by six."

"I'll get you at five-thirty. Five-forty-five, the latest," he informed her. But meanwhile, he was planning on how best to use his night off, and it involved Katie.

She groaned. "It's still going to be dark that early."

He laughed. "Yup."

"Great. I think the last time I saw five-thirty, I was getting in from the night before."

"Now that's a story I'd like to hear."

She laughed. "No, you wouldn't. It was for work and I was getting off the red-eye flight from LA. Believe me, my life's not that interesting."

"Yes, it is, and you are," he told her. She really had no idea how fascinating she was. He'd have to show her.

"I want you to come and meet my family tonight. Come over for dinner."

She looked at him doubtfully. "I couldn't do that. I don't want to intrude on your family time."

"You're not intruding. I invited you."

"Yeah, but your mom isn't expecting me..."

He laughed. "She had nine kids, plus all of our friends who were always stopping by. She cooks like there's an army coming for dinner every night."

She hesitated. "Are you sure?"

He nodded. "I'm sure. We'll get you checked into the hotel then head over."

Both the trip to the hotel and the drive to his parents' house turned out to be quite an unexpected eye opener for BB. He pulled the car into his parents' driveway, glad to see that at least his old house still looked the same. It was a relief, because it seemed everything else in his hometown had changed.

In the little hick town he'd grown up in, where the coming of Wal-Mart had been a sign of civilization a few years ago, there was now a Starbucks Coffee! That was something he'd never thought he'd see. The people around here were used to buying their coffee from the gas station for a dollar. He was finding it hard to believe they'd be interested in a Mocha-Chocha-Grande whatever for over three bucks!

And then, while he was still recovering from the coffee shock, he'd nearly put them both through the windshield when he saw, just in the nick of time, the red light. There was actually a traffic light installed on his parents' street!

Down the way a bit, he realized why there was a sudden need for a traffic light on a road that had never needed one. The old farmer who used to supply the local horse owners with hay had finally sold out. There were now about two hundred brand new houses dotting what used to be pastureland.

Needless to say, BB was very happy when his mother, looking exactly the same right down to her favorite housedress, came out to greet him. He got out of the car and hugged her.

He turned to introduce Katie, and realized she was hanging back by the car awkwardly. He grabbed her hand and pulled her over to his mother.

"Mom, this is Katie." He was about to explain whom she was when his mother stepped forward, threw her arms around Katie and exclaimed, "What a nice surprise. Billy

Bob hasn't brought a girl home with him in years. I am so happy to meet you, Katie. Come inside and tell me all about yourself."

BB stood and watched Katie, looking like a deer in headlights, get hustled into the house by his little gray-haired mother. She glanced helplessly back at him and he smiled at her. He could correct his mother's assumption, but he decided to wait a little while.

His personal appearances were almost over, for now anyway, and Katie was scheduled to fly back the day after tomorrow. BB had managed to keep their relationship professional, mostly, so far. But now that things were wrapping up, he wasn't going to let her hide behind her job any longer. He decided he wasn't going to let her go back without moving them to the next level, personally.

And just the thought of that made his mouth dry with anticipation as he followed the two women into the house.

Katie sat in the rental car and glanced sideways at BB as he drove to the hotel. It was the first time she had with him alone since arriving at his parents' house. It had been quite an evening.

He noticed her staring at him. "What?"

She screwed up her face. "As if you don't know. You let your mother believe we're dating." And no matter how many times Katie had explained to her, to them all, what her role

was, they still believed she was his girlfriend and was just telling them how they'd met.

What had really gotten her thinking was that no one—not his parents, not his two brothers and one sister who'd come for dinner—looked at all surprised at the idea of them together.

She'd gone over there thinking she would be closer to his mother's age than his, but she'd been wrong. Bugged down by her insecurities about his age, and hers, she really hadn't thought it through. BB was the youngest of nine. Of course his mother had to be much older than her, even if she had started at eighteen and had one child every year for nine years.

As it turned out, BB's mom was warm, round, white-haired, and huggable, kind of like Mrs. Claus. She was the kind of woman who made everyone feel like family in her home.

The large farmhouse, all decked out in lights and garlands for the holidays, was as warm and welcoming as the family itself. The house even smelled like Christmas, all pine and cinnamon. It had been too nice of a taste of what being a part of that family would be like.

She looked over and saw BB smiling at her. "Maybe I didn't correct my family for a reason."

"And what reason would that be?" she asked.

He didn't answer as he concentrated on pulling across the on-coming traffic and into the hotel parking lot. It was the kind of hotel where each room had an entrance from the exterior, so BB parked the car in front of her room and cut the ignition.

"Because nothing would make me happier than if it was true." He got out, walked around and opened her door just as she was trying to digest that tidbit.

When she stood, he put a hand on each of her shoulders, and then moved to stroke her cheek with one thumb.

Well, he'd sure taken her by surprise. But not as much as when he bent his head and whispered, "I'm going to kiss you now, and if you want me to stop, you better say so pretty quickly."

Her brain had a lot to say, but none of it got out of her mouth before BB's lips covered hers. They were warm and soft and her knees nearly buckled from the sheer pleasure of the kiss. Then his tongue found hers.

A small sound escaped her throat, which he echoed enthusiastically before breaking away to whisper, "Let's go inside."

They were still standing in front of the open door of the car in the well-lit parking lot of the hotel. But if they went inside, she knew exactly what would happen.

He noticed her hesitation. "What's wrong? Is it because you're my handler?"

She controlled her adolescent giggle. Oh, she wanted to handle him all right!

"Yes. Partly." But not mostly. If she slept with him tonight, it would absolutely kill her when she saw him out in public with some young thing on his arm. And that's what would happen. How could it not? He was young and hot and a veritable chick magnet. "Exactly how old are you, BB?"

He nodded knowingly. "Ah, ha. So that's it." He held her face in two hands now and forced her to look into his eyes. "I have no problem that you're a few years older than me. In fact, I think that's one of the things that attracted me to you in the first place."

He moved to nuzzle her neck, and then breathed in her ear, "Nothing's sexier than a strong, confident, mature woman who knows her mind."

Mature. Not a good word choice. “You didn’t answer the question. How old are you, BB?”

He was making it very difficult to resist him as he nibbled on her earlobe. “I’ll be twenty-eight next year.”

She laughed. Only a man would try to make himself older. “So you’re twenty-seven.”

He pulled back slightly and rolled his eyes. “My birthday is in February, so I’m almost twenty-eight. So what? How old are you?”

She employed his trick just to show him how impossible this situation was. “I’ll be forty next year.”

God. That sounded horrible coming out of her mouth. She hadn’t thought she’d have problems with turning forty, until now.

“So you’re thirty-nine. Eleven years. Big deal.”

More like twelve, but it was sweet of him to round his own age up.

“Katie. We’re standing outside in the cold in a parking lot along Route 9. Let’s talk about this inside your room.”

She didn’t answer and dropped her eyes.

He bent lower and dipped his head to see her. “Why can’t I come in?”

She sighed. “Because if you come in, you know what’s going to happen.”

He smiled and grabbed each of her hands in his. “I know what I hope is going to happen.”

Her heart was pounding and she was starting to tremble. She swallowed. “Will you be able to still work with me in a professional aspect if we do this?” She couldn’t even believe she was considering doing this.

He nodded. “Yes. Will you?”

No, her brain yelled. But her traitorous mouth said, “Yes.”

He grinned wide. Wrapping an arm around her, he slammed the car door and led her to the room. And all the while, Katie cursed her assistant for even putting the idea of BB into her head.

Chapter Five

Katie was fighting her attraction to him, tooth and nail. BB could see that. He also saw the moment when she gave into it, and it was like unleashing a wild cat.

She'd handed him the key, and he'd barely flipped on the light and shut the door behind him when the look Katie gave him tugged all the way down to his core. He threw the key on the dresser and pulled her to him. She stepped easily into his embrace and pressed right up against him.

There was no way she'd miss feeling his arousal between them. Her eyes narrowed, her lips parted, and that was all the invitation BB needed. He couldn't decide which to do first, kiss her or undress her. He tried to do both at the same time, until she was tangled in clothing and laughing.

He had to laugh at himself too. "Sorry. This is no way to impress you with how mature I am."

"You don't have to impress me, BB. Besides, no one has shown this much enthusiasm around me in a long time."

He shook his head in amazement. "I don't know why not. You're incredible." Not that thinking he was the only man in her life didn't make him happy. It did.

He slowly started to extract her from the overcoat, then the suit jacket, making sure his hands brushed against the sides of her beautiful breasts as he did.

Then he decided now was the perfect time to satisfy another one of his own cravings. He reached behind her head and pulled out the elastic band that held her hair so tightly in the bun. Her thick, silky locks tumbled down her back. He smiled and ran his fingers through it. "I've been wanting to do that since the first time I saw you in the commander's office."

She laughed and ran a finger down his chest. "I've been trying not to think about how much I've wanted to do this since I met you in your commander's office," she admitted.

Her eyes closed as his fingers massaged her scalp. BB took a shaky breath and was lost. The rest of their clothing disappeared quickly, until he was down to his Andre Milano briefs—hey, they were free—and she was in only her bra and underwear. He reached behind her back to find the hooks when she stopped him.

"Leave it on. Please?" She frowned a bit.

He stroked the smooth skin of her back. "OK." She'd get comfortable around him eventually. Until then, he didn't care what the hell she was wearing, as long as they could get to that big bed. And since it was a big bed and a small room, he barely had to take one step back and she was tumbled on top of him.

She straddled him, two thin layers of cotton undergarments the only thing between them. She moved a bit, and his erection rubbed between her thighs. He fought to keep his eyes open so he could watch her. Her hair fell in loose waves around her face as she looked down at him with heavily hooded eyes.

"Oh, BB." She said it as if she doubted they should be doing this, even as her hands roamed his chest.

Hoping she wasn't going to change her mind, he settled his hands lightly on her hips and ground against her. Perhaps a little incentive might help. Her eyes closed as a little sound of

pleasure escaped from her.

“We’ll take it as slow as you want,” he offered magnanimously.

She released a shaky breath tinged with a laugh. “No.

That’s not what I want.” She clutched his hand in hers, brought it up to her mouth and kissed his palm, letting her tongue just touch him. Her eyes opened to bare slits as she looked at him. “I want you to fuck me until neither one of us can walk.”

Surprised, but more than happy, he said, “Not a problem.”

Katie decided that having sex with a younger man, not to mention a man in the absolute height of physical condition, was an experience, to say the least.

She was too anxious for the main event to spend much time in the way of foreplay. Sometimes foreplay was overrated. Looking down at the gorgeous specimen beneath her, she decided this was definitely one of those times. A condom appeared from somewhere, she didn’t care from where, and his briefs disappeared. Her underwear did, too. But she wasn’t giving up the support her underwire bra provided, and luckily, he didn’t seem too concerned about that.

Still on top, she lowered herself onto him with a shudder and a sigh. Eyes closed, she rocked against him, enjoying every stroke. Her breath coming faster, she said,

“BB, you feel so good.”

“I can make it better.” He reached between them, but she shook her head and moved his hand away. He protested, “I want to make you come.”

She released a quick laugh, followed shortly by a moan. “Oh, BB. Don’t worry, I will.” She’d felt her orgasm already starting to build, which was one reason she’d pushed his hand away. Pressing closer, she ground against his pelvis until she was shaking above him and crying out loudly.

Her release was long and hard and amazing. It left her limbs so shaky, she collapsed against his chest even though she knew he wasn’t done yet. Luckily, he was in better physical condition than she. Wrapping his arms around her, he rolled them both over. He looped an arm under her knee and plunged into her as the aftershocks of her orgasm still pulsed within her.

BB watched Katie beneath him when he felt her inner walls begin to grip him again. A small frown furrowed her brow as she squeezed her eyes shut tightly, her lips parted. Then her hands held him close against her as she shattered within for the second time.

He closed his own eyes and concentrated on the amazing sensation of her pulsating around him. He held back for as long as he could, then thrust into her as he came himself. He finally collapsed on top of her. “Holy mother of god, Katie. That was the most amazing thing I’ve ever felt.”

He heard her laugh beneath him. “Yeah, it was.”

After a few moments of recovery, he finally managed to raise himself on one elbow so he could see her. He’d been with twenty-something year-old women, and it had never been like that before. He didn’t think it wise to raise the comparison, so instead he said, “You are incredible.”

She rolled her eyes. Was she actually blushing?

He suddenly wanted to know everything about her.

“Can I ask you something personal?”

She laughed. “Since you’re still inside me, I think it’s probably okay.”

He laughed, pulled out of her and rolled on his side.

“Why did you get divorced?”

She raised a brow in surprise, but answered him. “We were both young and didn’t know what the other one wanted in life.”

“What did you want?”

“A successful career, a nice home of our own.”

“What did he want?”

“Me barefoot and pregnant and us living in the apartment in the basement of his parents’ house.”

BB laughed. “I see the difficulty. How young were you when you got married?”

She pursed her lips and sighed sadly. “About two years younger than you.”

He wasn’t going to let her start regretting this because of her age hang-up. “But you know exactly what I want and that I’ve already got it. I’m where I want to be in my career. My military career, that is, not the other one I’ve been forced into. And you are exactly where I want you to be, which is with me.”

“For now,” she agreed.

He frowned. “What does that mean?”

“This is one night, BB, maybe two. Then you’ll go back to your life and I’ll go back to mine.”

He shook his head. “It doesn’t have to be like that. I want to see you again. Hell, that’s not true. I want what my family assumed to be true. I want you to be my girlfriend.”

She laughed. “Girlfriend.”

“Yes. Why not?”

“What about the future, BB? What do you want say, ten years from now?”

He shrugged. “Katie. In my line of work, you live every day as it comes and thank god for it. I don’t worry about the future. I enjoy the present.”

She breathed deeply in and then out at his words. “Let me tell you what I think. One day you are going to want to marry, settle down and have kids. I’m almost forty, BB. In ten years, I’ll be fifty. Which means I can’t be that woman for you. And as much as I understand your ‘live for the moment’ philosophy, I can’t warm your bed until you leave me for a younger woman who can have your babies.”

She looked away. He saw tears shining in her eyes, and his anger grew.

“That was not fair, Katie. I would never use you then dump you. And I’m not interested in any younger woman. If that was what I wanted, don’t you think I’d be with one right now? I’m not here with you because you were convenient. I’m with you because I respect you professionally, I care about you personally, and I absolutely crave you physically. And as for kids, I grew up with eight brothers and sisters. Everything I owned was a hand-me-down. And now I have more nieces and nephews than I can keep track of, and although I love them all, what makes you think I want kids of my own? For your information, when I became special ops, I decided I probably wouldn’t start a family, ever.”

The tears were falling freely on her cheeks now. “I know you believe what you’re saying. But I also think I’m right. You just don’t know it yet.”

He shook his head. "You're wrong. You know, I would have understood if you couldn't be with me because of the nature of my job. But not because you're assuming I'm going to trade you in for someone younger. If you really think that of me, then maybe you're right. We shouldn't be together."

He got up and threw on his clothes as quickly as he could while trying to ignore the tears streaming silently down her face. He paused at the door. "I'll pick you up at five-thirty."

Katie watched the door close behind him and then burst out into huge sobs. All she could think was, thank god she'd held them in until he was gone.

And he was gone. Totally. She'd managed to push him away. But better now than later. It would only hurt worse then.

Her cell phone rang in her purse. She leapt from the bed, chastising herself for hoping it was BB. She couldn't hope. Having hope would only devastate her further.

She saw Emily's name on the read out. She answered on a sob. "Oh, Emily."

"Katie? What happened?"

She cried her way through the entire thing, knowing it wasn't professional to lay this on her assistant, but unable to help herself. She worked so damn much, she didn't have any actual friends.

"Katie. You do realize you pushed him away because you're afraid," Emily observed patiently when the tale was complete.

"Yes."

"So call him right now and tell him that. He'll forgive you."

There was that damn hope again. "You think so?"

"Yes, and if he doesn't, you don't want him anyway."

Such sage words from one so young. She'd really have to stop being such an age-ist. Katie vowed that if BB would forgive her, she'd never make age-based generalizations again.

And then there was a knock on the door and she heard BB's voice. "Katie?"

"Oh, my god. He's at the door." Katie's heart pounded and she thought about how badly she must look at the moment.

"See. I told you he'd forgive you. What the hell are you doing? Hang up the phone and go answer the door."

"Okay, bye." She flipped the phone shut, pulled on her underwear and ran for the door. She only hoped he would still want her once he saw her at her worst. But as Emily had said, if he didn't, then she wouldn't want him anyway.

She opened the door. The cold night air felt good against her hot, tear-streaked face as she forced herself to look up at BB.

Stepping inside, he grabbed her face in his hands.

When he spoke, it was with such conviction it was almost frightening. "I won't let you push me away because you are afraid."

She felt her eyes fill again. "I don't want to push you away. And I don't want to be afraid any more. Will you help me stop being afraid?"

He smiled. "Yeah. That I can do, if you do something for me. Call and cancel your flight. Stay and spend the holiday with me and my family."

She felt her heart swell. "That I can do."

Then he kissed her in a way that told her she was his, and she had better get used to it.

And she decided that was fine with her.

The End

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