

PRAISE FOR DEE HENDERSON AND *True Honor*

“The absorbing third entry in [her] Uncommon Heroes series exemplifies why Henderson, a wildly successful CBA novelist, is dominating this market’s paperback fiction best-seller list.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“*True Honor* will appeal to the patriotism of every American. Dee Henderson is a fantastic storyteller who knows how to keep and maintain reader interest from the very first page.”

MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW

“Henderson continues to delight readers with her romantic thrillers, and her popularity continues to soar. Her mainstream crossover appeal makes this a necessary addition to all collections.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“The name Dee Henderson is synonymous with authenticity. Her books shine with believable facts and descriptions while her characters think and act like the professionals they are.”

ROMANTIC TIMES MAGAZINE

“Dee Henderson delivers an uncommonly good story with grace and style.”

ROMANCEJOURNAL.COM

“[Dee Henderson] has created a truly stunning tale of love and devotion to God, country, and to those left behind when the missions are done.”

COMPUSERVE REVIEWS



READERS' PRAISE

"My husband is in the Air Force, so it is nice to read military stories that are based in reality!" —R. G.

"You have an amazing ability to weave a tale about Christians struggling to make sense out of their lives and the curveballs they're thrown. The Scripture verses used throughout the story are well placed and fit the story masterfully." —K. R.

"Thank you for sharing your gift and love of God." —S. H.

"Dee Henderson is a phenomenal writer. Her books are fast-paced and keep you on the edge of your seat. Be warned . . . if you ever read one of Dee's books, you'll be hooked!"
—T., Amazon.com reader



UNCOMMON
HEROES



BOOK THREE

TRUE HONOR

DEE HENDERSON



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois

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True Honor

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While I have endeavored to be accurate in both the terminology and tactics of a Navy SEAL and those who work in the intelligence agencies, I was at best only able to capture a feel for what their jobs are like. This is a work of fiction and all errors are mine.



TITLES BY DEE HENDERSON

THE O'MALLEY SERIES

Danger in the Shadows (prequel)

The Negotiator

The Guardian

The Truth Seeker

The Protector

The Healer

The Rescuer

UNCOMMON HEROES SERIES

True Devotion

True Valor

True Honor

Kidnapped

The Witness

Before I Wake

GLOSSARY

BLACK OPS: Military operations that are conducted without public knowledge.

bolt-hole: A location arranged as a secure place to hide should a spy be discovered.

BUD/S: Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL. The name for the initial six-month training program at the facility in Coronado, California, which all men hoping to be SEALs must pass.

CINC: Commander-IN-Chief.

CO: Commanding Officer.

cover blind: A location and occupation created to provide a long-term false background for a spy.

Cover Your Six: Slang for “watch your back.” Something in the “six o’clock” position would be behind you.

DIA: Defense Intelligence Agency.

GPS: Global Positioning System. Satellite guidance around earth used to precisely pinpoint aircraft, ships, vehicles, and ground troops.

IRA: Irish Republican Army.

NSA: National Security Agency.

NATO Phonetic Alphabet: Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, Echo, Foxtrot, Golf, Hotel, India, Juliet, Kilo, Lima, Mike, November, Oscar, Papa, Quebec, Romeo, Sierra, Tango, Uniform, Victor, Whiskey, X-ray, Yankee, Zulu.

NVGs: Night Vision Goggles give good night vision in the dark with a greenish view.

Roger: A yes, an affirmative, a go answer to a command or statement.

SAS: Britain’s Special Air Service. An elite branch of the British Special Forces.

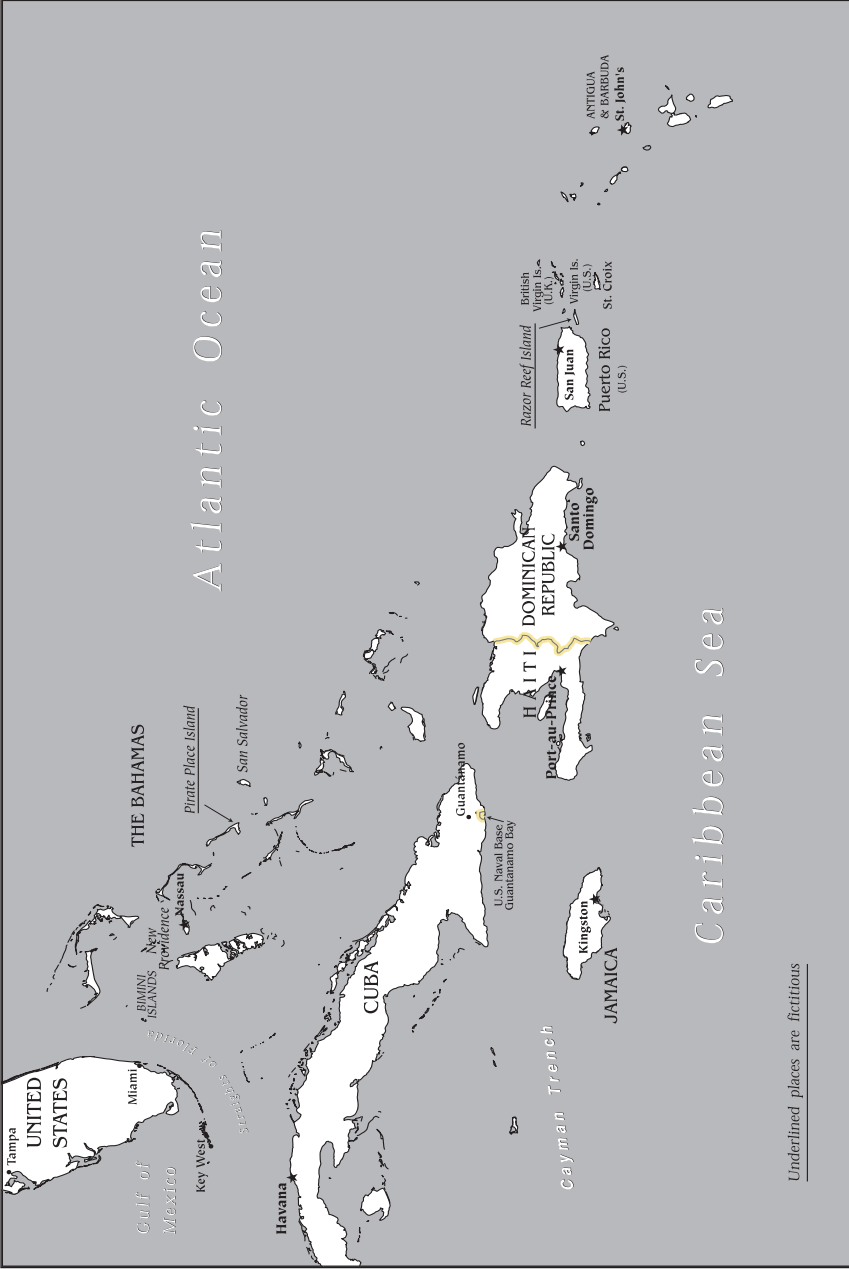
SDV: Seal Delivery Vehicle.

SEAL: One of the elite branches of the U.S. Special Forces operating from the sea, air, or land.

tango(s): Terrorist.

TRIDENT: SEAL’s emblem. An eagle with talons clutching a Revolutionary War pistol and Neptune’s trident superimposed on the Navy’s traditional anchor.

ZODIAC: A rubber motorized craft designed to carry SEALs covertly to shore.



Atlantic Ocean

Caribbean Sea

THE BAHAMAS

CUBA

HAITI
DOMINICAN
REPUBLIC

JAMAICA

UNITED STATES

Gulf of Mexico

Cayman Trench

Underlined places are fictitious

*But understand this, that in the last days
there will come times of stress.*

2 TIMOTHY 3:1

Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life.

PSALM 54:4

PROLOGUE



SEPTEMBER 7

Friday, 6:10 a.m.

SHELTON, NORTH DAKOTA

There was a bounty on Darcy St. James's life, and in the world where she had once worked, having someone come after her was still more likely than not. She rested a booted foot against the lower fence rail she'd replaced the day before and ran an experienced eye along the length of triple-rail fence, judging how much paint she would need to cover the new rails, while in the back of her mind she wondered if this was the day she would be interrupted by unwanted company.

After weeks of clearing out dead branches and undergrowth, the line of evergreens that provided a wind and snow break for the house had a tended-to look. At least the grounds of the place she called home would return to some semblance of order before winter came, even if the house itself was still torn apart. She loved this place. It was just proving to be a multiyear repair project.

She sipped her coffee and then reached down for the rifle resting against the fence railing. For those who bothered to ask, it was for the prowling coyote that had killed her neighbor's chickens, but in reality it was for her own security. Winter was coming and snow, and this year that was a good thing. It would be much

harder for someone to approach the house with a few feet of snow to wade through.

A patrol car slowed on the nearby road, and Darcy lifted her hand to her sister. Amy and her husband, Jacob Bond, lived down the road. There were worse things than having an older sister with a protective streak who happened to be the town sheriff. And if Darcy did a little quiet watching out of her own for her sister's safety, she kept it to herself. There were some benefits to working for the government that lasted past an early retirement at thirty-five.

This place was beginning to feel like home. It was different living in one location and setting down roots, but she could feel herself relaxing deep inside.

Jesus, I didn't realize how much stress had built up until I was able to fully stop. The verse this morning from Psalm 54 was perfect: "Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life." I'm grateful that You brought me back here.

She looked around the grounds and knew she could use some divine wisdom for the next project on her list. How could she take out that dying evergreen without taking out part of the garage roof? At least while there was work around the house and grounds to fill her days, she could ignore the fact that she still battled boredom when rain or delays in supplies left her with hours to fill.

The phone in her jacket pocket broke the silence. She was tempted to ignore it. The morning was peaceful and hers to schedule. There hadn't been enough such days in her life. She reached for the sheepskin-lined jacket inherited from her grandfather that she'd draped over the fence post and tugged out the phone. "You found me."

"Mornin', dahlin'."

She smiled at the Louisiana drawl that made the words sing. "Does your wife know you still call me that, Gabriel?"

“Marla knows that I reserve it for my one and only partner who saved my life.”

It hadn't been much of a rescue. Three years ago someone had driven by and shot at them in Bulgaria. She'd shoved him back into the hotel, picking up a bruised elbow for her efforts. “Flattery this early in the morning?”

“You live too far away. What's North Dakota got that Virginia doesn't? You move all the way out there, and I never get to enjoy your funny face anymore.”

She rested her back against the railing and enjoyed the rising sun on her face. “I miss you too.” There wasn't much she missed of her former life, but she did Gabriel. “The world blowing up somewhere, friend?” The Central Intelligence Agency had fingers everywhere, and Gabe owned the globe from Europe to the farthest time zone in Russia.

“Have you seen a paper lately?”

“Can't say that I have. I try to avoid such things as news these days.”

“I can't believe you've been able to go cold turkey.”

“It's not that hard when it's no longer my responsibility to know what, where, when, and how to fix it.” She'd retired from the CIA two years ago with an Intelligence Star for Valor. She'd solved enough of the world's problems for one person to tackle in a lifetime.

“I need you.”

She finished her coffee. “Now, did you have to go and say that?”

“Sergey wants to talk and he asked for you.”

What did Sergey Alexandrov have to share that could only be done in person? He was many things: a former KGB station chief in London, a decorated cold war veteran, a spymaster. He'd advanced to number three in the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service before his own retirement last year. He was a worthy

adversary. After a decade of competition between them, she'd call it a draw. She straightened. "Is he going to defect?"

"Doubtful. He's got a nice place in Spain, and he winters in the British Virgin Islands."

"Anyone missing on our side?"

"No."

She leaned back against the fence again. "Then I really don't want to fly halfway across the country to hear about a coming coup, a missing weapon, a renegade agent, or something else equally nasty that means I'd be working for more than a weekend."

"Darcy, you should see some of the new crowd around here. There's no way I'm going to send one of them to see Sergey. He would laugh and send them back to day care. If you can't go, I will, but this request came through their embassy. Sergey asked for you by name."

And that meant there were . . . rules of the trade in play. The spy agencies of both countries were designed to distrust each other. They built trust on the procedures they agreed to follow, even if they didn't always trust the contents of the passed message. If possible, the Agency needed to honor this request, even if it meant asking her to come out of retirement.

Sergey understood how to handle sensitive information. He wouldn't make an extraordinary request for a face-to-face meeting without good reason. The Russian president trusted him. It could be a private message that needed confidential delivery or information that unless delivered through trustworthy hands would be discounted as not credible because of its unusual contents. Sergey, too, had been called out of retirement. "One weekend and I'm back by Monday?"

"He asked to meet Sunday night at a hotel in Florida. I've got a typed sheet of details. He did his usual meticulous job of laying out time and location."

She accepted her answer was going to be yes and shifted to logistics. “Let’s keep this low-key. I’d rather not advertise I’m going to be on the East Coast. Courier me the information and send a guy to check the hotel the day before. I’ll make my own travel arrangements between here and Florida. Sergey’s news may be time sensitive. See if there’s a military flight that can be arranged from Florida, say out of Eglin Air Force Base, on Sunday night so I can bring whatever Sergey has straight to the Agency.”

“You want a backup team?”

“I don’t think so. Sergey will follow protocol and come alone. I’ll get to the hotel early enough to look around, make sure I’ve got a bolt-hole. If it looks like I need company, I’ll call the Miami office. I’d rather not have my name in the system unless it’s really necessary.”

“It’s nice having you back on the job, Darcy.”

She’d promised Gabe to give it five years before she wrapped up her cover identity and presence on the East Coast and made a permanent retirement to North Dakota. She was only surprised that he had given her two years before he called for something more than a question, her opinion, or an hour to shoot the breeze. “Let’s see what Sergey has to say. I’ll see you in a few days.”

ONE

★ ★ ★

SEPTEMBER 9

Sunday, 8:20 p.m.

DESTIN, FLORIDA

Sam Houston strolled toward the hotel outdoor pool carrying a soft drink and tugging at his tie, leaving behind the laughter of the banquet room. His buddy Tom Yates was married, and the reception was breaking up now that the bride and groom were safely away on their honeymoon. A huge weight had just lifted from Sam's shoulders.

The breeze from the Gulf brought the smell of sand and sea. Sam paused at the steps going down to the boardwalk. Florida was good to its visitors. Miles of beach and luxury hotels stretched to either side. He smiled as he contemplated his upcoming days off. Maybe do some deep-sea diving and treasure hunting—something challenging and adventurous. It wouldn't compete with his last deployment and getting shot at for an adrenaline rush, but it would do.

The past few months peacekeeping in Turkey had put him near a shooting war and turned him a little too serious for his own good. His temporary homeport with SEAL Team Nine was Little Creek Naval Base, Norfolk, Virginia. And while diving in the Atlantic could be fascinating, it couldn't compare to the vast

treasures around the Gulf. A little diving, a little getting his priorities back in sync— He planned to enjoy life, not just live it.

“Now you look like a man at the end of a good day.”

He glanced to his right and felt a spark of interest. A lady sitting alone by the pool was watching him. He didn't think she'd been a guest at the wedding—he had tried to meet everyone—but Tom and Jill had more friends than he could hope to keep straight. The thick closed book in her lap, the plate set aside on the nearby table, suggested she had been comfortable there for some time. He walked her direction. “Good food, good friends: the definition of a very good evening.”

She tipped her head back as he approached. He liked her smile. Her glasses were interesting: oval-shaped with gold frames and a little star in the corner. She slid them off and set them on the table, and he could see through the glass without distortion to read the print on the magazine cover. She must use them and that little star to detract attention from her eyes—no one would forget those baby blues if he got a good look at them.

“You're with the wedding party? I heard the music.”

“Best man.”

“That explains the tux and the too tight tie.”

He tugged it the rest of the way free with a rueful smile. “Hazards of the day.” Making a decision, he dumped his jacket on an empty chair and took a seat on the lounge chair near her, turning up the cuffs of his white shirt. Despite being a chief petty officer, he could've used an instruction book for how to give advice to the groom, keep rambunctious buddies in line, troubleshoot problems, and keep track of more guests under the age of ten than he could remember names for. It felt good to be done and able to consider time his own again. Blue lights shimmered up through the water, inviting a late-night swim. “It's a little dark for reading.”

She clicked on a penlight. “Five hundred and ninety-six

pages—I'm going to finish it tonight and find out *whodunit* if it kills me.”

He laughed softly. “A committed reader.” He liked the sound of her voice and the relaxed humor in her answer.

“I'm recently retired and trying to make up for all the books I missed.”

The ice in her drink had melted. His drink was getting low. “Like a refill?” He caught the attention of a hotel employee. He requested a second Coke for himself and she asked for a pineapple ice slush.

It was odd that she thought of herself as retired. He put her age at maybe thirty-five, forty. A glance showed a ring on her right hand, but her left was bare. The watch looked expensive, as did the dress. This wasn't a cheap place to vacation.

“I'd ask, but that looked like a private thought.”

“It was.” He was single, no kids, with life insurance from the military to bury him. He had a lifelong habit of giving extra money away. Buying stuff just meant it had to be packed and shipped to the next base. But he admired the effort it suggested to be able to retire young. She'd had a plan for catching up on her reading. What other plans had she made for herself now that she set her own schedule?

Their drinks arrived. He signed the slip, putting them on his room tab.

She sipped hers. “Thanks. I love these fruit things.”

“My pleasure. The only place where you can get a better one is in Hawaii.”

“Really? Have you been there often?”

He nodded. “With work. They're beautiful islands.”

“I'll have to go someday. I want to see the fish along the coral reefs, the lush greenery that goes forever. I hear it's good honeymoon country.” She lifted an eyebrow.

“They went to the Caribbean on a cruise. Tom and I are Navy buddies. He married a sweetheart in Jill.”

She tilted her head. “Did you send them off with a walk under raised swords?”

She had some knowledge of military life; he tucked that observation away to come back to later, even as he smiled. “Our team of SEALs did the honors.” The last man had slapped Jill’s behind with the flat of his sword in the best tradition of Navy weddings.

“She’ll have great wedding pictures.”

“I hope so. The photographer certainly took enough of them.”

She laughed and the sound was rich, warm, and bubbled. When she spoke he heard a trace of the West and home. He wished he had met her years before. “I’m Sam by the way. Chief Petty Officer Sam Houston.” He offered his hand, belatedly realizing the oversight.

“Darcy St. James.”

He was careful as he took her hand. His bore rough rope burns from the work he did and had the strength to crush the bones in hers. He found her hand had an unexpected strength. “Pretty name.”

She smiled and let the compliment pass, not breaking eye contact but merely not reacting beyond that slight smile.

That simple fact had him slow to release her hand. Those eyes were the unfathomable kind, as clear and deep a pool of blue as the ocean when it both welcomed and yet hid its treasures. He had never been one to miss a treasure hunt. “Listen, would you like to get a piece of wedding cake? There’s plenty left.”

“Actually I’ve been waiting for someone, but he’s running late.”

That was either a gentle *not interested* or a simple statement of fact. He held her gaze and what he saw convinced him it was worth taking the optimistic view. Besides, he admired the loyalty and patience she showed in waiting for her date. Too many people in life were impatient, and he’d long ago learned that the best

things in life often involved an indefinite wait. “Have a number you could try?”

“I wish I did.”

“Then while you wait, let me bring the cake to you.” He got to his feet. “White or chocolate? A lot of icing or a little?”

Her hesitation was so slight as to be barely noticeable. “White with lots of icing.”

“I guessed that.”

She grinned and he got the feeling he’d just made an unexpected friend. Sam walked back toward the ballroom to get the cake, intrigued with her and that tantalizing hint of the West in her voice. If her date didn’t show up, he’d enjoy an hour of conversation with her. And if she was interested in learning to dive . . . her company would be welcome. He could hang with the guys anytime; Darcy would be much more interesting.

Darcy watched Sam walk away, leaning forward in her chair to catch a last glimpse of him as he disappeared around the decorative planters, his purposeful stride and posture signaling soldier even in his tux. She wished she weren’t working at the moment. She’d enjoy walking into the reception with him for a piece of that wedding cake and a chance to meet his friends. If there were a few SEALs still walking around in their dress uniforms carrying their swords . . . She shook her head and forced herself to lean back and not follow the thought.

Sergey was late. She could continue to sit here alone and read with her light, but she would be noticed and remembered by passing guests. Sam was her solution. A couple didn’t attract a second glance. And if one of them was remembered, it would more likely be him.

Sergey hadn’t lost his tradecraft skills. A wedding was beautiful cover. She’d bought her dress in New York the day before and it

fit her profile of a guest at this hotel: expensive, elegant blue, cut in classic lines. Sergey would appreciate it.

She shifted the leather portfolio in her lap and reopened her book. It wasn't like Sergey to be late, but she could give him another fifteen minutes. She had contingency plans and a bolt-hole arranged. The contrast of a wedding and the possible danger she was in just sitting here was stark. She didn't want someone making an attempt to collect that bounty while she was focused on her meeting with Sergey. She made herself relax. She'd said yes to this mission, and she was committed to seeing it through.

Was Sam short for Samuel? Maybe she would get a chance to find out. She always appreciated a man who could focus. And he'd focused on her, a pretty nice fact all the way around. The man had wasted no time making a casual scan of her left hand looking for a ring. He wore a unique one with the SEAL emblem at the center and a cross etched into the side. The cross was an unexpected surprise—it was nice to have an early clue as to what he valued.

She'd surprised him. When she interrupted his reverie, there had been just a beat of a pause as he decided how to react before he moved to join her. He hadn't been sure if he knew her but curiosity had him coming over. There were calluses on his hand when he took hers, and she'd picked up the faint smell of peppermint.

He made an impression all right. She had a feeling she would be dreaming about the man and that smile tonight. And those eyes . . . He had a fascinating face. Not a pretty or overly handsome one, but compelling with blue eyes that reflected his laughter and a smile that was quick to appear.

Midthirties, six-foot even, fit and tough, he looked well able to take care of himself. Given the amount of trouble in the world SEALs got sent to quiet down, she doubted Sam spent much time in the States. They were Special Operations Forces trained to work covertly from Sea, Air, and Land, and only a few thousand

were on active duty. She met SEALs overseas during extractions of spies and occasionally at embassy dinners where just their presence created a layer of security.

Next time choose the couple from New York, she told herself, turning pages in the book. They had been seated to her left until a few minutes before Sam appeared, and she could have easily started a conversation with them about the current Broadway plays. Instead she chose Sam and wiped out her concentration.

There weren't many strangers to bump into out in Shelton, North Dakota; a fact that was great for her security but detrimental to her social life. Maybe this meeting with Sergey would fall through, maybe Sam would be around for a few hours . . . And if she didn't stop thinking about him, she was going to end up where most distracted agents did when they were working—in trouble.

Sam walked into the ballroom. Guests had regrouped around a few tables in the center of the room. Someone in the center of that mass of people was about to do something stupid; Sam could hear through the shouts of laughter someone calling off a count. If he didn't know for a fact Wolf was away on his honeymoon, Sam would have predicted his partner would be the SEAL on the spot. He considered wandering over to see, but there were priorities in life and then there were priorities. A lady with brilliant blue eyes didn't smile at him that often.

Special Operations was a small community. He'd trained or worked with most of the men here. Years of sweat equity had earned him a place in this group where respect was earned, not given, and it felt good. The guys had brought their wives and girlfriends. He'd make another effort to talk Darcy into joining him. He'd seen the way her eyes lit up at that idea of walking below raised swords. He wasn't opposed to using the trappings of his career to tip the balance in his favor.

A piece of white cake with lots of icing. Sam studied the table and chose the one with the biggest rose. He picked up a chocolate piece for himself. The evening felt a lot like icing atop an already great day.

“Chief.”

Sam turned at the call from his boss. His instinct was to snap to attention but he overrode it. Lieutenant Joe “Bear” Baker was still in dress uniform from the wedding. “Yes, sir. Is Kelly settled for the night?” Bear’s wife was five months pregnant, and since she had asked him to be the child’s godfather, Sam tried to stay current on the details.

“Asleep, although she wouldn’t admit she was tired.” Bear nodded to the two pieces of cake. “Found some company?”

Sam heard the curiosity of a friend as well as the care of an attentive CO and smiled. “Yes.”

“Then I won’t keep you. I want to pass on an invitation from Kelly. If you don’t end up with plans for lunch tomorrow, feel free to join us.”

“Thank you, sir.” It was a night for optimism. “I’m hoping for the plans.”

Bear laughed. “Then I wish you luck.”

Sam walked back to the pool area, still smiling. Bear was the right kind of boss; it was a 24-7 commitment. The man was responsible for the lives of sixteen men. Keeping an eye out for complications on the home front went with the job. Distractions got people killed. He had smoothed out more relationships with a well-placed word than Sam could count. Even if the advice occasionally came with a bit of a growl for which he was famous—Joe was a grizzly bear early in the morning.

A small pebble bounced down the steps as a couple came up from the beach arm in arm. Darcy looked up from her book and made more than a casual inspection of everyone in sight. She was still expecting her company to arrive. Whatever had held the man

up, Sam hoped he appreciated the fact that Darcy was waiting for him.

He walked over to join her. "Here you go." He offered her the slice of white cake.

She turned in her seat toward him and waited until he sat down and had sampled his cake before tasting hers. She waved her fork. "Delicious as I knew it would be." She ate another bite, edging her way around the rose to leave it for last. "You said you are a Navy SEAL?"

"For over a decade now." He waited for the follow-up on what it was like to be a soldier.

Instead she studied him over her fork. "What do they call you?"

It wasn't a question he had expected. Sam grinned. "My friends call me a lot of things. *Cougar* normally. *Chief* when they're razzing me about my recent promotion."

"There's a story behind that name Cougar."

He inclined his head. A complicated, slightly unbelievable, but true story. "A long one."

She lifted the sugary rose from the cake. "Long stories are by far the best kind."

He studied her for a moment while savoring the last of his cake. Darcy wanted him to be the one talking while he was much more interested in hearing about her . . . interesting. Getting beneath the layers of this lady would not be easy. "A cat bit me."

She arched an eyebrow. "I won't ask you where."

He wanted to laugh. Darcy excelled at subtle expressions. Her humor he could come to enjoy as much as her laughter. He pointed to her cake. "Eat."

She glanced past him and her entire expression stilled and then relaxed. "Sam, my late guest just arrived. I need to go. Thanks for your company and the cake."

He took the plate she offered and then turned to see who it

was who had kept her waiting, curious to at least meet him, for Darcy was in a hurry to leave. There was no one in sight.

Darcy collected her book and notepad. "Would you give your friends my good wishes when you talk to them next? Weddings are such wonderful events."

"I'll be glad to." He took a chance. "Join me for lunch tomorrow?"

She paused. "I'm leaving tonight." Her hand brushed his arm and she offered a breathtaking smile. "But it was very nice that you asked."

Sam watched her walk past the steps going down to the beach, pause to pick up the champagne flute someone had left on the low wall, and disappear toward the hotel restaurant.

Well, that was a bummer. He'd just seen the last of Darcy St. James. He sat pondering that, looking for any glimmers of optimism to grab hold of and couldn't find one. He knew her name, but not enough other information to track her down, nor any indication that he should try. Sam rose and picked up his glass, then returned the plates to the reception. *It would have been nice, Lord, if You could have held up her date for another hour.*

Rather than call it an evening, he headed down to the beach to take the walk he'd been contemplating earlier. Lunch with Joe and Kelly would be nice, but it would definitely be the consolation prize.

Darcy walked across the patio of the outdoor restaurant, fully attuned to the details of her surroundings, paying attention to the faces of staff and guests alike. She wasn't as worried about Sergey as she was the person who had put that bounty on her head. Splitting her attention between the two concerns was giving her a headache. Too many hotel employees were walking around for her comfort, and out of deference to Sergey she wasn't armed.

“Sergey, it has been a long time.”

He rose as she joined him at the corner table. “Four years. You are looking as beautiful as always, Darcy.” He kissed one cheek and then the other, the compliment sincere, his smile welcoming.

In his sixties now, he wore the years in his face and eyes. The man looked more like a thug than a gentleman, even in the elegant suit. But looks had never conveyed the real picture. She respected this man, and her partner Gabriel owed him his life. She answered his smile with one of her own. “Thank you for the champagne.” Neither would drink tonight but appearances mattered.

“The least I could offer as an apology for my delay.” He held her chair for her. “You should not have waited for me to arrive.” He was genuinely bothered that she had. Staying more than a few moments past an agreed-upon time was a cardinal mistake of tradecraft, and he had always been one of the teachers who understood spies lived to be old spies because they followed the rules.

“A risk, but a calculated one. One well worth it for a friend. Gabriel sends his regards.”

“Has he forgiven me yet?”

She tilted her head, considering. “Within limits. He wouldn’t be so quick to join you at a restaurant.” Sergey had arranged to give Gabe food poisoning so he would miss covering a meeting in Sicily.

“You are surprised I asked only to see you.”

“Yes.”

“It is best,” he replied. “Retirement looks like it agrees with you.” He circled his index finger on his napkin as he lifted his glass with his other hand, holding her gaze.

The gesture signaled that he assumed they might have unwanted company listening in. His? Hers? She wouldn’t put it past either agency. She hadn’t seen anyone, and she knew he’d

have chosen the table at random. She wasn't too worried about it, for at least spies doing their jobs were not likely to shoot her in the back. "I was about to say the same about you."

"I am a grandfather now. My granddaughter will be one year old next month."

She lifted the champagne flute in a toast. "Congratulations, my friend."

From his pocket he offered a picture. Darcy had seen photos of his family in his file, but this one of his daughter and granddaughter was recent. She studied it and then returned it with a smile.

Sergey's expression turned grave. He gestured toward the hotel gardens. "Let us walk a bit."

With a nod she rose to join him, surprised at the speed he chose to get down to business but also relieved to be away from the flow of hotel staff through the restaurant. Meetings with Sergey had a rhythm, and the time spent reestablishing the relationship was rarely shortened. They strolled through the hotel gardens and eventually back around to the deserted pool area. The deep end of the pool afforded privacy and he paused there.

"How may I help you, Sergey?"

"I have been asked to convey a message to your director."

"I can have it in his hands within hours." A military flight at Eglin Air Force Base was waiting to take her back to Washington, D.C., tonight.

He removed an envelope from his inside pocket.

Darcy slid her thumbnail across the edge of the back cover of her book, opening a hidden slot. The note slid inside. She resealed the edge with a firm touch. "Would you like me to bring you a reply?"

"None should be needed. But if you do need to get in touch, a request sent through the embassy will reach me."

The message in hand, Darcy felt an urgency to be on her way

but also reluctance. It might be years before she saw him again. “How is Kendra?” she asked, turning to look back as she heard footsteps.

“My wife is not well.” She glanced back at him concerned at the unexpected words and saw Sergey’s hand come out from his jacket. “I am sorry, Darcy.”

She caught a glint of a blade and reacted to the threat before she understood it, her weight shifting back and her arm swinging the portfolio and book in a sweeping arc to strike it away. The knife caught her. She got out of the way the only way she could. She moved back and was falling. Water closed over her.

Dear Reader,

During the writing of this book, September 11 happened. The event changed my life, as it did for many in America. The result is a book I wrote more for myself than someone who might later read it. This was the story I wanted to tell as I worked through the months of September through December. More than once during those months I came close to stopping and telling my publisher I didn't want to write a military story—let's do something else. Fans were sending their spouses and loved ones to war. Friends in the military were leaving for overseas. As I write this, many are still there.

Max Lucado's book *Traveling Light* talks about the journey we take with God through life as captured by Psalm 23. Releasing burdens and trusting God even in the midst of tragedy is part of His plan for how we cope when life rips apart. God has a way of pulling together even the tough days of our lives into part of a beautiful tapestry.

Despite the external pressures going on through these months, I really enjoyed writing Sam and Darcy's story. They were part of my own recovery of a sense of hope. Darcy is a warrior as much as Sam. Darcy was the endurance. She put her head down, accomplished the next objective, and kept going until the job was done. Sam is the trust. He waded into the fight confident he'd win, trusting God for the outcome. Together they were the right kind of team.

There are many like Darcy and Sam working today. This is my tribute and thanks to them. They are indeed heroes.

As always, I love to hear from my readers. Feel free to write me at:

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or online at www.deehenderson.com

Thanks again for letting me share Sam and Darcy's story.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Dee Henderson". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.