

# Chapter One

Corporal Jack 'Dog' Horan stared out the small window in the communications room at the Pennsylvania State Police Barracks. He blew out a breath. What a day. Just another five minutes and he was out of here. Another twelve months and he had the option to hand in that blasted Campaign hat troopers were required to wear while on duty and say, *adios*. He'd leave with mixed feelings, though. The interaction with decent people on a daily basis had a way of making up for the bad asses he arrested, but twenty-five years on the force was enough.

Becoming an officer of the law had been a dream of his since he was eight years old. It may not have been his mother's first choice of professions for her only child, but his dad had supported his decision, as did his mother after the initial shock had worn off. To 'protect and to serve' had been drilled into his head at the police academy and stayed with him for the past twenty-four years. Now, all he wanted to do was marry and maybe have a kid or two. He hadn't been as lucky as some of the guys who were married with families of their own. He may not have found the right woman, but he wasn't giving up the search.

There were plenty of females available who'd like nothing more than to take on a man in uniform, but the sex was becoming too monotonous. There had to be more to a relationship than just the 'go out for a drink then fuck' sort of one. He longed for a marriage like his parents had. His parents had openly expressed their love and commitment to one another right up until his dad passed away ten years ago from the coal miners' disease known as 'Black Lung'.

Jack glanced at his watch. One minute left. He might as well head for the locker room. He took a step away from the window only to jerk to a stop when he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. The 'Grab n Go' mini market located across the street was convenient and a good place to grab something quick to eat or gas up the car. He had met all the employees at one time or another, but he didn't recognize the girl sweeping the pavement. He peered closer and felt a stirring in his groin. Girl, hell, this was a full-bodied woman. Not the usual skinny-assed type the owner, Bob Delano was known to hire. Either Bob wised up or his new wife had laid down the law. At this point, Jack didn't care. From this distance, her backside appeared quite captivating. Nice and full. He was anxious to get a closer look.

A hard whack landed upon his shoulder. “Hey, Jack, see anything interesting out there?”

Jack swung around and stood directly in front of the window, successfully blocking the enticing view.

“Nope.” Hell, if he’d say anything. The word female would barely pass his lips and there’d be a cluster of single officers elbowing him out of the way. They’d eyeball the woman like a pack of starving coyotes. No... this time he’d be the one to meet the newbie first. He eyed the clock. Time to move.

He hurried to the locker room and changed from his uniform to a pair of jeans and short-sleeved cotton shirt. His mind raced ahead of himself. What was her name? Where did she live, and most importantly, was she married? Shit, that’d suck. He stepped into his sneakers and barreled out the side door, nearly knocking over his commanding officer. Once his feet hit the pavement, he hurried to the parking lot behind the barracks and leaped into his Durango.

Jack tapped the steering wheel as he waited for the traffic to clear, then hit the gas, but when he arrived at the store, she was nowhere in sight. He circled the building on foot and came around the other side. *Where the hell did she go so damned fast?* Frustrated, he went inside and spotted Bob coming out of the cooler.

He tossed a wink in Elaine Delano’s direction. “May I borrow your husband for a few minutes?” At her nod, Jack threw his arm around the older man’s shoulders and steered him outside. “Okay, Bob, let’s have it. What’s her name, where does she live *and* most importantly, is she married?”

“Is who married?”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Don’t be a smart-ass.”

Bob chuckled. “Melanie’s been a widow for quite some time. She stopped by yesterday and inquired about the help wanted sign in the window. I thought I’d give her a shot. She seems nice and pleasant enough.” He lit a cigarette. “Not bad to look at if you ask me.”

“I ain’t asking. Where does she live?”

“At The Lake.”

That info came as a surprise. “Hmmm, I wonder why I’ve never seen her before at The Cabin or down by the lakeside.” Jack had been given a guest pass by one of his fellow troopers so he could enter the gated community as often as he wanted. He liked to fish and The Lake held fishing tournaments along with other interesting events for both the young and the old. Without a

word, he spun on his heel and left Bob with his smoke. Back inside, he prowled each aisle and came up with zilch. He sauntered over to the counter and picked up a bottle from its cardboard display. He pretended to read the label while thinking up a way to ask Elaine about Melanie without sounding like a horny teenager.

“Are you buying that bottle of horny goat weed, or do you intend on staring at it for the rest of the day?” Elaine asked.

“Huh?”

She smiled knowingly. “If you’re looking for the new girl, she left a while ago.”

Jack set the bottle down with a bang and glanced outside. Bob was nowhere in sight. Mumbling under his breath, he strode to the back of the store and plowed through the swinging doors bearing the sign, ‘Employees Only’. He was wise to Bob’s tricks. There was an emergency exit at the rear of the building the girls used for quicker access to the trash bin. Bob must have come in the same way to avoid getting his head knocked off for not telling him Melanie had left for the day. Jack poked his head around the door jamb of the small office and snarled, “Thanks a lot, asshole.” Bob’s look of surprise didn’t fool him in the least. He stared pointedly at the two monitors on the table in the corner of the room. Christ, the man must think him an idiot. “You knew I was hanging around to talk to her.” He heard footsteps behind him and moved to the side.

“Hey, honey, Stacy’s on time for once.” Elaine grabbed her purse from underneath a chair. “Once I go over a few things I want her to do if she’s not busy, I’ll head home to start the lasagna. You’re welcome to join us, Jack.”

“No thanks, sweetheart. I told my mom I’d stop by and check the oil in her car.” He nodded to Bob. “If you don’t mind, I’ll go out the back way.”

Elaine followed him to the back door. He stopped and said, “Make sure you release the bar on the door after I leave. This way the door will be locked from the outside and...”

“And they won’t have to waste time looking for the key in case of an emergency,” Elaine finished for him. She batted her eyelashes and grinned.

Jack frowned. “I’m not joking, Elaine,” he said sternly. “And make sure you tell Melanie.”

The petite redhead’s smile vanished immediately. “I will, Jack, and thank you for your concern. Oh, and by the way, Melanie’s working the day shift tomorrow, and then she’ll be switched to second. That’s where we need the most help.”

He popped her on the nose with his finger. “Thanks.”