

# HER GENTLE SOLDIER



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

## CHAPTER 1



She met him at the door with a smile like he'd rarely ever seen before on anyone—open and warm, as if inviting him to find the joke where there wasn't one yet.

"Ah, another victim has arrived, I see. Welcome, welcome," she said as she stepped aside to allow him in, with a dramatic sweep of her hand. "Just leave your money where I sit—the tiara—and make things easy on yourself."

Her broad grin and twinkling eyes got him to grin back at her when he wasn't often readily disposed to it.

Then she offered him her hand. "I don't think we've met before. They call me Princess here—since I hardly look like anyone's idea of a princess, but I thoroughly enjoy all of the accoutrements. My actual name is Tabitha—Tabby—Soulia. And you are?"

He took it, engulfing hers in his still leather-gloved one. "Brae Samuels." His voice was deep and quiet.

"Bray as in 'the sound a donkey makes'?" she asked with a soft laugh as she closed the door behind him.

"No, B-R-A-E as in 'no one but my mother ever calls me Braeden,'" he answered, shrugging out of his coat.

She took it from him—although it was very nearly as big as she was—as if it was something she'd done a thousand times before. She hung it up on the collapsible set of pegs that everyone in this part of the country had right by the door. He toed his way out of his winter boots, then sat down on the deacon's bench to don the pair of construction boots he'd dug out of his knockoff LL Bean canvas bag.

Not many native Mainers—who didn't work for LL Bean—could afford what Bean sold. Especially since they'd done away with their policy stating that their customers could return anything they'd bought there when it had worn out for a free new one of whatever it was. There was a time when buying a pair of boots from Bean's made sense to culturally obligated Yankees, because not only were they so well built that your son might well inherit them, but when or if they did wear out, you could always get a free replacement for them. That kind of potentially generational investment only made financial sense to hard working Mainahs. But now, it was for the tourists and "from aways" to pay their exorbitant prices, with the understanding that when the item wore out, they were just going to have to pay what would undoubtedly be an even higher price to get another one.

Tabby was standing there, watching him, in a pair of neon pink knock-off Crocs, along with the warmest, but sadly also the ugliest, woolen socks she owned.

Constitutionally incapable of keeping the question to herself, she asked with great curiosity, "Those are your comfortable shoes?"

His, "Ayuh," should have come from the mouth of a much older man. Brae stopped in the act of putting his other boot on and looked at her. He was so tall that he was seated, and yet he still wasn't really looking up but rather more across at her.

"Each to his own, I suppose." She shrugged. "I think most everyone's in the den, whenever you're ready."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." Tabby forced herself to leave the little mudroom, made that much smaller by his physical presence in it. The fact that she did have to force herself to do so made her wonder why she felt she should stay. She was generally put off by men who were that imposingly large, so much so that she would usually have done her best to avoid him, even though she didn't know this man. Her prejudice, and she'd long since baldly admitted to herself that was exactly what it was—was based entirely on his size.

Oh, she'd heard a bit about him, but they'd never been at the house at the same time, which wasn't all that unusual, considering the relative rarity of these gatherings, as well as inevitably conflicting schedules.

Maybe it was the fact that she'd already had several shots of her favorite whiskey, and it was making her feel more expansive, although it had never done that for her prior to now. Maybe that was making it harder for her to squelch—or even just ignore—that rebellious, niggling, nagging little voice at the back of her head that was trying to get her to linger near him.

No, that wouldn't do. That wouldn't do at all.

Tabby glided through the old, homey house with the homey feeling of an old friend, picking things up, empty beer bottles, dirty plates, and the occasional bong—of the glass, plastic, and apple kinds—and putting them where they belonged, bottles in the bag in the pantry/laundry room. She knew that Mason or Floyd—given the nickname from 'Pretty Boy Floyd' because of his annoyingly classic good looks—Rutlege, who owned the house, kept a bag for returnables. She placed the dishes in the sink, although she refused to go as far as washing them, and the bongs on the counter, where, since there was still most of a bowl left in one of them, someone was likely to avail themselves of it, sooner rather than later.

A quick glance into the formal dining room—the one Mace

always said his mother would never let him so much as breathe in when he was growing up, full of china cabinets and boxes of real silverware that were always saved 'for good', when 'good' never seemed to arrive—showed that the table, which sat eight comfortably, was piled high with food. Mason, as their host, was only expected to provide the venue and snacks. Bags of chips, pretzels and crackers with some kinds of no name dip would have been perfectly fine with all of them.

And there was some of that, yes.

But Mason was one of the better off of the friends—although he was far from truly wealthy—and he wasn't about to only offer those things. But he also provided mini-lobster rolls—it was Maine, after all—shrimp cocktails, and Chex Party Mix, all homemade, and the latter of which he knew was a particular favorite of the princess, who couldn't resist filling a paper bowl full of it on her way by.

He also provided, to one side, on his grandmother Pelky's good pie crust table, 'Waterford crystal', which was red Solo cups, 'fine linen' in the guise of a roll of paper towels for napkins, and 'the good silver'—plastic forks, spoons and knives.

Everyone else brought a dish or snack of some sort, so there were restaurant sized pans of cheesy scalloped potatoes with ham, always Kent "Stinky" Miller's contribution, or rather, his non-attending, put upon wife's. There were also Lemon's famous four-inch-thick lasagna and Poochie's, also known as Leslie Terriault, wings, in two levels of heat, mild and 'wish you were dead now and later'. By morning, only the mild ones would remain.

Others brought stuff for breakfast the next morning, which was much less demanding and heavy on carbs. There were boxes of Dunkin's donuts, Stop and Slave's blueberry muffins, maybe even pastries from Frank's in downtown Bangor, and bagels, if the desserts they'd laid into the night previous—a three tiered carrot cake, courtesy of Mason taking up baking

just for the fun of it, and a butt load of someone's no bake cookies—plus bowls of candy that were strategically placed around the house—weren't enough to cause them to need insulin already by then.

Mason had two microwaves set up to reheat the things that should be warm and two refrigerators to accommodate the truly staggering amount of beer they would consume in what would be—for most of them—just one evening, as well as a chest freezer in the mud room that was full of bags of ice, for those who weren't into beer. There were sodas in those refrigerators, but they were utterly overwhelmed by the beer and used mostly as mixers.

And everyone brought a bottle, or bottles, of something—anything. The host was never expected to provide booze. To say that this was not a fussy crowd was to severely understate the situation. They would literally eat, drink, or smoke anything tonight that stood still long enough, so his grandmother's sideboard was groaning from the collection of bottles atop it—everything from a good, Quebecois sortilege—to some very expensive vodka and everything in between.

Munching happily, Tabby made her way into the den, where, as she'd told him, most of them had gathered. She was accosted from behind and hugged, hard.

"Give us a kiss," the owner of those strong arms demanded at her ear.

But Tabby just laughed. "As if! I have better taste in women than to kiss you!"

Still, she turned within the arms of her tall, impossibly strong friend, and instead hugged her tight, throwing her arms around the other woman's neck and having to stand on her tiptoes to do so. "Lemon! How are you?"

"Better, now that you're here!"

"I didn't see you come in!"

"I cheated and came up from the garage."

Tabby shivered, and it was no lie. "I'm amazed you lived to tell the tale."

Lemon frowned deeply. "Me, too. That place is... disturbingly arranged. Some kind of combination of a prepper's stockpile, Norman Bate's basement, and the maze at the end of *The Shining*."

Mason himself rose then, not in the least insulted to hear how she had characterized his basement, to greet the newcomer with a hearty hug, just as Brae entered the fray and his attention turned to the other man.

The two, who were of a similar size, shook hands in an act that, if they weren't friends, might have—in another time—ended up as a contest between the two to see who was the stronger. As it was, it served as a way to pull each other close for a hard, manly hug, with lots of backslapping

"Hey, man! It's good to see you! You're back then?" Mason asked.

"No, I'm still in Afghanistan. This is a figment of your imagination, brought on by too much beer and weed."

"I know you're lying, because there's no such thing as too much of either." Mason turned to the rest of the group, announcing, "Hey, everyone, the general is here."

Brae was immediately surrounded by three more men and two women, all of whom greeted him with the same amount of enthusiasm Mason had displayed, including Lemon.

When the crowd had dispersed, Lemon, whose real name was Sarah, leaned down to whisper in her ear, "So? What do you think of him?"

Tabby snorted. "Think of him? I just met him five seconds ago—although he did earn points for knowing that his name is a homophone for a donkey's sound."

Lemon reared back, as if insulted. "He's not a homophone. I happen to know from a very reliable source that his sister is gay!" she deadpanned.



"Yeah, your wife is much more reliable than you are," Tabby teased.

"I resemble that remark!" Her friend feigned offense.

"Yes, yes, you do," she agreed, finding her way to a comfortable chair in the large, open room. The biggest component of area was the enormous stone fireplace that occupied almost the entirety of one wall, within which a warm blaze—which the men were routinely fantasizing about wanting to turn into a bonfire—burned merrily. There were several floor to ceiling bookcases, most of them filled with books various family members had collected over the years. Others contained every conceivable game—cards, board—every kind but video games.

Most people, not lacking for other forms of entertainment, didn't even notice that there was no television anywhere in the room.

In front of the fire was what his parents—from whom he had inherited the house that had been passed down through generations—referred to as a sectional, which was actually several couches formed from armless loveseat bases, in which were hidden full-sized pull out beds—and corner pieces, along with enough easily movable, individual pieces. When all pieces were touching, it formed a square.

As it was, the pieces had been pulled out from there, leaving various gaps that allowed an ease of movement in and out of the highly popular area, along with the occasional table and lamp to break it up, and other tables that curved up and around the couch cushions—what passed for legs tucked away, up under the couches—so that there were always places for a drunk person to put a bottle or glass.

It was made for large parties, large people and the consumption of large quantities of alcohol. Overall, it was a dark room, but not uninvitingly so. It was kept that way deliberately, to encourage coziness and relaxation, and it inevitably achieved its goal every time they gathered.

The current group was a ragtag bunch, at best, but then they'd never really aspired to be anything but that. Some of them had grown up together, some had met in college, all had settled in the New England area, some closer to where they always met, some farther away. There were ten to twelve of them, in total, but they were very rarely altogether anymore. Some had moved away; one had died. The rest came as they could. Sometimes it was obligations of one sort or other that kept them apart, family or otherwise, others, it was simply the weather.

Some had had financial success in life, some had had successful marriages and families, few were lucky enough to have both. None of their lives were untouched by sadness, of one kind or another. But their friendships remained strong.

And, once a year, usually in the dead of winter when everyone needed something fun to look forward to, they all drove however many hours were necessary to congregate here. They were in the middle of the Maine woods, surrounded by pine trees and blueberry fields, by moose, coyotes, lynx, and eagles, to make as much noise in their revelry as they wanted to, knowing that there was absolutely no one to hear them for miles around. Not that there were any windows open in February in Maine, but there were always fireworks over the pond at the end of the evening—or rather, early morning—that, nonetheless, managed to insure that most of the folks in the unorganized territories around them, the 'TRs'—Township and Range—would know they were there, regardless.

They did, occasionally, get together in the summer, but it was a much more subdued, family-friendly affair. They met on the Backside of MDI, near a particular harbor, where there was a free picnic spot with ample parking, a great view of the sunset on the open ocean that few—yet more and more as each year passed, they noted unhappily—tourons had yet to discover. There was also a fire pit, which allowed the men to indulge their pyromaniacal tendencies in relative safety, with the whole of the

Atlantic Ocean available should things get out of hand. It was generally conducted in mid-August, when the women wouldn't get too cold sitting around the fire at night, with the inevitable cool breeze—even then, blowing in off the ocean—and taking the Maine State Bird, the mosquito, with it, or, if they were unlucky, fog dampening everything and everyone in sight.

This time, there were eight of them—at last count. In the winter, few of their significant others wanted to make the trip, and that was fine by the rest of them. They would genuinely welcome anyone who arrived on the doorstep, but they were always happiest when it was just the core of them.

In one corner of the room, was a very large, round oak table that had been in Mace's family for generations. In the middle of the table, sat several coin cups from casinos all over the States that had been collected by many of them over the years, and which might well be collectors' items now, since everything was electronic in casinos nowadays. And each one of the ten of them in the center was filled to overflowing with change—silver only, no pennies.

That was the collective pot—formed from the first few of these gatherings and generously donated to by everyone who played over time —from which they would all play, shared among them. Each took a roughly equal amount in the beginning, until all the change had been distributed and, during play, taking a handful or two as needed. Hell, even pots that were newly won were readily shared among them. None of them—not even the poorest—came here for the money. It had come to be expected that when someone won, they would look around to see who at the table had the fewest coins showing and shared the wealth.

They played for the glory and skill of it, and of course, bragging rights—of trying to decide who, among their close friends, was bluffing or whether risking two aces up and one in the hole was worth it if someone might could fill the inside of the poten-

tial straight they were showing. Was their opponent too high to really know what cards they were holding? Too drunk? Too full and thus sleepy? Or were they just faking it so that their dear friend would fall for their bluff?

When they'd all settled around the fire, chatting in various small groups amongst themselves, everyone with either a bottle or a red cup full of something in their hands, it was Tabby who interrupted.

"Well, are we gonna gab all night like a buncha women, or are we going to play poker?" she prodded, rising to take her seat behind the tiara she'd put at the place she'd staked out, adjusting the gaudy crown on her head.

"Oh, God, she's wearing the tiara. I guess there's no hope for it now."

"Damn straight."

Everyone took their seats, the same places they always sat in, and without anyone saying a thing, they all made sure they had something in their cup or bottle before they did so.

When everyone was settled—drinks, snacks, and coins distributed—roughly—equally, what were usually the loud, raucous voices fell silent, and they all looked to Mason. He was the eldest of the group—although he hadn't been at first—and he took his role seriously, raising his glass of what everyone knew would be cheap coffee brandy spiked with even cheaper vodka, and saying, "Here's to those who are here tonight, but more so, here's to those who have gone before us. To Sully."

Everyone echoed, almost all of them with tears in their eyes, even the men, as they clinked their glasses together, "To Sully!"

"And here's to those dear to us who were unable to attend, as well as those loved ones who made it possible for the rest of us to be here."

"To everyone we miss and love!"

"May they never meet," Lefty murmured, only to be smacked hard by Lemon, who was sitting next to him.

"That's husbands and boyfriends," Tabby informed him.

"Oh, is that what it's supposed to be?"

Beer bottles clinked with rocks glasses, clumped against the ubiquitous red Solo cups, and even tinkled against Lemon's fancy-schmancy martini glass, which was the size of a small tub.

They used to end the toasts by slamming their drinks down on the table, but that ended when Lefty—who used to be Angel, because he was far from it—Pat Dawson, sliced his right hand open when his glass broke and he had to be rushed to the nearest, which was to say an hour away, hospital, for stitches.

It was Mace who opened the games by saying, "Play ball!"

They drew for who would deal. Low card became dealer and got to pick not only the game variation, but also which deck they would use to play. They had everything from Harley Davidson cards to Star Trek cards to puppy and kitten cards, to nudie cards—male and female, of course. They were all equal opportunity offenders. And it was the men who hated using the cards with pictures of naked men—and bitched more about it—than the women ever did when their situations were reversed.

So, when Tabby won the draw, that was, necessarily, the deck she picked.

Every man around the table groaned loudly at her choice—except the general.

"Five card draw, jacks or better to open, and tens and fours are wild," she said as she began to distribute the pictures of nude men to her friends, while Floyd put a shot of something amber and a pipe into the pot. The winner could take the shot and smoke the pipe or designate someone else to do either or both. Usually, the least altered person at the table was the smart choice.

For his part, Brae didn't care which variation of the game they played, or with what cards, either, for that matter, especially not now, when it wasn't the game his mind was occupied by.

He took another sip of his beer, trying to ignore his brain

and work on getting buzzed enough to really enjoy the game, having found he played better when he was half in the bag—as his eyes flickered—unexpectedly, unconsciously, and unwillingly—to the hands of the woman who was standing across from him, the deck of cards still in her left hand.

The princess who'd greeted him.

And his eyes kept wandering to her many times over the course of the evening. The more he saw her, every time he heard her laugh or make some self-deprecating remark just to laugh at herself, along with everyone else, the more he liked her.

But for some reason, he found his rebellious eyes drawn to her multiple times throughout the night—when she laughed triumphantly and flipped over cards he'd paid to see, to reveal a full house that gained her a lot of his money, when she spoke quietly to Lemon, who was on her right, and when she rose to get herself another whatever it was that she was drinking and made sure to ask everyone whether they wanted her to get them anything while she was up.

She ended up returning with a tray held at shoulder height, like a barmaid, handing out drinks and bowls of snacks as if she did it every night, and again, there was a smile on her face as she did so.

"All right, you scurvy seadogs, this is the one and only time I'm going to do this for you, and don't forget to tip your waitress generously, or I have it on good authority that she won't hesitate to spit in your drink—or on your Cheetos, either!"

There always seemed to be a smile on her face, or at least in her voice—even when she lost, badly, and was down to about a dollar twenty-five.

And he was surprised to realize how depressed he was to notice, early on, that she was wearing rings that marked her as another's, and that should have been the end of it for him.

Normally, it would have been.

He didn't poach—never had, never would.