

Out of Bounds (Out of Uniform Series)

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"Friends then?" Avery looked at the rugged hand he offered, wondering what it would feel like against her skin. "Okay." She extended her hand and found out. The warmth sent small tremors through her body, building pockets of desire in places she hadn't felt physical need in years. Her breath caught. Connor tugged on the hand he held in his, focusing her attention on him, then with his other he fingered one of her curls that had come loose from her ponytail. "How is it possible you've gotten more beautiful?" Pulling out of a 5G dive was easier than pulling out of his grasp, especially with the urge to sink into his arms so strong. Avery dug deep and snatched her hand from his. "I don't think this is a good idea," she said, though at the moment she'd have trouble saying specifically what was wrong with letting him continue to brush his thumb across her cheek. Connor shrugged. "Maybe not. But it doesn't mean we won't have fun doing it." Being with him would be like putting her plane in a dive—exhilarating as hell and just as dangerous. She should send him on his merry way with a couple well-placed sharp words. His offer dangled tantalizingly in the air between them. She wanted Connor. There was no sense in lying to herself about that. She also wanted a twenty-pound box of chocolate. In the long run, neither would be good for her. Out of Bounds by Melissa Klein *Out of Uniform Series* This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental. **Out of Bounds** COPYRIGHT © 2016 by Melissa Klein All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or The Wild Rose Press, Inc. except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. Contact Information: info@thewildrosepress.com Cover Art by *Angela Anderson* The Wild Rose Press, Inc. PO Box 708 Adams Basin, NY 14410-0708 Visit us at www.thewildrosepress.com Publishing History First Champagne Rose Edition, 2016 Print ISBN 978-1-5092-1088-6 Digital ISBN 978-1-5092-1089-3 *Out of Uniform Series* Published in the United States of America **Dedication** I dedicate this book to women in uniform and the memory of Lieutenant Colonel Jimmie Mims, my great, great aunt, who served her country during World War II Chapter One Avery Madigan shimmied, trying to get her pantyhose up her hips. She'd planned on having enough time to change in her hotel room instead of the microscopic restroom she'd found at the far end of the hangar. *What was it Murphy said about plans?* Since zero-six hundred not one person, animal, or inanimate object had cooperated with her. "Why should my underwear be any different?" she muttered under her breath. "Get the lead out, Mad Dog," David Collins said, using her navy call sign. "They've started without you." Three years after she'd left active duty, her former wingman still had her back. Except, he couldn't help with her dress whites which had shrunk a bit since the

last time she'd put them on. "I'm well aware of the situation, Opie. I don't need a status update," she replied through the bathroom door. Avery never ran late, didn't do the last minute rush thing. She drew in a breath as she silently cursed her ex-husband, Rob. Next time she should probably calculate a larger window for him to pick up their son instead of the one hour she'd allowed this morning. After tugging the skirt down and cramming her feet into the butt-ugly shoes that went with the uniform, she snatched open the door to the head. Only the opportunity to pay homage to her mentor could prompt her to return to this part of coastal North Carolina—the place where her military career stalled and her marriage went down in flames. David eyed her from stern to stern. "You clean up good." She rolled her eyes. "If that's supposed to be a compliment, I don't see how you convinced Stephanie to marry you." Then as she stalked past him, she called over her shoulder, "If you're waiting on me, you're backing up." She pushed through the double doors leading to the hangar just as her name was announced. "Lieutenant Commander Avery Elizabeth Madigan, U.S. Naval Reserves, arriving." Following the whistle that piped her aboard, she walked through the honor guard. Military ceremonies were as much a part of her growing up as horseback riding and Girl Scouts. Still, she preferred sitting in the audience as she had when her father had been in the army rather than actively participating. Avery kept her gaze straight ahead, ignoring the impressive crowd who'd come to honor a former commanding officer as he retired. Admiral Griffin opened the throttle on his retirement ceremony, even opting for rituals that didn't translate well from the ships where they originated to aircraft hangars. He cocked an eyebrow as she took her seat, causing a knot in her stomach. She'd rather ditch her plane in the drink than disappoint the Old Man. Not much beyond her six-year-old son, Will, managed to tap into the emotions she kept guarded beneath a tough exterior. Going through the motions of saluting the flag and sitting through the chaplain's invocation, Avery's mind wandered to the past couple of years. God only knew how she'd have coped during her divorce if it hadn't been for her navy family. Her name was called again, and she pushed aside the numerous distractions vying for her attention. Will's trip to Florida with his father and the career-shaping meeting she had at the end of the week could all wait. Right now, she needed to focus on the twenty-minute speech she committed to memory. "Admiral Griffin leaves the navy with a legacy of honor, courage, and leadership," she began. She executed her speech flawlessly until she made the mistake of taking her eyes off David and Stephanie who were seated in the back row. There he sat, second-row center, the devil who'd plagued her for the past twenty years. Lt. Commander Connor St. James, call sign Titan, probably bribed someone into giving him a place with the dignitaries attending the ceremony. Dressed in a black suit that complemented his dark hair and blue eyes, he looked as comfortable seated between Senator Tallmadge and General Switzer as he had sitting in the cockpit of his Super Hornet. Even the goatee he'd grown since leaving the navy looked good on him. Connor smiled up at her like he was her greatest supporter rather than her greatest rival. Her attention faltered as his smile broadened into a devilish grin. Heat bloomed in her belly, sending tendrils of electricity through her veins. She broke eye contact. Darn him. He'd always been able to do that, make her lose focus. She glanced at her notes. "After serving in Desert Storm, Admiral Griffin returned to the States..." For the remainder of her speech she managed not to stumble again. "On behalf of those who had the privilege of serving under you, we wish you fair winds and following seas." Returning to her seat, her shoulders relaxed for the first time in months. Between her civilian job, the Reserves, and being a single mom, she'd been running off her feet. Now she could enjoy the Admiral's reception later and a few days of long overdue vacation. "During the First Gulf War," Admiral Griffin said, recalling his time serving under Fleet Admiral Carter. Avery tuned into her mentor's reminiscences—some men entered your life and made it better. Her eyes gravitated to Connor—while others barged in and screwed things up. He was at the top of that particular list, and that was saying something considering she had an ex who'd screwed half the women at her last post. Titan had been under the admiral's command same as she. But, she'd known him much longer than that, over twenty years now. The sorry rascal grew more handsome every year. The dark suit gave him a distinguished look as much as the cocky smile on his face made him look like the scoundrel he was. He winked at her, having caught her staring. He knew he was good looking, too. Avery clenched her fists. *Dammit*. He couldn't fool her with his wicked smile,

not anymore. Experience taught her some hard lessons, but once learned she used them like a Kevlar vest. **** Connor shook the older gentleman's doughy hand again. "Pleasure to meet you, Senator," he said over the din of military music playing in the background. As soon as the ceremony was over and he'd paid his respects to Admiral and Mrs. Griffin, Connor kicked it into gear. He should have taken a seat with the other men and women who'd served under the admiral. As much as he would have enjoyed reconnecting with the guys, at the moment he had more pressing matters. "Likewise, Commander. Your take on our military budget gives me food for thought," the senior statesman said. Connor worked his way through the crowd of movers and shakers of not only his home state of North Carolina but the whole country. The key to holding your own in a place you didn't belong was to look as if you did. His glad-handing had nothing to do with massaging his ego. The only way to keep his family's business open after his older brother's gross mismanagement was by making connections with these bigwigs. While Stephen, the heir to the St. James empire, had seen Aviation Options as his personal piggy bank, it fell to Connor to pull the once-thriving business out of the toilet. His mind flashed to the disaster of embezzlement and crushing debt his brother had left. Connor vowed to pull the company out of near bankruptcy; that was if he could keep his mind on networking the crowd and off the redhead standing in the middle of a crowd of admirers. Even as he talked to General Hammond about the situation in Syria and listened while a congresswoman told a story about growing up on a tobacco farm, his gaze followed Avery around the room. He remembered the day a little over three years ago when he'd last seen her because it was also the day the rudder came off his life plans. After that he'd put in for the discharge he wasn't ready to take. *God, I miss the navy.* As a young boy in LaGrange, dreams of escaping the shadow of his older brother and the yolk of expectation the St. James name carried in that small North Carolina town fueled his actions. He'd done everything from getting top grades to earning his Eagle Scout rank in order to make it into the Naval Academy. Not that he was a choirboy by any stretch of the imagination. There wasn't a risk he hadn't taken or rule he hadn't broken. He knew even as a kid that if he wanted to get ahead, he had to play out of bounds; which was the reason he and Avery got along about as well as wind shear and an ultralight. Other than that time during their first year at the Academy, she'd been the poster girl for the navy. No breaking curfew, no sneaking beers, and definitely no fraternization with the other plebes for his girl. He tracked her movement as she spoke to a two-star. As General Madigan's daughter, Avery's career was preordained. He'd bet money on her making captain before retirement. Much as he would like to say she rode her daddy's coattails, outside of his own skills behind the stick, he knew of no one who was better at flying the Super Hornet. No one filled out a uniform better either. Pretty even as a twelve-year-old with braids and braces, over the past twenty years she'd matured into a beauty that had nothing to do with Botox and liposuction. Confidence was its own beauty cream. A familiar and important face stepped into his field of vision, the only thing that could distract him from watching the woman who'd harried his thoughts and haunted his dreams since middle school. Charles Hendricks was a vice president with Louisiana Gas and Oil. Getting a contract to move their guys back and forth to their oil rigs in the Gulf would be a boon to Aviation Options. Even if he managed to reel in the contract with LGO, Connor wasn't going to be satisfied until he had a nice, thick cushion of profit to keep the family business well into the black. With not only his extended family but thirty employees dependent on the company, he had a lot weighing on his success. His phone vibrated on his hip. He checked the screen; Sofia's school. In addition to taking on the job of running the family business after his older brother's suicide, he was now responsible for his fifteen-year-old niece. *God, and he thought the Gulf War had been tough.* "Connor St. James," he announced, holding his breath for the latest round of bad news from LaGrange High. "Mr. St. James, I'm calling to let you know Sofia is absent from classes today." Connor massaged the bridge of his nose. Well, it wasn't because he hadn't taken her there. Before heading down to River Bend Naval Air Station, he'd hand delivered her to the campus for the last day of class before Spring Break. "Yes, I know," he fibbed. "She wasn't feeling well, so I thought it best she stay home this morning." Connor arranged for her to spend the time with a friend's family, one he knew would keep an eye on the girls while business took him south to Wilmington. It looked like Sofia planned to start her break a little early. He

ended the call and headed in the direction of his car. If he had to drive the ten miles back to LaGrange, he'd miss the meeting with Carolina Entertainment. Running his hand through his hair with one hand, he dialed her cell phone with the other. Winning the contract to fly musicians and actors around the South played a major role in keeping his company afloat. God, he hoped he could work this out over the phone. "Why aren't you in school?" he asked by way of greeting. This wasn't the first time she'd ditched class, and even if he'd have done the same at her age, he wasn't letting her get away with stuff like that. "I started my period," she answered in a teary voice. "By the time I realized it, I'd stained my clothes." Connor's face heated. Functions of the female body topped the list of things he was unprepared and unqualified to handle. Shoving aside his embarrassment in favor of more urgent concerns, he asked, "Where are you now?" The high school was two miles from home, and the only thing more worrying than her walking the distance was her catching a ride with some eighteen-year-old boy who was also ditching class. "I'm home. I called Meghan's mother. She's waiting on me while I change then she'll take me back to school." Sofia's explanation sounded a little too tidy for his liking; not because he had developed a parent's ear for bull, but because it sounded like the type of yarn he'd have woven to tell his parents. Plus, she'd just last week lied to him about being at the library studying. "Put Meghan's mom on the phone." After a huff that let him know she was once again aggravated with him, he ascertained that indeed his niece's story was true. "Thank you, Mrs. Barnes; you don't know how grateful I am for your help. Please let me talk to Sofia again." When she came back on the line his one goal was to smooth things over with her. As much as the past few years had been hard on him, it was nothing compared to what his niece had endured. "You handled yourself well, Little Bit," he said, using her pet name. "Call me if you need anything." As long as it didn't involve personal care items. "I love you, and I'll see you Sunday." With the latest crisis handled, Connor double-timed it through the parking lot. He had less than an hour until his meeting with Carolina Entertainment and too much was riding on it to risk something like a flat or traffic to get in the way. He was just reaching for the SUV's handle when he heard his name. "Titan." Connor turned to see Sabastian Baron, one of his old squad members, headed his way. The guy was dressed in a dark suit similar to Connor's, and like him, had left active duty. "Bash, how's the world treating you, my man?" he asked, wondering if the rumors were true that he'd transitioned his aviation skills into a career as a military-thriller novelist. "Like a baby treats a diaper," his former naval flight officer answered, with a grin. "I tried to get a minute with you, but every time I caught sight you were schmoozing with the brass." Connor shrugged. "You know how it is, got to make a living. What's doing with you?" "Not much. I wanted to invite you to Wayfarer's tonight. The squad's getting together over there to knock back a few and pretend we're still the shit." "What time?" God, it had been a coon's age since he'd seen the guys, or done something that wasn't related to taking care of either business or Sofia. "Eight o'clock," Bash answered. That would work. After he finished his meeting, he'd still have time to take care of a few things at Wrightsville Marina. "I'll see you there," he said, wondering if Avery would skip the after party. Chapter Two "Remind me again why I play pool with you, Mad Dog," Bash said, running his hand through his hair. After the admiral's retirement party, Avery and several of the guys took their celebration on the road. They ended up at Wayfarer's, a bar about a mile from the hotel where she was staying. For all her day had started off badly, it was definitely ending on an upswing. One more shot and she would have run the table and relieved Bash of the twenty bucks he bet against her. "You're a glutton for punishment?" she asked over her shoulder where he, Opie, and Hank nursed drinks along with their wounded male pride. The ball sank into the pocket with a pleasant thunk as it landed on top of one of its friends. Instead of gloating, she put down her cue. "I'll be right back. The next round's on me, guys," she said, walking toward the head. After taking care of business, she was washing up when Opie's wife entered. "There you are," Stephanie said. The petite brunette leaned against the wall, watching Avery as she used a wet paper towel to repair her makeup. "Ready to have some fun this week?" She let out a sigh. "Yes, between work and Rob nearly making me late for the admiral's ceremony, I seriously need to unwind." "We'll make that our mission then," Stephanie said, grasping her hand on their way out of the restroom. Opie, Stephanie, and their two kids were staying at the same hotel as Avery. The two women planned to hang out by the pool and take advantage of some of the

hotel's spa amenities. No doubt Stephanie would make it her top priority to see to it that Avery relaxed. In fact, it seemed as if the woman planned on starting the cruise-director routine right then. Stephanie touched her arm when she headed toward the pool tables. "Come hang out with me. Competing with David and the guys won't help you relax." Stephanie had a point. As much fun as kicking back with her former squad members was, her competitive streak couldn't let it go when she missed a shot or one of the guys started ribbing her. Soon after she slid into the booth across from Stephanie, a waitress moved in to take their orders. "What can I get you?" Avery had been knocking back diet sodas in the other room, but maybe a glass of wine would help loosen the screw in her back. "A glass of your house white, please." Stephanie took a sip from her glass. "Are you and Will still coming to our place for the Fourth?" Independence Day at the Collin's house was a tradition that withstood the test of distance, deployment, and even her divorce from Rob. Her stomach twisted a bit. This year would be a little different. Avery shook her head. "It'll just be me. Rob asked if he could have Will." Stephanie arched an eyebrow but held back a comment as the waitress set down their drinks. After she left, Avery explained. "He's been pretty consistent with visitation in the last several months." She played with her glass of wine, swirling the liquid around in the glass. "That's good to hear," Stephanie said, patting her hand. Letting go of the bitterness against her ex-husband was a work in progress. Three years ago, she returned from a six-month deployment in the Gulf to find out how well Rob had been doing his part as a military spouse. Husbands and wives of officers had an unpaid and underappreciated duty to the enlisted personnel's family. Stephanie was a whiz at the job, checking in with the families in David's crew, offering help with finding childcare, negotiating dependent benefits, or providing a listening ear. Rob had taken on the duty in another way, one that involved him "servicing" the wives of several shipmates. In addition to the pain of betrayal, her skipper saw it as a failure on her part. Rob had taken off a week after she'd returned. She and Will hadn't heard anything from him for months after that. Not knowing where Rob was made it impossible for her to finalize their divorce and kept her and Will in a state of limbo that hadn't been good for either of them. Now they were on the flip side of that period in their life, she was ready for some smooth air. Stephanie must have tuned into that thought because she touched on a subject she'd been pondering herself. "There's a guy in our neighborhood I'd like you to meet. He's in his late thirties, a widower with two girls in middle school;" Stephanie was the closest thing she had to a best friend, which meant Avery had no problem cutting her off. "The last thing I need right now;" She began before her phone went off in her purse. The UFO-like noise identified the caller as her boss. "I need to get this," she said, snagging the phone while sliding out of the booth. "Did you send that proposal over to Carolina Entertainment?" "Yes, Douglas." She struggled to keep the impatience out of her voice. She'd been working on the project for the past several weeks. It wasn't likely she'd forget such an important piece of Flight Innovations' bid. "And I confirmed my appointment with the vice president for Friday at four." Avery chewed her thumb, waiting for her boss' response. Several heartbeats of weighted silence passed. "I'm still not convinced this is the direction we need to be taking the company." "I know." Boy, did she know. The man never missed an opportunity to tell her what he thought of her ideas. She was spot-on about pursuing this business. Expanding Flight Innovations' core services would increase their profit. "With the company acquiring Jet South's assets, we now have the passenger planes we need without having to invest money in new equipment." Why the hell the guy couldn't see that was beyond her. Probably because he didn't want to listen to anything she had to say. Avery made two vertical moves in the year and a half she'd been at Flight Innovations. Perhaps the old fart was worried she was after his job. She wasn't. She was after his boss' job. "Everything's under control. I've got a great presentation and a solid bid. I don't think we can lose." More silence on his end. A throb began behind her eyes. "Leave it to me, Douglas." Some sixth sense told her not only her promotion depended on her closing the deal but that her job was riding on it. "I'll talk to you after the meeting." After hanging up, she returned to the booth. "Sorry. That was the boss." She kept the phone out. He usually followed phone calls with a series of emails as he thought of more points he wanted to make. On cue her phone dinged again. She turned it to read the message. *You've got one chance to make this work.* "God, I need these few days off." Stephanie finished off her drink as

the waitress set another in front of her. "Girl, you need to get laid." That from Mrs. Happily Married. She and Opie were the poster children for love everlasting. "You might be right." Avery hadn't had sex with anyone but herself since she and Rob split. The problem standing in her way was she didn't think she'd ever trust a man enough to get married again. Some companionship wouldn't be a bad thing—of the no-long-term-expectations variety. She scanned the bar. She'd been a lowly ensign the last time she'd been in a bar looking for a hook up. She hadn't enjoyed it back then, and going by the men in this particular establishment, things hadn't improved in the past few years. Where were all the nice, single, straight men? "How about this one?" Stephanie asked, nodding discreetly at the guy headed in their direction. Wearing a tight T-shirt and board shorts, and sporting the artfully messy hair she'd seen on cologne ads, he leaned in a little too close as he asked, "Can I buy you ladies a drink?" Stephanie grinned. "I'm good, but you can buy one for Avery here." She wasn't so taken with the guy's aren't-I-something-else routine. "No thanks," she corrected. She probably had underwear older than him. The Ian Somerhalder wannabe moved on with a shrug. Stephanie swatted at Avery. "He was into you. I could tell." "Please." She rolled her eyes. "I probably reminded him of a babysitter he once had a crush on." Never one to dwell on defeat, Stephanie motioned to the front of the bar. "Well, if you won't let me fix you up, at least come do karaoke with me. We haven't done that since that time in Pensacola." *God, that had been fun.* Probably the last time Avery had felt free, like anything was possible. Instead of the survival mode she'd been in for the past few years. "Let's do it," she said. "But I get to pick the song. I'm not singing 'Save a Horse, Ride a Cowboy' like we did last time." **** Connor propped his pool cue against his shoulder and took a long pull on his beer. "Who else is here?" "Just us," Bash answered, pointing to the four guys watching Connor and him play a round of Nine Ball. "Dice left with someone about an hour ago, and Pappy couldn't get a kitchen pass." He took a swig from his long neck. "Why?" Connor shrugged. "No reason. Just making polite conversation." The corner of Bash's mouth turned up. "Yeah, right." He jerked his chin in the direction of the other room. "She's in the bar with Stephanie." No need to say who *she* was. Their rivalry was legendary. Connor craned to see inside Wayfarer's main bar area and caught a glimpse of Avery at a booth with Opie's wife. He tamped down on the urge to step closer to get a better look. He shouldn't have been so keen to see her again. The last thing he needed was to go twenty rounds with *She Whose Hair Matched Her Temperament*. They'd first met back when they were kids. Her dad was stationed at the base not far from LaGrange, and for a couple years she and Connor attended the same middle school. Then her hair had been a bright red. "You playing or staring at her?" Bash asked, jerking Connor from his thoughts. "I was looking for the waitress," he said as he held up his drink. "I could use another beer." He'd actually been thinking how Avery's hair had darkened over the years to a deep auburn. Noting the change and wondering if it denoted a mellowing in the woman's famous temper wasn't why he'd come. After this afternoon, he'd earned a little down time. His meeting with Carolina Entertainment had gone well, but between it and Sofia's little drama, he was looking forward to a few days on his boat. Connor set his empty on the ledge ringing the room, then approached the table and lined up his shot. There was a place to fly by the seat of his pants, executing a perfect carrier landing, and pool wasn't it. The four ball sank in the corner pocket and over the next few minutes he proceeded to run the table. "I just can't catch a break tonight," Bash told him, fishing in his wallet. Connor pocketed the twenty. The win should have felt better. "What say I give you a chance to earn it back?" He gestured toward the table with his chin. "I can't send you home in defeat." Bash flashed a grin. "You're on." As Connor waited for him to rack the balls for the next game, he rubbed the back of his neck. Then he paced the room, making sure to steer away from the view into the other room. He was supposed to be celebrating with old friends, not looking for trouble. But, damn, a distraction of the female variety wouldn't be amiss. Waiting to hear from Carolina Entertainment would be crazy-making if he didn't channel his thoughts elsewhere. His sales pitch had been spot on, and he'd answered every one of the guy's concerns about choosing a smaller charter company. That's all he could do. But losing to one of the other air transport companies wasn't an option. Over the course of the contract, it'd be a steady source of revenue for Aviation Options. Connor's mind swam with numbers, both black and red. He'd give his left nut to find out what Flight

Innovations' proposal looked like. If he could, he'd make damn sure his was better. Carolina Entertainment was taking bids until close of business on Friday, and nothing said Connor couldn't sweeten the deal if he needed to. The livelihood of Aviation Options depended on him winning that contract. The alternative meant selling his beloved boat. He'd had a few of offers to buy her over the years but clung to the hope he could turn the family business around without sacrificing the last reminder of his former life. Just thinking about parting with *The Nemesis* put a knot in his gut. Over the past three years he'd sold off everything he owned. First, to cover the loans Stephen took out, then to keep the company afloat while Connor worked on getting new contracts. Back when things had first gone south on him, he'd entertained the idea of just taking Sofia and letting the family business implode. One look at the faces of the people who'd lose their jobs and he'd tossed that option overboard. There was another reason he couldn't walk away. Proving to his old man that he wasn't the screw up came in a close second. Damn, to be thirty-two and still seeking his deceased father's approval. Way to be a second son stereotype. Stephen had been the heir, while Connor was the spare. The opening notes of a popular rock anthem drifted into the room. "Oh shit, those two are at it again," Opie said, slamming his beer down on one of the tall tables dotting the room. "What?" Hank Taggart asked. "Oh man, check it." Bash threw his head back with a laugh. "Stephanie and Mad need to take that show on the road." Opie body-blocked the doorway leading to the bar area. "I'll pay you guys to stay in here. They don't need any encouragement." Hank pushed Opie aside, and the other guys abandoned their bullshit and pool. Connor followed them into Wayfarer's main room, interested in anything to keep his mind off his old family issues. Especially if Avery was part of the distraction. Whether she was flying, tearing someone a new one, or giving a heartfelt speech, she never failed to enthrall him. On the far side of the stage, Stephanie and Avery stood behind a Karaoke machine with mics in their hands. Now this was something he hadn't seen her do. "Those two get up to more mischief," Opie said, shaking his head. "It's a good thing we're not neighbors anymore." After a minute of pacing while scrubbing his hands through his short hair, Opie gave up and plopped down at a nearby table. Far from making fools of themselves, the women were drawing attention of the admiring kind. People were holding up their lit cell phones the way kids back in his concert days held up their Bics. With their arms wrapped around each other, they were quite the pair. Stephanie had a nice soprano voice that rang clear. Then there was Avery's alto. Her sultry sound went straight to his cock. Deep and throaty, she sounded like she was making love as she sang the lyrics. She poured everything into her performance, closing her eyes and belting out the lyrics as if she were singing to a crowd of adoring fans. When their duet ended, Avery started up her solo act, singing a romantic ballad. *Damn, he didn't know she had it in her.* She sang as if she was alone and the lyrics were from a deep part of her soul. He should have known she'd have a fabulous voice. She approached everything she did with an eye toward mastery and made it look so goddamned easy as she did it. Connor shook his head, a combination of surprised admiration at yet another example of Avery's lengthy skill set and a reminder that wanting and getting were two different things. He wasn't any more likely to win anything other than her sharp tongue than he was getting his old man's approval. But that didn't stop him from appreciating the way she sang, flew a plane, or filled out her jeans. When the song came to an end, Opie bolted for the stage. "I got to get Steph off of there, or she'll get ideas about being on *You've Got Talent* again." "Oh, come on, Opie. Don't spoil their fun," Connor called. He wasn't done watching Mad Dog show her wilder side. Stephanie leaped into Opie's arms, letting him carry her from the stage in an over the top display of what a happy marriage should look like. Not that Connor knew anything about functional relationships. The two up-close-and-personal marriages he'd seen had been enough of a disaster to convince him happily ever after only existed in the movies. As Opie set his wife on her feet, she staggered a bit as if she'd had more than a couple drinks before taking to the stage. Was that what Avery had used to get up the nerve to put on the performance? The woman he'd known since childhood was too squared away to let loose in front of a crowd of half-drunk sailors. She put out a hand, grabbing the back of a booth as she made her way back to the table. Yep. She had a couple drinks in her. Maybe more than a couple given the way she used the backs of the booths to guide her way. Avery was still laughing as she headed to a booth. Then she stumbled as she reached across the table for her

purse. Surely she didn't plan to drive like that. Not stopping to investigate the reason behind the sudden protective instinct or to remind himself that she wasn't his problem, he followed her out to the parking lot. **** Riding high from her and Stephanie's performance, Avery followed her friends outside. A few days with them was exactly the catharsis she needed. Stephanie's laughter carried across the night then died as she and Opie stopped by their car to kiss. She rolled her eyes at the only downside to vacationing with Mr. and Mrs. Forever. She picked her way across the parking lot. The half glass of wine she drank over an hour ago had nothing to do with the reason she was toddling like a recruit who hadn't gotten her sea legs under her. The stilettos were responsible. The sore feet and aching side from laughing so much were well worth the pain. For those few minutes on stage she wasn't Lt. Commander Madigan, the Director of Sales and Marketing at Flight Innovations, or even Mom. She was Avery, a still youngish woman who enjoyed a good rock anthem. Well, she still felt young even if she could see her twenties in the rearview mirror. In the semidarkness she stumbled over some unseen obstacle. "Damn," she cursed as she reached inside her purse for a flashlight. Maybe the shoes hadn't been such a good idea, even if they did make her legs look long. The sound of footsteps behind her had her picking up the pace and reaching for the mace instead of the light. This was exactly why she didn't drink. Intoxicated women put themselves at risk. Back on active duty while her squad had cut loose in bars all over the world, she always acted as designated driver. Mother Mad, they called her. A male who had a few too many might wake up to find he'd been rolled by a mugger. A female could awaken to much worse. "Mad Dog, hold up." The baritone voice burned through the remains of her afterglow. *Great.* Just what she needed to kill her good mood—Connor St. James. Although, there was nothing saintly about the guy.

Avery Madigan lives by a strict code of conduct that's helped her rise through the ranks of navy pilots. Rule number one—never mix business with pleasure.

Lt. Commander Connor St. James never met a regulation he didn't want to break, especially if it involves making love to a certain auburn-haired woman who's starred in his dreams since the Naval Academy.

When their worlds once again collide, the impact is nothing short of incendiary and the rule book is thrown overboard. Can a vacation hookup change the course of their lives, or will competition send their love up in flames?

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