

Mamie to the Rescue: Part Two

I sat at the table in the conference room, staring at Colonel Black in complete disbelief. I'd met him before, at Uncle Mike's going away party. The colonel is an enormous man—maybe six and a half feet tall and very muscular. I really should've been intimidated by him, but all I could think was, he's sending my baby brother to *PERU!*

"No," I said. "He's not leaving the country without Mom knowing. If you don't tell her, I will!"

The colonel gave me this "don't-mess-with-me-sweetheart" look. I was about to tell him not to patronize me, but he launched into this story about how the monsters in Peru were eating little children. Bile rose in my throat and tears stung the backs of my eyes. While Matt and Colonel Black talked about how urgent the need was for Matt to go down there, all I could see in my mind's eye was a pair of three-year-olds being torn apart by a gaping maw full of bloody slobber.

A little sob bubbled in my chest and Matt put his hand on my arm. "I gotta go down there to keep the Gators from killing any more little kids. Don't you see? I have to do this."

I took a big breath, hoping I wouldn't cry. They wouldn't understand that I cried when I got angry; they'd think I was weak. Instead, I glared at all of them in turn. "Okay, but you protect *Matt* no matter what. He's your highest priority. If he gets hurt, I'm going to rat you out to Mom."

Lieutenant Johnson's large brown eyes popped wide. "Yes, ma'am." He shook his head. "Tough cookie, that one."

They worked out the travel details, then handed me the worst job of all: fooling Mom until Matt came back. Once the lieutenant and Colonel Black went outside, I gave Matt a hug and said a silent prayer that he'd come home okay. Despite reassuring me he'd be careful, I could see the gleam of excitement in his eyes; Matt loved the hunt, and I worried one day that would catch up with him.

Finally, I let him go, trying to squash the doubt and fear that I'd never see him again. Lieutenant Johnson was waiting to walk me to the SUV. After he opened my door for me, he gave me a few gentle pats on the back.

"I'll take good care of him, Mamie," he said. "I'll watch him close, okay?"

I sniffled. "I know you will, Lieutenant. But I need a favor."

“Anything.”

“I want Colonel Black’s cell phone number.”

Johnson let out a whistle before getting into the SUV and starting the engine. “All right, I’ll give it to you, but *do not* call the man unless it’s an emergency.”

“Of course,” I said, thinking he and I probably defined “emergency” a little differently.

On the way home, I texted Will from Matt’s phone. *When you get home in the morning, call me on Matt’s number. We have work to do.*

* * *

“Okay, so I’ll stay in the house to avoid your mom so she won’t realize I’m not in Aspen,” Will said. “And I’ll answer his phone if she calls. He’ll be in the bathroom, or up on the hill or something.”

“I’ll also need you to text her from Matt’s phone every so often.” I handed Will a sheet of paper. We were in his room, working out the details of Matt’s cover story. Will’s housekeeper had given me a funny look when Will took me upstairs. That had made me blush a bit, but there wasn’t anything going on, so I had no reason to be embarrassed.

“You’ve written out all his texts? And the times to send them?” Will started laughing. “And what’s the thing with the boxes underneath the messages?”

“A decision tree,” I said. “Depending on how she answers the text. If she deviates from my predicted answers, text me so I can give you a better response.”

“Oooo-kay,” Will said, quirking his eyebrow. “You’re thorough.”

“If we’re going to fool a woman with a law degree and three kids, there’s no room for error.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “Can you do this?”

“Sure.”

“One more thing,” I said. “I need pictures of Aspen from one of your trips, so I can post pictures on Matt’s Facebook page. I’ll show them to Mom every so often, pretending to be jealous that he got to go skiing with you.”

“I’ll send you some.” Will kicked his feet up onto his coffee table, but I resisted telling him that was bad for the furniture. His family was so rich they could probably just get him a new table when he scuffed up the current one. “Mamie, don’t ever let me get on your bad side.”

“Wise.” I said. “I need to go.”

I let myself out downstairs and climbed into Brent's car. I hadn't gotten one of my own yet, but he was pretty good about allowing me to borrow his every once in a while. Phase One of Matt's mission to Peru was complete. Mom thought he'd been invited to go skiing with the Cruessans over the remainder of spring break and I'd brought his ski gear to Will's house to make it look good. Now, if all the other little details could keep her convinced that he'd actually gone to Aspen, we'd be in the clear.

I just had to relax.

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Saturday and Sunday passed without trouble. Mom oohed and awed over "Matt's" first Facebook post of a beautiful mountainside, and his text about how he'd made it down a black course without falling had made the rounds, too. So far, so good.

Monday I woke up with this feeling of dread. I couldn't put a finger on it, but I was uneasy all day. I hadn't gotten a message from Colonel Black, other than telling me Matt had landed safely and was being deployed. Lieutenant Johnson had emailed me Sunday evening when he made it to camp, saying the rest of the team was out on a hunt but that he'd have Matt send me a message soon.

Nothing had come through.

As the day wore into evening, I'd chewed my fingernails to the nub, wondering what was going on. I believed Lieutenant Johnson wouldn't forget to ask Matt to email me, so something must've happened to them. I paced around my room, carrying my cell phone. I'd brought up the colonel's number a half-dozen times, but hadn't called. Now, though, now I needed answers. I hit "send."

The phone rang three times, then Colonel Black said, "Yes?"

"Colonel? It's Mamie Archer."

There was this long pause. "Miss Archer, how'd you get this number?"

"Never mind that. I haven't heard from the lieutenant or Matt for more than twenty-four hours. Something's happened, hasn't it?"

"I can't talk about the mission Miss Archer. I'm sure they'll be in touch soon."

With that, he hung up on me and I stared at the phone in outrage. Oh no, he wasn't getting away with that so easily. So I waited until eight p.m. on the dot, then called again. He didn't answer. I left a polite message, asking him to give me an update.

By nine, he hadn't called, so I called him again. "Colonel Black, I know you're busy, but I'm really worried. You need to call me back."

At ten, I decided it was time for guerrilla tactics. "Hi Colonel Black. You know what? I like cats, but my mom doesn't, so we can't have one. Did you know cats were worshiped in ancient Egypt? I mean, that makes sense, because most cats think they're gods."

I went on in this vein until the message cut off for being too long.

At eleven, worried out of my mind, I left him a tearful plea, hoping the guilt might work.

By midnight, he still hadn't called back, so this time, I read him the opening paragraphs to the *Declaration of Independence*.

Nothing.

At one a.m., I tried calling again, only to find that my number had been blocked. So I texted him instead: *I know you're there. You need to call me, or text me. Or send me a telegram. I'm not picky. Tell me what's going on!*

At two a.m., I texted him a picture of my report card. *I'm a smart girl, Colonel. I know Matt's in trouble. CALL ME BACK.*

Three a.m.: *Where's my brother, Colonel?*

Four a.m.: *I'm really tired, and it's all your fault, you big meanie. Where's Matt?!*

Five a.m.: *Anything?*

Six a.m., Seven a.m., Eight a.m.: *I'm still here.*

Nine a.m.: *He's hurt, isn't he? That's why you won't call me.*

Ten a.m.: *I'm going to tell my mom if I don't get an answer soon.*

Eleven a.m.: *You have three hours to comply, or I'm busting Matt's cover.*

Noon: *Two hours. I mean it, Colonel.*

One p.m.: *Last chance.*

At five minutes until two, my phone finally rang. "Hello?"

"Miss Archer, I'm calling with an update...and to let you know that I'll be changing my phone number immediately after this call." The colonel sounded peeved, but very tired. "There was an incident Sunday night. We lost some men, and others were seriously injured, including Matt."

Lightheaded, I sank onto the edge of my bed. “How badly?”

“He has a pretty sizable wound in his side, but the lieutenant reports that Jorge, the medicine man they’re working with, is healing him somehow. We anticipate he’ll recover in the next day or two.”

“And why are you just now telling me this?” I snapped. “You should’ve notified me sooner!”

“The team didn’t report in until mid-morning yesterday. Contrary to what you might believe, the news takes time to reach me, too.”

“Then you should’ve called me yesterday.”

The colonel sighed loudly. “I had to get all the facts first, and military operations aren’t something we routinely share with the soldiers’ family members.”

“Nothing about this is routine,” I said.

“That’s...true. Okay, here’s the deal. We’ll be flying Matt home on Friday. He’s done really good work in Peru. He saved a baby, Miss Archer. If nothing else, you can be proud of him.”

Matt saved a baby. I smiled a little. “I want to talk to him, please. Once I’ve heard from him and I’m sure he’s okay, I’ll stay out of your hair and arrange his arrival so Mom doesn’t suspect anything.”

“I’ll have our technical specialist patch you through to Peru. I told Lieutenant Johnson to expect a call.” Colonel Black chuckled. “I still can’t believe you left me messages every hour for nineteen hours. It takes an odd kind of courage to purposefully annoy a man in my position.”

“It wasn’t courage, sir,” I murmured, sagging with exhaustion. Matt was going to be okay; he was coming home. “I just love my family. I’d do anything for them.”

“Matt’s lucky to have you, then,” the colonel said. “I’ll have that call patched through within the next few hours. Stick close to your phone.”

Once he hung up, I stretched out on my bed thinking I’d take a short nap while waiting for the call.

Annoying a colonel was tiring work.