

OPERATION:
ALLEGIANCE
a sweet military romance

DEEDEE LAKE
SUSAN BAGANZ



ST. JOSEPH, MISSOURI USA

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To those who serve our nation in the military and to the families left behind, you have our love and gratitude. You are not forgotten.

and

To Seth and Ben, our sherpas on this journey.

Glossary

GREEK

| | |
|------------------------|------------|
| Mamá | Mom |
| Papá | Papa |
| Próstimo | fine |
| Efcharistó | thank you |
| Próstimo | fine |
| Óchi | no |
| Nai | yes |
| Efcharistó | thank you |
| Se agapó | I love you |
| panemorfi | beautiful |
| Mitéra | mother |
| mitéra mou | my mother |
| morá | babies |
| Agapiménos or agapitós | beloved |
| amóre mio or agápi mou | my love |

SPANISH

| | |
|------|------------------------|
| Mamí | Mommy (often in Latin) |
|------|------------------------|

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| | |
|---------------------|--|
| | cultures adult kids will still call their parents Mami or Papi, used as an endearment) |
| Papi | Daddy |
| Mamisita | Mommy (little momma) |
| Tia | Aunt |
| Te Amo | love you or love you |
| Mi hija | my daughter (as an endearment it is written and spoken as one word – mihija) |
| Sobrinos | nephews |
| mi madre | my mother |
| mi amor | my love |
| cariño (male) | sweetheart |
| carina (female) | sweetheart |
| un accidente | an accident |
| mis sobrinos guapos | my handsome nephews |

Prologue

The bottle rockets soared high into the air above the surrounding Rocky Mountain peaks, bathing the mountains in a colorful glow. Alexandros laughed. “Rusty. Did you see that one?” His brother’s grin was evident in the fading moonlight.

“Yeah! I’m surprised no one from the camp has discovered us missing. Alexos, you rocked it coming up with this idea.”

Alexandros, known as Alexos to many of his family and friends, nodded. “It was hard not rolling my eyes at Dad this afternoon when he lectured me, again, on being *responsible* this summer at camp. And in front of all our friends and youth group, too.”

“I almost bust a gut trying to stop from laughing. He means well though. It’s weird to think it’s our last summer here. Next year we graduate and will have to put this all behind us.” Rusty groaned as he lit another bottle rocket and the teenagers stepped back from the cliff edge, hands over their ears at the deafening scream as it soared high overhead and exploded in the air. The sound was amplified by the surrounding mountains.

“Woop!” Alexos yelled. “Says you. I don’t plan on putting any of this fun behind me.”

“Me either. Wait till you see this one.” Russ pulled a huge thick stick out of his bag. His curly head bobbed with excitement.

“Wha—t? Where did you get that?” Alexos’ chest clenched with alarm.

“I found it back in one of the old sheds. I bet she’ll be a beauty.”

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“I don’t think we—”

Russ already lit the fuse but hadn’t stuck it into the ground.

Eyes wide and heart racing, Alexos screamed, “Toss it!”

Russ released the stick as it reached the end of the fuse. The explosion over the edge of the cliff blinded Alexos.

“Wow, bro. That was awesome. Hey...Rusty? Where are you?” His ears rang from the explosion. After that blast of light his eyes couldn’t adjust. “Come on. This isn’t funny. Tell me where you are.”

Silence. A lone owl hooted in the distance and a coyote howled. The hair stood up on Alexandros’ arm and goosebumps covered his entire body. An involuntary shiver overtook him as terror settled deep in his gut.

“Rusty?” he whispered.

He still couldn’t find his brother. He went to the aspen tree where they had dropped their flashlights. He picked his up and turned it on. All he could see around him were trees, rocks, and underbrush. Alexos gulped. “Rusty?” Tears threatened at the corners of his eyes. If anything happened to his brother...

He crept to the edge where Russ had tossed the dynamite. He aimed the flashlight down and the reflective stripes on his brothers’ jacket glowed. His brother’s still body sprawled out on the rocky ground below the cliff.

Stifling a gasp, Alexos called out. “Rusty!” He waited for only a few seconds as the shout echoed off the surrounding mountains. His brother didn’t answer. “I’m going to get help. Hang on, Russ. You’re going to be all right.”

He headed down the trail back to camp as fast as he could. *Lord, save my brother! Please!* Guilt tore at him, hurting more than the branches that ripped at his face and coat as he raced for help.

How was he ever going to face his father now?



The pilot and rescue workers teamed together to get Rusty’s body out of the canyon. A treacherous task in the dark. Alexos was in awe

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of what they'd accomplished. There was no way to know Rusty's condition, but he was alive.

Two hours after the initial explosion, Alexos watched from a distance as a rescue chopper airlifted his brother to the hospital. His tears had dried. Pastor Blake, also known to the students as PB, wrapped his arms around him. "Your parents are meeting us at the hospital. I'll drive you there."

Campers cleared a path in a *walk of shame*. PB led Alexos to the van they had arrived in earlier that afternoon. No one said a word. They didn't need to. He recognized the truth.

He was to blame.

1

Mandatory fun? Right? 0530 training at the Hump, in South Korea, outdoors...in November. Loads of fun. CW3 Alexandros Sava scoffed under his breath. He didn't think the old man had ever laughed a day in his life. Sweat trickled down his back even though he could see his breath in the twenty-eight-degree morning. The Black Cat's company commander made a wager that his pilots and crew would wipe the field with the medical unit from M.A.S.H. at Camp Humphreys. Alexandros wasn't going to be the one to disappoint a superior.

"Come on, Chief, one more point and we got the win." Second Lieutenant Carlos Ortega meant well, but what did a butter bar know about anything?

Alexandros picked himself up and tested his aching ankle while knocking the dew-covered grass from his leg. He half-limped, half-jogged back to his team as they planned their next attack.

Once back in the game, yells of "Go, Chief! Go, Chief! Go long!" rang in his ears. Out of the corner of his eye, Alexos spotted Ortega jumping up and down on the sideline.

"The day they started letting infants become officers was the day the Army lost its dignity," he grumbled.

He took off running as fast as his sore ankle would allow. A soldier learned to push through pain. That was part of the training, and this game was much more than that. It was a workout and couldn't be avoided. The military didn't suffer wimps.

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Corporal Yi was too quick for Alexandros' reflexes, slipping on the wet grass in front of him until it was too late. The shorter Korean soldier leapt for the Frisbee at the same time, and they crashed to the ground together.

Alexandros screamed in pain. Was that really his voice?

Corporal Yi staggered to his feet and offered a hand to the larger officer. "Need some help, old man?" he wisecracked.

Alexos groaned, unable to put his pain into words. The five-foot corporal bent over to help the six-foot-three-inch Alexos to his feet.

Oh, this should be good. Not.

"You good, sir?" Corporal Yi asked, his brows suspiciously linking above his eyes.

Words he shouldn't be thinking threatened to slip past his lips as pain stabbed up his leg when he tried to move his ankle.

"You don't look too good, sir. I don't think your foot should go that way," Yi said.

Really? Nothing escaped Yi's keen eye. Where did they find this guy?

Two medics, who probably began shaving last week and were barely legal to drive, jogged over to assess him. They called for supplies and soon had his ankle and foot splinted. When did they stop giving you something to bite on when pain was this bad? His barely avoided biting his tongue as he tried to hold in the screams that sought release.

I'm sorry, Rusty. Did you suffer like this? The thought of his brother's pain racked with him guilt. His heart ached more than his leg. Halfway around the world and the past rose to taunt him once again. Alexos was grateful Rusty was alive but the sense of guilt never left him.

The medics were professional and soon helped him up on his one good leg. He nearly fell before the two young soldiers could get a better grip on him. He was hard to carry when he wasn't struggling against them and almost impossible to get him somewhere he didn't want to go. He was being difficult but couldn't help himself as they maneuvered him to their privately owned vehicle, or POV. He could barely fit in the tiny Korean car due to his height. Biting back the tears, he gritted his teeth and clutched the door handle tight to keep from making noise.

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The specialist behind the wheel nodded to him. “That’s real ugly, sir. The doc will probably send you to Young San to get that fixed.”

“Are you kidding me?” Alexos said through gritted teeth. “I’ll shake it off. Just give me a minute.” Bravado, pride, or was it wishful thinking? He’d never hurt this bad before. Walking it off was not going to be an option this time.

The news didn’t get better after the doctor returned with X-rays. Lieutenant Colonel Maddox broke the bad news. “We won’t be able to do what you need here. The day after tomorrow, we’ll send you on to Tripler and from there Walter Reed for surgery. There’s too much damage. You need an MRI before they can operate, and the swelling needs to go down. My staff is already making arrangements, and your unit commander has been notified.

“I’ll give you some sedatives to numb the pain. You’re medevac is in one hour so if you need something from your quarters, we can send someone to get it for you. You aren’t going to be mobile for some time. Any questions?”

“Sir, will I be returning to Camp Humphreys?” Alexandros asked.

“It’s highly doubtful. Your flying career may be over. With the damage you’ve done over the years and today’s event, you’ll likely have several surgeries and months of recovery. I’m sorry.”

Alexandros gulped and nodded. “Thank you, sir.” He replied to the officer the way he’d been trained. Some things never changed no matter what your rank or circumstances.

The sedatives did their job quickly and he slept through most of the flight on the C-5, waking an hour away from Tripler Army Medical Center.



“Welcome to Hawaii, Chief.” A cheery voice roused Alexos from a deep sleep.

His eyes cracked open to find a ray of sunshine piercing into his brain. He closed them tight and turned his head away. “Does it need

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to be so bright in here?” he grumbled. Cracking open his eyes again, he slowly took in the room, starting with the yellow ceiling before finally peering at his body. His leg was suspended by some contraption. “What in the world? What did you do to my leg?” he demanded, but not with as much strength as he had hoped for. He passed out before the nurse could answer.



Someone stroked Alexandros' chin. It was an odd sensation, equal parts calming and irritating. How long had it been since he'd shaved? He wanted to open his eyes but couldn't summon the energy. Who...?

When he awoke again the ceiling was different. Grey greeted him now. How depressing in the dimly lit room. Greek words were rapidly exchanged off to his left. His parents were here? Why? Was he dying?

He closed his eyes as his mom whispered prayers over him. The soft comforting cadence of her voice soothed him, much like when he was a little boy afraid of thunderstorms. At least once a month they communicated via video chat with them when he was overseas. Hadn't he talked to them a few days ago? He had no idea how much time had passed. If they were with him now, it must be serious. What happened? He wanted to tell her not to bother God with her prayers. It was a pointless exercise, but if it made her feel better...God certainly wasn't interested in his life.

He was tired. So tired.

He cracked open his eyes again to see his mother's graying head bent over folded hands. His father stood next to her, with one hand on her shoulder and the other touching Alexandros' arm. Their hair was grayer than he remembered. Alexos lifted his hand to touch his mom and let her know he was awake. Her olive skin was nearly the same color as his.

“Hey, *Mamá, Papá*.” His scratchy voice was soft to his ears.

“Oh, *Amore Mio*.” A tear crept down her cheek as she reached to caress his face with her hand. His father stepped back to allow her to get closer, walking to the window to gaze outside.

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Once again, he had disappointed his father. He was surprised they abandoned the ranch, church, and café to be here with him. Wherever *here* was.

“Alexandros, how do you feel?” His mother’s eyes pleaded with him for good news.

“My leg hurts. Where am I?”

His father turned to face him but didn’t come closer. “You’re at Walter Reed.” The voice was deep and dispassionate.

“What did the doctor say?” He was afraid to find out, but given what he could see and that wiggling his big toe caused pain, he figured he hadn’t lost his leg at least.

“You’ve had two surgeries. They are hopeful, but...” His mother glanced to her husband.

“But?” Alexos dreaded asking.

Arms folded across his chest, his father frowned. “They expect it will be several months for recovery.”

Alexandros squeezed his eyes shut. They didn’t know this had probably already ended his career. “It was just combat Frisbee.”

His mother shook her head. “We are grateful God has brought you back to us. It’s an early Christmas miracle.” She gave a soft grin as she tapped his nose with her finger. “Especially since you are in one piece ...maybe with a few extra parts added.”

“I hope no more screws fall loose in you, boy.” His father cracked a small grin, a rare thing from his stern authoritarian dad. Peace filled Alexandros’ soul. He couldn’t wait to get home, recover, and prove the doctors wrong. He would fly a chopper again. He needed to. Without that—he was nothing.



Three months at Walter Reed and Alexos was still not ready to face the trip home to Colorado. It would be long and painful. His parents hadn’t been able to remain long at Walter Reed Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, so his time there had been lonely and boring when

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the doctors weren't torturing him. The cute nurses weren't even a temptation. If he couldn't rejoin his unit, home was the next best place to be.

His mom met him when he landed at Colorado Springs Airport. The blonde female medic who accompanied him handed her a packet.

"What's that, Lieutenant?" he asked, weary from the trip, although he slept most of the way due to the sedative they gave him to make the journey easier to bear.

The nurse shook her head at him. "Chief, Mr Sava grumpy pants. I was only relaying the information from the doctor as to your care and medications and your follow-up visits here in Colorado. Someone needs to kick your rear into gear, so you can become more mobile."

"Pretty sassy, aren't you?" he grumbled. Her comments hit too close to home. The fact that he needed a *keeper* and that it was his mom who was saddled with the task, humbled him.

"Alexandros. Apologize to the young lady," his mom chided.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

The young woman gave a smile. "Too bad I'm heading overseas after I return to Maryland. I wouldn't mind taking care of a handsome soldier like you once you got over yourself." She saluted with sass and left him with his mother.

He frowned at the nurse's departing figure. Before this accident, he wasn't in the market for a girlfriend. Not that he didn't like women. He liked them just fine. He only believed that the happiness of marriage was something beyond what God would ever allow him to enjoy. Why would He? Some sins were too big for a holy and just God to forgive.

"Come on, son." His mother plopped the packet in his lap, released the brakes on the wheelchair, and began to push him toward the parking lot. "Let's get you some good home cooking to strengthen you. I suspect you've lost some weight during your recovery. Time to reverse that so you can heal."

"Yes, Mother." What else could he say? He went from one program of rehabilitation to another. At least here with the Rocky Mountains all around, he could relax a little and eat his mom's homemade cooking.

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There was no one to impress here. He was determined to recover. No one or nothing would stand in the way of his dream to fly again.

Once home, his father came to wheel him to the porch and handed him crutches. “They tell me you can manage these things. I’ve not had time to build a ramp, so let’s see what you can do.”

Pain meds were wearing off, but he had something to prove. He set the brakes on the wheelchair, grabbed the crutches, and hefted himself to his one good foot. With a grunt he worked himself away from the chair and one step at a time made it to the porch. How’d he get so weak so fast?

His father carried the wheelchair up and took it into the house. Alexandros followed as his mother held open the door.

“I suppose you didn’t get an elevator installed to the second floor, so either I have to hobble up and down or sleep on the couch.”

Mrs. Sava shook her head. “There is a daybed in the old room you and Rusty used before we added onto the house. You’ll be able to sleep there. If you want a shower, however, you’ll need to use the en-suite in the master bedroom or tackle the stairs.”

“Thanks, Mamá. I’m sure the daybed will be fine. Don’t tell me you painted the room pink though.”

She chuckled. “Go check for yourself. Dinner will be on in an hour, so get some rest or unpack. Your next dose is later.”

Alexandro shook his head. “Are you sure about that?”

“I have it in writing.”

“You’re not forgetting that Maryland is two hours ahead of Colorado, are you? I could have sworn it was time for that med before I ever left the airport.” The screaming from his ankle was making that clear to him.

Pursing her lips, he watched her do the math in her head. “You’re right. I’ll bring you some water and your pill, but I’m not getting up in the middle of the night to do this for you. You’ll need to adjust to mountain time. You’re not in Maryland anymore.”

He wasn’t in South Korea either, where he belonged. He wondered how his unit was doing and hoped they were getting along without him and missing him all at the same time. He hobbled to the old bedroom

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he, Rusty, and his younger brother Kristos had shared until his parents built the house up a story to accommodate their expanding family.

Collapsing on the bed, he bit back a groan at the deep throbbing in his leg from the exertion. Alexos leaned up to take the pill his mother brought him and reclined to wait for the medication to kick in.