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MAX & MILIAN

AN AEGIS NETWORK SHORT STORY

USA Today Bestseller

JEN TALTY

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Book Description

Max Weber preferred animals to humans any day of the week. So, when his K-9 partner Milian goes and finds himself a lady dog friend across the street, Max finds himself uncharted waters.

Both with his dog and with the super sexy Veterinarian that couldn't seem to keep her own pesky little puppy on a leash.

Recently divorced, Chanel Dixon wanted a fresh start for herself, her practice, and her dog. However, her new beginnings didn't include a sexy ex-Navy SEAL with an adorable dog who not only wouldn't go away, but kept brining his owner around, making her feel things she'd been trying to avoid since she'd left her husband.

Only, Max was nothing like her ex and both him and his dog were about to run away with her heart.

Chapter 1

Max pulled up in front of his house in Windermere, Florida, a small town not far from Orlando. He lived in a cluster of homes on Lake Butler, though not the expensive ones right on the lake, but the ones across from the old church that had been turned into a restaurant.

He shifted into reverse and backed into his driveway.

Milian, his dark Labrador mix and K-9 partner, barked at the new neighbors that moved in across the street. He'd seen the truck pull up the other day right before he'd left for his last assignment. And he'd seen the new tenant.

Which he wished he hadn't because he hadn't been able to get her out of his mind.

"Shit," Max mumbled as he stared at a front yard full of puppies. Six of them to be exact along with their very attractive long-haired German shepherd mother. On second glance, she couldn't be that litter's mother, but she was still a very attractive dog. "I didn't know she had animals."

Milian tilted his head and made a noise.

"You're not going over there, so stop looking at me like that."

Milian put his snout on the dashboard, letting out a big puff of air, steaming up the glass.

"Maybe they will be out on our morning run, but you better behave yourself around them, young man." Not that it mattered, his dog had been neutered a long time ago, but Milian had a way with the ladies. He was a chick magnet both in his own species and with humans.

The latter, Max could do without.

He'd learned his lesson and one divorce was enough for him.

Milian yelped and pressed his paws on the door. His tail thumped on the center console.

"Nope. We're not going to say hello to the new neighbors. I'm not a friendly guy

and you know it. Don't you remember the last woman I got involved with? Do you want a repeat of that?"

Milan growled as if he understood.

Just as Max prepared to make a beeline for the front door, his neighbor and co-worker, Ashley, appeared. "Oh boy, are you in trouble." She pointed across the street.

"Milian is a highly trained professional. He'll be able to resist all the adorableness."

"I'm not talking about the puppies. I'm talking about the hot chick with the tan legs that go on forever."

Max growled. "Stop trying to fix me up. I'm not interested."

"Oh, yes, you are. And maybe you can find someone that will last longer than a couple of weeks."

"You're one to talk," Max said. "Now if you'll excuse me. You have a jog to finish, and I've got shit to do, and tell your dad I'll be up this weekend to fix the deck."

"Thanks," Ashley said. "See you later."

"Now it's dinnertime." Max hooked the leash onto Milian's collar, something he wouldn't normally do, but even the best trained dogs could be distracted by cuteness.

Milian whined and whined, but he followed Max into the three-bedroom house that used to be rented by Dylan Sarich's father-in-law, a fellow Aegis Network employee. Dylan had worked for Delta Force, and he had a brother who'd been in the Marines and two other brothers who'd been in the Army. They were good people and Max enjoyed their company.

While at work.

But after?

Oy. They had like a ton of little kids and while Max didn't begrudge any of his buddies a family, he'd given up on that pipe dream the day he'd come home from a grueling mission to find his wife humping the UPS delivery man.

What really sucked about that was he'd resigned from the Navy for his wife and it still wasn't good enough. She hated his choice of careers.

Or maybe she just hated him.

He snagged Milian's dog food and filled his bowl before snatching a beer from the

fridge. He stared out across the street as a woman with long dark hair pulled up in a ponytail bent over and lifted one of the puppies from the pen to show a young girl and her parents.

At least Max knew the little ones would be gone soon. Hopefully his new neighbor wasn't a breeder. But it didn't matter if she was because he wasn't even going to meet her. Nope. Wouldn't even go over and say hello. Not even interested in holding the adorable little creatures before they were sold off or given to the...shit. The little girl and her parents placed the puppy in a crate in their car before waving and driving off.

Shit. He loved puppies and Asher and Griggs, the co-founders of the Aegis Network had given him the green light for more K-9 units and he had the man power, he just needed the dogs.

Going over there was strictly business.

Or at least that's what he was telling himself.

"Looks like you win, Milian. Finish your food. We'll go say hello to the animals. But just the animals. I'm not interested in meeting the lady with the legs that go on forever." No. He was just going to talk to her about possibly getting one of the dogs for the Aegis Network. Or maybe two.

And he'd want male dogs because women, regardless of species, were nothing but trouble. All they did was give you a headache and take your money and try to take your dog.

Milian sat at his feet, staring up at him with a tilted head as if he understood every word Max said.

Max scratched Milian's ears while he pulled out his phone to text his bosses. Might as well make this all professional like.

To cover his bases.

* * *

"One down and five to go." Chanel Dixon plopped herself down on her cheap lawn chair with a glass of wine and took a large gulp. She should have said no when these little bundles of joy showed up at her old office up in Jacksonville, but how could she do that and look at herself in the mirror?

She was a veterinarian for fuck's sake. Her job was to care for animals. She couldn't just leave these poor little souls in hopes someone else would do the right thing. But moving them, even a few hours down the road, to a neighborhood where she knew absolutely no one, and her practice hadn't even gotten off the ground, might be one of the dumbest things she'd ever done. Between having to unpack and get her office set up, she really didn't have time to deal with unloading dogs.

Sasha jumped to attention.

"Sit," Chanel commanded as she tugged on her dog's leash. "Relax." She glanced up and her heart smacked the back of her throat.

A man wearing a pair of stonewashed jeans that fit him like a glove and a black T-shirt tucked neatly into his slacks strolled across the street holding on to one very handsome black lab mix who appeared insanely well-behaved since he didn't leave his owner's side, even when he got close to the puppies, though he did whine a bit.

"Welcome to the neighborhood," the man said. "I live across the street. I saw your moving truck the other day. Looks like you've pretty much got yourself all settled in."

"My stuff is inside. However, I wouldn't say I'm unpacked." Chanel stood, tugging at Sasha's leash. However, her sweet, but ill-behaved oversized baby couldn't sit still. No. The damn one-hundred-pound dog had to jump. Then run in a little circle, tangling Chanel's legs in the rope meant to keep Sasha from acting like a menace to society. "Sasha, sit," Chanel said with her stern voice, but all that did was make Sasha even more excited.

And it riled up the puppies. So much so that the one with the white paws jumped the doggie gate.

"Now look what you've gone and done." Chanel went to set her drink on the table by her chair just as Sasha tugged harder at the leash and twisted Chanel's ankle, pulling her to the side. Her arms flapped in the air, sending her drink in the stranger's face. "Shit," she mumbled, tumbling back into the small pen. The puppies yelped and jumped and nearly licked her to death.

She fell flat on her back and stared at the sky. "I guess that's one way to offer you a drink. Is it any good?"

The man wiped his face and smiled. “I wouldn’t know a good wine if it was tossed in my face.”

“A man with a sense of humor,” she said with a long breath. “Can I interest you in another dog?”

He laughed. “Actually, I’m hoping my boss might be up for taking a couple off your hands.”

“Your boss?” She managed to get to a sitting position. The puppies still climbed all over her, but at least Sasha had calmed down a bit and was currently circling the new neighbor’s dog, who sat next to his owner, not moving a muscle.

Show-off.

The man stretched out his hand and as if she were as light as a feather, pulled her to her feet. “I’m Max. I work for a company that does a lot of work both for the government and for the private sector.” He patted his dog’s head. “We do a lot of highly specialized operations, and I run the K-9 unit. Actually, I am the unit, but we’re looking to expand and that means training new dogs, and my boss is interested in possibly taking two of your puppies.”

She glanced around. “Does your boss live around here too? Because I just put these babies out with a sign down the street about fifteen minutes ago. I haven’t even had the chance to put them up on the internet.”

“No. But I’m the one in charge of building the unit. I literally just hired two men who’ve trained service dogs before. Now I just need the dogs.”

“So, military or police type training?”

“Yes. That level,” he said. “I’m an ex-Navy SEAL. And Milian here is too. We’ve been working together for about ten years.”

She covered her mouth and stifled a laugh. “Really? Max and Milian as in Maximilian?”

“Exactly,” he said with a bright smile. “It suits us.”

His dog yelped but didn’t budge even though all the puppies were going wild trying to climb over the barricade and her dog, Sasha, was sniffing around Milian.

“You do all the training? Where?”

“I’ve set up both an indoor and outdoor field facility where Milian and I keep up with exercises, and I would make sure the environment was safe and secure. What are you asking for these adorable little creatures and are they purebred or mixes? Not that it matters. Honestly, I’d prefer a mix. Milian here is actually a shepherd—”

“Doberman and I suspect a little black Lab as well.”

“That’s what I was told, but we can’t be sure. I found him in an undisclosed area when I was still on active duty. Our government let me train him, and he’s saved my life half a dozen times.”

“Well, these little fellas are rescues, and I’m giving them away, along with providing all the medical services they will need like vaccines, spaying or neutering, that kind of thing for the first few months. And they are mixes. Not exactly sure, but my best guess is lab and shepherd.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how did you come to be taking care of them if you didn’t breed them?”

“I’m a veterinarian, and they showed up on my doorstep right before I moved. I couldn’t just leave them, now could I?”

“No. I guess you couldn’t.” Max leaned over the pen and petted a couple of the puppies. Could you set aside two males for me? If my boss approves, I’ll be picking them up tomorrow.”

“I can do that for you,” she said.

“I didn’t get your name,” he said.

“It’s Chanel.”

“As in perfume, purses, clothing, designer company?” he asked.

“Well, that’s one way of looking at it, but that’s not actually where my name comes from, to be honest. It’s my mother’s maiden name. It’s French.” Way too much information, Chanel. He didn’t need all the detail. He didn’t ask and just because he was standing there, looking at her, it didn’t mean he was interested and even if he was, she wasn’t.

Her divorce had left her more than disillusioned when it came to love.

It didn’t matter that he was not only sexy and a dog lover, he was a man and ex-

military.

He was everything she didn't want.

And more.

"It's pretty," he said. "I should be going before we reach mayhem with the animals. Milian is more than well-behaved, but he can only be expected to be so good when he's not on duty."

"And I'm shocked my beasts aren't going apeshit," she said. "Just let me know as soon as you can. I need to have these puppies off-loaded by next week when I open the clinic."

"I'll know by tomorrow," Max said. "If you need anything, let me know. You can tell I'm home because my Jeep will be under the carport."

"You might regret offering that."

He laughed. "Have a nice night." He licked his finger. "And next time, I'll take a beer."

Chapter 2

Crash!

Thud!

Bang!

“Are you kidding me?” Max jumped to his feet. “No. Milian. Come.” But for the third time in ten days, his well-trained dog didn’t listen. Nope. Milian took off around the corner, skidding to a stop and doing the happy dance with Sasha. “How the hell did you get... You broke my fence, you sneaky beast you.”

“Sasha!”

“Back here.” Max pulled open his gate that barely hung together on its hinges thanks to the massive dog.

“She chewed right through the leash. My invisible fence guy doesn’t come until next week. I’m so sorry.”

Max picked up a stick and tossed it across his side yard. He had one of the best lots on the street, but only because it was technically two, and when Max bought the place a few months ago, he always thought he’d knock the place down and build a big house and sell it for a profit.

That was until he lived here for a week and fell in love with the little town. If he did anything now, it would be to just remodel and maybe expand on what he already had.

Milian snagged the stick this time, but Sasha wasn’t going to give up without a playful fight.

“I will pay to have that fixed.” Chanel wiggled the door. “Sasha acts like she’s a male dog and yours is the one in heat.”

“Milian isn’t behaving well either.” In all the years Max had been working with Milian and other K-9s, he’d only seen one other dog go off the deep end, and that had been Alley.

First, who named their dog Alley?

But second, that girl just fell head over heels for Banister, and they became like stupid teenagers whenever they were within sniffing distance. They were worse than humans falling in love for the first time.

“He’s a much better dog than mine. But I didn’t get her until she was a year old. Poor girl had been found tied up, starving, and beaten. Believe it or not, she used to be afraid of her own shadow.”

“That’s a terrible story, but not much different than Milian’s. I found him in a minefield. Actually, he found me. Saved my damn life. We think he’d already had some training, by the enemy, but whoever owned him had been abusing the hell out of him, and it took a lot of love to get him to completely trust me.” He latched the fence before it fell off its hinges. “Can I get you a drink? I’ve got beer, soda, water, tea, but no wine.”

“Beer sounds great. If you don’t mind.”

“As long as you don’t spill this one on me, then I don’t mind at all.” He jogged into his back porch where he kept a small beverage cooler and snagged a couple of cold ones and paused to mentally give himself a good lecture, reminding himself he was on sabbatical from talking with women.

He wasn’t even supposed to be really looking.

He stepped outside and handed her an open longneck. He should have put it in a glass, but maybe she’d see what a rude asshole he was, just like his ex-wife had told the world, and Chanel would quietly excuse herself and stop sending her dog over.

Because that’s what she had to be doing.

And he was falling for it.

“How are the puppies? I haven’t heard from your buddies, so I assume they are doing well enough, though I do have an appointment for them on the books next week. I hope you don’t plan on missing it.”

“Oh. They will be there as part of the agreement. I told you we’d keep all the vet stuff with you. It’s only fair.” He bent over and took the stick that Milian dropped at his feet. “Sit. Stay.” He held up his hand. “You too, Sasha.” He knelt by the excited dog and looped his finger in her collar. “Sit. Sit.”

She wiggled her butt before doing as he commanded.

“Now. You’re going to stay.”

“No. She’s not. When it comes to fetch, she knows only two speeds. Run. And run faster.”

“For a vet, you’re not very patient.” He tapped Milian’s nose with the piece of wood and repeated the motion to Sasha. “Stay.” He made eye contact before hurling the stick across the yard.

Milian whined.

Sasha jumped to her feet.

“No. Stay,” Max commanded again.

Sasha barked.

“Good girl. Now go fetch.” He smacked her little butt.

“She was going to run in about two seconds anyway.” Chanel pressed her beer to her lips and let the bubbly liquid flow into her mouth.

It took every ounce of energy Max had not to rip his gaze away from the beautiful lady standing in his backyard wearing a pair of loose-fitting jean shorts that barely covered her rounded ass and a white button-down shirt, untucked, that showed off a bit too much cleavage. Her long hair curled down around her shoulders, and the sun bounced off the highlights, making it shine.

“She’ll learn if you keep at it with her.”

“It’s funny. I was always a cat person. I’ve got three of them. And then this little beast came into my life and I just couldn’t give her away. First and probably last dog I’ll own.”

“How does she get along with the cats?” Why the fuck was he making small talk? Let her take her damn dog home and be done with it.

“She loves the cats, but let’s just say all the kittens find Sasha to be a little bit on the annoying side. It can be a hostile environment and Sasha is too stupid to even know.”

“Maybe that’s why she comes over here.” Max laughed. “Or maybe she’s in love.” He shook his head, watching the two dogs plop themselves down on the grass in front of the lounge chairs and lay their heads on one another as if they were old lovers. “You’re a bad influence on Milian, you know that?” He wagged his finger.

“Hey. Maybe it’s your dog that—oh, who am I kidding.” She made herself comfortable. “You’re going to have to give me some pointers because I’m going to go broke fixing your fence, and I can’t keep chasing her over here.”

“Well, we’ll just have to do some scheduled playdates, and I can work with her a little, but you’re going to have to follow up with the training.”

“Now you sound like me. I tell my patient’s owners all the time when they have pets with behavioral issues, especially dogs, that consistency is key, and that is the one thing I’ve never been able to give Sasha, and since the divorce and the move, well, I’m lucky she hasn’t chewed through all my shoes. Yet.” Chanel lifted her foot and showed off a pair of slobbered on boat shoes. “These were my favorites. Now I just wear them around the house.”

“When I first got Milian, he did the same thing, and I hate to admit it, but he started doing it again when we retired a few months ago and moved here. However, I think I’ve finally broken him of the habit.” Max sat across from Chanel, leaning forward slightly. He pushed his shades up on top of his head so he could get a closer look at her pale-blue eyes. “How long have you been divorced?”

“It just became final a couple of weeks ago. I was separated for a year.” She waved her hand. “I want to circle back to how you stopped Milian from chewing on shit, and I find it hard to believe that that dog over there ever did a bad thing in his life.”

As if on cue, Milian dropped his head to the floor and covered his snout with his paws as if he were guilty of some crime.

“I don’t have to tell you, a doctor of animals, that changes to a pet’s environment will cause them stress and anxiety and they will resort to nervous habits. When my wife left, Milian started taking all my shoes and putting them in the toilet.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. That’s a weird one.”

“Not when you consider my ex put a few of my favorite things in the toilet as she was screaming at me, calling me names, and then she left for good. I have no idea what Milian was thinking because he didn’t really like my wife, but we moved a few months later and he would just chew on shoes in the middle of the night and then drop them in the toilet. All I did was make it hard for him to get my shoes and reward him on the

mornings he'd behaved."

"So, how long have you been a member of the exes' club?"

"Almost a year. It's funny. She begged me to leave the military, so I did. Then she left me because I took a job with the Aegis Network and that was too much like the military for her. I'm just not cut out to be a salesman or have some boring desk job, and she decided she couldn't be married to someone who carried a gun."

"I'm sorry," Chanel said. "My ex-husband left me because he said I loved animals more than I did him, which might have been true." She raised her beer and took a long sip. "Of course, he was fucking one of the lawyers he worked with, so I'd say he was the one who had commitment issues, not me."

"I'd say so." Max leaned back on the lounge chair. *Don't do it. Don't do it.* He'd be insane if he didn't ask her to leave the second she finished her drink. She wasn't the kind of woman who did one-night stands nor could they ever be friends with benefits.

Friends. Yes.

But at this point, nothing sexual could happen without making their neighborly relationship awkward when it ended and he couldn't have that, not when he hoped to expand the K-9 unit of the Aegis Network to a team of six and he needed her to be the official veterinarian for all of the animals.

"Since our dogs aren't going to want to separate any time soon, care to join me for dinner tonight? I have a huge steak I was going to grill and it's too big for one person." He dropped his head back and closed his eyes, letting out a short breath, preparing himself for rejection.

"Just steak? Nothing else?"

He chuckled. "I might have some vegetables in the fridge, but it's questionable how fresh they are. I do know I have bread."

"All right. I'll stay on one condition."

"What's that?"

"You let me bring over a bottle of wine and the salad I was going to eat," Chanel said.

"It's a deal." He peeked open one eye.

She jumped to her feet. “Can I leave Sasha here while I go get my contribution?”

“Of course.” He stood, closing the gap between them. He reached out, fanning her cheek with his thumb and gazed into her soft-blue eyes. He was in more trouble than when Milian stared up him with his sad, dark orbs after they both nearly got blown to bits the first day they met. “Your ex-husband was a fool to cheat on you.”

“Thanks for saying that, but you didn’t have to live with me, and he was right. I cared more about the animals than I did him.”

He held her chin with his thumb and forefinger. “Did that happen before or after he mentally checked out of your marriage because he was sleeping with someone else?” He cocked his brow. “My ex said I cared more about my job and nearly dying than her. And then of course the dog. She always said I used my career to stay emotionally withdrawn, and she was right. I checked out before we even got married because she manipulated me in the first place.”

“How?”

“We got married because she was pregnant. She lost the baby when I was deployed, and she’s never forgiven me for being away when that happened.”

“Could you have changed your orders?”

“No. But she didn’t understand that. And then Milian came home with me, and I dived into training him and then going on one mission after the next, avoiding her and all the shit that came with being married until I up and got her pregnant again. This time she carried for almost twelve weeks, and I was right by her side when she miscarried since I’d left the military for her. But it wasn’t good enough. We were done. She had actually been talking to a lawyer before she found out about the baby.”

“I’m so sorry.” Chanel reached up and palmed his cheek. “When I come back, no more talking about exes. Deal?”

“Promise.” He leaned in and brushed his lips over her mouth. She tasted like sweet cantaloupe with a drizzle of chocolate.

A low moan rumbled from the back of his throat. He rested his hands on her full hips, tugging her closer. In the distance, the whimper of dogs tickled his ears.

This was a mistake.

A big one.

One he couldn't stop if he tried.

* * *

Chanel stood on the back porch with her head hammering in her chest. It pounded so hard she thought it might bounce right out of her body and roll to the ground. "Thank you for a lovely evening."

"The pleasure was all mine."

She blinked. And then did it a second time. What she should be doing was moving her legs as fast as they would take her across the street and back into her home. This was a fresh start for her, and it was all about doing it on her own. Being independent. She didn't need a man in her life.

Nope.

That would be a complication she could do without.

"Come on, Sasha," she said softly and without any conviction.

The dog's ears twitched, but she didn't budge.

Max took Chanel's hands and rested them on his shoulders. He heaved her to his chest. "Milian. Inside. Now." He snapped his fingers, and both dogs jumped. He reached around Chanel and pulled open the door. "After you."

"What? You're not going to bark orders at me?" She swallowed. Even if he did, she wouldn't be offended. And she'd do it.

He laughed. "I probably should have asked you first, but—"

"I would have said no, but my legs wouldn't have moved me across the street," she whispered. "I think we have a big problem here because I have a few rules we're about to break."

"Yeah? What are those?"

"I don't date neighbors. Patient owners. Or men named Max."

"Well, at least you're only breaking two of them because my real name isn't Max. It's Maxwell."

"Even worse."

He pressed her against the wall by the staircase. His warm tongue slipped between

her lips, finding every crevice inside her mouth. His hands massaged her back muscles, leaving hot impressions that sent her mind down the path of no return.

She flattened her hand on the center of his chest. Her breathing had become erratic. “I’m not looking to get into a relationship with anyone. As a matter of fact, I’m supposed to be staying away from men. If anything were to happen, it wouldn’t happen a second time.”

He ran his thumb over her lower lip. “I don’t think once will be enough for either of us, but I’m with you on the *no long-term commitment* thing. I don’t do them anymore and I never will. But I also don’t sleep around or with more than one person at a time, so if we do this, for however long we enjoy the other’s company—”

“Oh, shut up. I get it. Now let’s get on with it.” She glanced over her shoulder. “I take it this place is no different than my house and the master bedroom is upstairs?”

He shook his head. “No. First thing I did when I moved in was put a big master bedroom and bath down here.” He curled his fingers around her hand and tugged her through the family and to the back side of the kitchen where he’d just finished the addition about three weeks before she’d moved in. The room had already been part of the house, but it was more of a den or office. He kicked out a few walls and made it a masterpiece.

“Oh. My. God.” She stopped dead in her tracks in the middle of the room. She ran her finger over the big king-sized bed. “Is that the bathroom over there?”

“And walk-in closet that I don’t have anything in because I have like five outfits.”

She laughed. “May I?”

“Please.”

Still holding his hand, she raced into the bathroom. “Holy crow, this is gorgeous. And that tub. It’s huge. And it’s so white and clean.” She ran her fingers across the granite vanity. “I don’t have a bathtub. Not even in the second bathroom.”

“I probably shouldn’t tell you this then.”

She snapped her gaze in his direction. “You’ve never used it?”

“Not once,” he said. “But you’re welcome to use it if you’d like.”

“Oh. I’m going to take you up on that one.” There was nothing she’d like more than

to soak in a hot bubble bath with a glass of wine and a good book.

And maybe a sexy guy to wash her back.

Maybe.

She fiddled with the hem on her shirt. “Could I come over tomorrow night? Say around eight or nine for my bath?” She tossed the cotton piece of clothing to the floor before wiggling out of her jean shorts.

He groaned. “Only if I get to hand you a towel when you’re done.” He inched closer, tracing a path across the top of her breast with his index finger. “Or better yet, feed you grapes and cheese during your bath.”

“Yes, to all of the above.” She reached behind her back and unclasped her bra. “For the record, I don’t normally do things like this.”

“Nor do I,” he said, pressing his lips against her neck. “This can’t go anywhere. We’re just having a little fun.”

“While it lasts.”

He set his shit on the vanity and slipped out of his slacks. “We’re probably making a huge mistake.”

“Massive. Perhaps bigger than both our failed marriages combined.” She slipped her fingers into the elastic of his boxers.

He hissed.

“You’re definitely a better choice. You’re prettier.” He kissed her cheek. “Sweeter.” His lips brushed over her chin. “And kinder.” He lifted her breast with his hand and took her nipple in his mouth, swirling it with his tongue.

She dropped her head back and closed her eyes, getting lost in the moment. It had been months since she’d been with a man. Months since she allowed herself to feel like a whole woman. Her therapist had encouraged her to start getting out there again, but Chanel didn’t think she was ready. Hell, she didn’t think she’d ever be able to open her heart up to love.

But sex?

Her body demanded it. Her mind had become obsessed with it, and right now, it’s all she cared about.

He guided her into the bedroom, taking his time kissing every inch of her body. She'd never been with anyone so generous. It was as if his release was inconsequential and hers was what would rock the world.

Her orgasm came at the most unexpected moment. It came hard. And fast. She gripped his shoulders and wrapped her legs around his strong body. Grinding with his movements, she let each wave of her climax take her for the most wild ride and she hoped it would never end.

He swelled, holding her steady, spilling his release deep. He groaned. "Chanel," he whispered, kissing her cheek. He buried his face in her neck.

She accepted his weight, running her fingers up and down his back, taking in a few deep breaths.

Rolling to his side, he pulled the covers over their bodies.

"You're going to hate me, but I'm going to have to sneak out soon," she said.

"Why? I might not be looking for a relationship, but I'm not an asshole. You're welcome to spend the night." He kissed her forehead. "I like cuddling."

She snuggled in and let out a long breath. "So do I, but I've got three cats I need to take care of and I really don't want Sasha getting used to sleeping here."

"Good point. Next time we sleep at your place. My dog is used to being uprooted all the time."

She raised her brow.

"Because of my job. Not because I sleep around." He batted her nose. "But do you have to leave this second?"

"No, but within the hour. I do also have to work in the morning." She rested her head on his chest. It was going to be hard not to fall in love with him. But even if she did, she wouldn't ever tell him because he had heartache written all over him and his adorable dog.

Chapter 3

Max finished the last of the dishes. He put the plates back in the cupboard and snagged two beers from the fridge before stepping back out onto the back porch.

For five straight weeks Max slipped between Chanel's bed and his house, sneaking across the street like a common criminal. Three times he'd gotten caught by the school bus crossing guard and twice by his next-door neighbor. Not that it mattered, except Sally, his neighbor, was good friends with one of his co-workers' wives and it caused him a fair amount of grief at work.

He could handle the teasing, no problem.

However, he couldn't cope with the reality that pelted his brain or filled his heart.

He also owed no one an explanation except he could no longer think straight.

And neither could his dog.

Talk about being distracted. While Milian performed just fine on the job, the second they got in the car to drive home, he started to act all squirrely. He'd get antsy in the car. He'd look out the window and pant. He'd dance in the front seat, doing a little circle instead of sitting still.

There was no controlling him once they turned onto the street. He had to be with Sasha the moment they pulled into the driveway, and Sasha went nuts and wouldn't stop barking the second they parked. She would run in a circle in her pen until he and Chanel let the two dogs play. On the few nights they chose to ignore each other, like the last three or four, his dog was miserable. Milian actually moped about the house as if his life were over. One night, he actually wouldn't eat. Not even a T-bone steak that Max prepared special. Real fucking human food and the damned dog passed just because he couldn't play fetch with the bitch across the street.

Fucking ridiculous.

Well, he wouldn't do it tonight. No. He would ask for some dignity. Some respect.

“Why don't you put some food out for the cats and spend the night at my place?”

“I was thinking that maybe our fun should come to an end.” She took the cold beverage and sipped.

“That came out of the blue.” The unexpected predictable breakup. Though usually he was the one spearheading the end of a good thing. A wave of insecurity flushed through his system, something he didn’t welcome.

“Not really,” she said. “We’ve both been busy lately and haven’t really seen a lot of each other in the last week, and we both know it’s better to end these things before it gets weird or ugly.”

“Yes. I totally agree, but it’s not even a little bit awkward yet.” His heart dropped to his stomach. It twisted and churned, beating in uneven painful bursts. He’d had a few short-term flings dump him before and they always stung.

But they *never* hurt.

This felt like someone took an ice pick and stabbed him in both eyes and he couldn’t explain the odd sensation.

“Are you sure you want to call it quits?” he asked, hoping he didn’t sound so desperate. “I’m still having fun; aren’t you?”

She stood and smiled. “I am. Perhaps a little too much.” She raised her fingers to her mouth and blew.

Sasha came running.

“This is becoming a little too easy. A little too comfortable. It feels like a relationship and I just can’t go there right now. I’m sorry. I should have said all this before dinner.”

He ran his hand up and down her forearm. “Don’t be silly. You still had to eat, and I had enough food to feed half the block. Besides, just because we won’t be sharing a bed doesn’t mean we can’t be friends.”

“Do you think we can transition into that role without—”

He pressed his fingers against her lips. “We’ve always been friends who happen to have great sex. Now we’ll be friends who every once in a while blush over remembering when you were sitting in that chair and had your legs over my shoulders and—”

“I get the picture.” Her cheeks turned bright red, which was the desired effect.

“I don’t have a lot of self-respect when it comes to you, so if you change your mind and want to renegotiate the terms of our friendship, you could probably twist my arm.”

“I have to admit, I was worried this might turn into a fight,” she said, hooking the leash onto Sasha’s collar.

“We’re going to still have to get the dogs together.” Wow. He was going to resort to using their pets to work his magic to keep Chanel in his life.

And in his bed.

In a more permanent fashion.

A band of perspiration beaded across his forehead. The thought of being in a relationship terrified him, but the idea of spending a single day without Chanel made his skin prickle.

“I’m happy to take Milian on my runs, and I’m sure you’ll be happy to play fetch in the evenings.”

“While you use my bathtub?”

She patted his shoulder. “Sadly, for me, because of the change in our defined relationship, I think those days are over.”

“You can use it whenever you want, and I promise I’ll do my best to forget every time I took advantage of you in there.”

“Well, now I’ll never forget, and on that note, I best be going. Thanks for dinner. I’ll see you around the block.”

Oh. She’d be seeing him alright because he wasn’t going to let her go that easily.

Chapter 4

Chanel fiddled with the label on her beer bottle. The condensation beaded down the glass, dripping off the bottom like the final drops of water falling from a leaking faucet. She almost didn't come to the block party. She didn't really know anyone, but she figured if she wanted to have friends in the neighborhood, this would be the best way to make them.

Only, she found herself sitting alone, not even with her dog, staring at Max while Sasha plopped herself at his feet with Milian and another woman juggled her boobies under Max's nose. His fucking eyes nearly bulged right out of his head he couldn't tear his gaze away.

Jerk.

Why did it have to be so easy for him to move on? Couldn't he at least pretend he cared for her more than as just a fuck buddy? Well, she wasn't going to let him believe it bothered her for a single second. She snagged a couple of cold brews from the cooler and strolled as if she didn't have a care in the world to the center of the street where Max had made himself comfortable.

"Well, hello there, stranger," he said.

She handed him the longneck. "I'm sorry. I didn't see your friend here, or I would have gotten her one."

Ashley, the single woman who lived up the street and seemed to have the hots for Max and was always hanging around, leaned against the picnic table.

Chanel had only met Ashley two or three times. Once when she'd first moved in and then twice since Chanel and Max had called it off, and those last two encounters had been awkward and terse to say the least.

"I'm not a beer drinker anyway. Too many carbs," Ashley said. "Now, those new beer spritzers. I'll do one of those. I think maybe I have a few in the fridge in my garage. Max, would you be a sweetie and go get me one?" Ashley had to be fucking kidding. Did

she actually believe that Max would go racing off to find her a damn beverage?

Not.

“I actually packed you up a few. I stuck them in my cooler.”

“You’re the fucking best.” Ashley looked inside the beverage container and found what she was looking for along with a couple of cheese sticks. “What would I do without you?”

“You’d go hungry, that’s for sure.” Max laughed.

Chanel sat down at the picnic table, using her foot to rub the belly of her dog. “For the record, those are my spritzers.” What the hell was Max doing? Did he seriously have to go and sleep with someone who lived on the same fucking block?

“I wondered why you had them. They so aren’t your drink,” Ashley said. “But since you dragged me to this thing, I was grateful.”

“You don’t like coming to neighborhood parties?” Chanel asked.

“I try to avoid them. I’m not the most social. Max knows that.” Ashley tapped her metal can to Max’s glass bottle. “I best go find my dad.” Ashley planted a hand on her hip, which made her boobs jump up and down. “Max, you can back out if you want to.” She held up her hand. “Really. I won’t hold it against you, though I can’t speak for my father.” She turned on her heel and headed up the road.

“I see you got yourself a new conquest.”

He burst out laughing. “Is that what you think?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“Me and Ashley? That’s fucking hilarious. Wait until I tell her you said that.” Max took a chug of his beer. “She and I are just friends.”

“Like you and I were.”

“You’ve made up your mind and no matter what I say, you’re not going to change it.” He let out a long breath, checking his watch. “I’m going to have to head out soon. We’ve got a big training session with the dogs.”

“How are the babies?” she asked. She told herself the only thing she really missed about Max was hearing and seeing the K-9 training videos. She had to admit, Max had to be one of the best dog trainers she’d ever come across in all her years as an animal lover.

He'd done wonders with her own dog and had given her so many interesting tips and tricks to pass on to her clients.

Max was truly a dog whisperer, and she wished he would give dog training classes to all of her clients, something she'd proposed a million times and he'd agreed to give free seminars whenever he could, but nothing on a regular salaried basis.

All she wanted was a way to keep him close because the longer they went without being intimate, the less friendly they became, a dynamic she wanted to correct.

"They're doing great. My bosses are very pleased, and I'm hoping next year I can add two more to the team."

"That's excellent. Let me know if you want me to be on the lookout for any rescue animals."

"I will." He leaned forward on the picnic table. "How have you been? Other than sending Sasha over to play, I don't see you much. I miss our long talks while you soak in the tub."

She arched a brow. "Your new friend doesn't let you stare while she soaks?"

"I told you. Ashley and I are just friends. There are no benefits. Really." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't know why you're making this so difficult. I've missed you and I think my texts and phone calls prove that."

"And yet I see you out here with Ashley all the time."

"Maybe if you'd listen to what I keep saying about her and how I know her, you'd get it." He shrugged. "But you don't, so I give up."

A long silence filled the air. She knew Ashley worked for the same company and that they had known each other for a few years. Except he hadn't spent much time with Ashley outside of work until after Chanel had broken up with him and that made her question his current denial.

"How goes things with the clinic? When I was there the other day, your assistant said you were out of the office and wouldn't be back. Some emergency. Is everything okay?"

She shouldn't tell Max what was going on, but she couldn't bite her tongue if she tried. "My asshole ex-husband seems to think he should have a piece of my new

business.”

“No fucking way.”

“He’s trying to start legal proceedings and everything.” Slipping back into easy conversation with Max was the last thing Chanel wanted, but it was everything she craved. Max didn’t judge or give his opinion on everything.

Even when he had one.

Generally, Max opened his arms and his heart, letting her purge the toxins of her day. It didn’t matter how trivial it seemed, Max gave her all the ear time she needed and more.

“What did your lawyer say?” Max asked.

“My ex-husband doesn’t have a leg to stand on. He has no grounds, but him and his lawyer will make waves anyway because they can, which means my business is now under investigation.”

“Any idea what triggered this last round of attacks?”

She glanced over her beer. “He lost his job.”

“Well, that says it all.”

“I’m done supporting him.” She should shut her mouth. Max might be good at pretending to care, but she shouldn’t have to anymore. “I’ve had to rebuild my entire life and I barely have two pennies to rub together anymore. I’m not letting him have a piece of what I’ve worked so hard to salvage.”

Max reached out and took her chin between his thumb and forefinger. “As you shouldn’t. Stick to your guns on this one. It’s not your fault your ex can’t get his shit together. Focus on yourself for a change. You deserve it.”

She curled her fingers around his wrist. “Thanks.”

He stood and leaned over, kissing her forehead. “You’re a good person, Chanel. Don’t let your ex get inside your head and fill it with all that negative bullshit he spewed for so long.”

“I’m working on it.”

“Good,” Max said. “And for the record, there is nothing going on between me and Ashley.”

“Okay.”

“I was hoping you could help me find her father a good dog we can train to be a service dog.”

“I can do that,” Chanel said. For about ten seconds, Chanel thought about inviting Max over when the evening festivities were over, but then decided better of it when he took off running to help Ashley with her father, who was in a wheelchair.

Max glanced over his shoulder. “I’ll call you later, okay?”

She waved and nodded, but she wouldn’t answer. By the way Ashley and Max currently interacted, if they weren’t involved, they would be soon.

Chapter 5

“I know. I know.” Chanel scratched Sasha’s head. Poor dog had been pouting ever since Chanel had walked through the front door after a long day at the office where she spent all her time thinking about Max.

He’s wormed his way into her dreams as well as every waking second of her day. She couldn’t even blink and not picture him and his stupid dog.

How the hell did she allow herself to fall in love with her neighbor? She had more control over her emotions than that, and she certainly didn’t subscribe to the idiotic ideal that humans couldn’t choose who they loved. They absolutely could, if they put their mind to it. The only problem with that concept was it was ten times harder to make yourself fall out of love.

If you never tasted the rich, sweet flavor of chocolate, you’d have no idea how much you craved it every time you poured yourself a glass of white wine. You can’t miss what you never had.

And she wished she’d never had Max.

She stared out the front window and watched as he backed into his carport.

Sasha raced to the front door, barking wildly as she’d done for the last few days.

“Sorry, girl. We’re not going outside right now.” When they did, it would be out the back and through the path between the houses to the other side of the neighborhood.

Two of her cats pounced on Sasha. Normally, the banter would help Sasha take her mind off not seeing Milian anymore, but not this time. No matter what the cats did, Sasha wasn’t interested.

Ashley jogged up the street wearing her cute little jogging suit. She had the nerve to wave to Max before knocking on Chanel’s front door.

“Shit,” Chanel mumbled. “Go to your den.” Chanel pointed to the crate by the stairs.

Sasha whined, but did as she was told.

Chanel sucked in a deep breath and pulled open the door with a big smile. “Hi, Ashley. How are you?”

“I’m doing great, thanks for asking.” Ashley tucked a single strand of hair behind her ear. “I wanted to thank you for helping me with the service dog particulars.”

“It’s my pleasure.” Chanel eyed Max, who opened his back gate, but his dog didn’t budge. Nope. Milian barked, which made Sasha jump in her crate.

“Stay,” Chanel said. “Was there anything else? I’ve got a lot of work I need to do tonight.”

“This is none of my business, but it appears your dog is dying to go play with Mi—”

“Don’t say his name,” Chanel said. “Or mine just goes nuts.”

“It seems kind of cruel to keep them apart when they really like each other so much,” Ashley said. “Kind of like you and Max.”

“Excuse me?” Chanel blinked.

“He’s miserable ever since the two of you broke up, and he’s going about trying to get you back all wrong.” Ashley shook her head. “Well, so much for me being vague with my comments.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Chanel’s pulse soared. No way could she be hearing this correctly. “You’re not making any sense.”

“Oh, please. You know Max has it bad for you and you’re tripping hard for him, so why are the two of you playing this stupid middle school game?”

“I’m still not following.”

“Basically, go tell him you want to start taking baths in his tub again so he stops moping around the office. The two of you are perfect for each other,” Ashley said. “I’ve got to go finish my run, but really, I’ve never seen Max this head over heels for a girl before.”

Chanel opened her mouth to explain to Ashley how wrong she was, but no words tumbled out.

“Do you like Max?”

Chanel nodded.

“Then go get him.” Ashley stuffed her pod things into her ears and jogged up the street.

“Come on, girl. Let’s go out back and grill us some hamburgers and bring them over to Max for a peace offering.”

Sasha yelped, but followed her through the kitchen.

Chanel snagged a couple of frozen turkey patties from the freezer along with everything else she needed, only the buns had been pushed back on the top shelf of the pantry. All she needed was her favorite little step stool she kept tucked neatly in the broom closet. She’d bought the cute contraption because it exactly matched in color her coral barn door.

Unfolding it, she fiddled with the latch. For some reason, the metal plate wouldn’t stay fastened over the pin sticking out. Well, it shouldn’t matter. She’d only be on the second rung of the stool and only for a second. She set it down and gave it a good rattle.

It held steady.

“Here goes nothing.” Putting one foot on the step, she grabbed the counter for support, only the stool crumbled in a second, and Chanel’s ankle twisted, getting tangled in the metal. “Shit.” Her backside hit the tile floor, followed by the back of her head. She groaned.

A loud snap filled the air.

A sharp pain ricocheted from her foot, up her leg, zigging across her stomach, and landing in her brain with the full force of having a house collapse on top of her body.

She blinked, but the darkness wouldn’t go away.

It replaced what light and colors were left in her vision.

Sasha barked once. And then a second time, only Chanel could barely hear her dog. She reached out, trying to find Sasha’s collar, but found air instead.

A wave of nausea took over her mind, making it impossible to concentrate on anything. The sound of Sasha crashing through the front door smacked her ears just before everything went black.

* * *

Crash!

Thud!

“Looks like your girlfriend is back.” Max whistled once, sharp, and Sasha was by his side in two seconds. But she didn’t wait for him to get to her level and give her a little love. Nope. She raced back to the front of the house and started barking like crazy.

“What’s gotten into you, girl?” Max strolled to the front yard.

Sasha had raced across the street and jumped at the front door before returning to his side, scratching at his leg.

“Did something happen to Chanel?” He didn’t wait for an answer a dog couldn’t give with words but had already done so with action.

Max jogged across the street with his heart thumping out of control, but he did his best to squelch it. Now wasn’t the time to lose his cool. He followed Sasha to the back of the house. The kitchen screen door was all broken and torn. Max suspected that was because Sasha had jumped right through the center of it.

“Chanel? Are you in here?” No sooner did the words leave his lips than he saw Chanel crumpled up on the floor, knocked out cold, with her foot twisted up in the metal step stool.

He pulled out his cell.

“Nine-one-one. What’s your emergency?” the operator asked.

“I’ve got a Caucasian woman. Thirty-eight years of age. Looks as though she might have fallen and hit her head along with a potentially broken ankle. I don’t see any open wounds. No blood.” He dropped to his knees and gently pressed his fingers to her neck. “Strong pulse.”

“Who am I speaking with?”

“The name is Maxwell Webber. I’m a retired Navy SEAL.” He set his phone to speaker, placing it on the counter. He tapped Chanel’s cheek gently. “Chanel. Come on. Wake up.”

She groaned.

“Did you witness the accident, sir?”

“No.” He continued to try to rouse her. “That’s it. Open your eyes, Chanel.”

Her long thick lashes fluttered over soft-blue eyes.

Quickly, he assessed her ankle. The skin had turned a blackish-blue already and the injured area had become swollen to the touch. Based on the angle of her foot and the way it flopped, she most definitely broke it. He jumped to his feet and made a protective barrier around her leg and placed a bag of ice over a towel, gently resting it on her skin. He cradled her head in his lap. “She’s coming to.” He snapped his fingers. “Go. Wait. Bring back.” He nodded to Milian. “I have a service dog who will be sitting in the front yard waiting to take the first responders back to the kitchen where I’m tending to the patient.”

“I’ll let them know,” the dispatcher said.

“Max?” Chanel asked with a shaky voice. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to rescue you.” He kissed her forehead. “Looks like you fell.”

She shifted and groaned, bending at the waist and reaching for her bad ankle.

“What the hell?”

“You might have broken it,” he said calmly. “When you fell off that contraption. What the hell were you doing anyway?”

“I was just getting down the buns for dinner.” She pushed her hair from her face.

“How many times have I told you that your little stool is dangerous and you should get a new one?”

“You can save the lecture. My fucking ankle is killing me and my head is pounding. I feel sick to my stomach.”

“Vomiting isn’t uncommon for a concussion, but try to give me some warning, okay? I’m not a fan of having anyone lose their cookies in my lap, even my girlfriend.” He threaded his fingers through her hair, careful not to tug too hard. “The ambulance should be here in a few minutes.”

Sasha rested her snout on Chanel’s shoulder.

Max patted her head. “You’ve got yourself a good dog here, even if she did break my fence again.”

“What do you mean?” Chanel asked.

“When Sasha came—”

“No. You said girlfriend. What did you mean by your girlfriend?”

He leaned over and pressed his lips against her mouth. “I should have never let you break up with me to begin with. I’ve been miserable ever since.”

“We were never an item.”

“Yes, we were,” he said, fanning her face. “And I want to get back together, only I want more. I want to take you to the company picnic next week. I want you to spend the night at my house, every night. Hell. I think you and your dog and cats should move in with me. We all belong together.”

Sirens sounded in the distance.

Milian barked twice.

“I think a woman in my condition shouldn’t be making any rash decisions.”

“I’m not going to let you off the hook that easily,” Max said. “Because I love you, Chanel.”

“Good.” Chanel reached up and palmed his cheek. “I love you too. And I think a concussion is going to need a lifetime supply of baths, at the very least.”

Thank you for taking the time to read *Max & Milian*. For more information on the Aegis Network, please check out the SARICH BROTHERS series.

About the Author

Jen Talty is a USA Today Bestselling Author of Contemporary Romance, Romantic Suspense, and Paranormal Romance. In the fall of 2020, a short story of hers was selected and featured in a 1001 Dark Knights Anthology. She is currently contracted to write in the *With Me* series by Kristen Proby with Lady Boss Press as well as Susan Stoker's *Special Forces: Operation Alpha* and Elle James's *Brotherhood Protectors*.

Regardless of the genre, her goal is to take you on a ride that will leave you floating under the sun with warmth in your heart. She writes stories about broken heroes and heroines who aren't necessarily looking for romance, but in the end, they find the kind of love books are written about :).

She first started writing while carting her kids to one hockey rink after the other, averaging 170 games per year between 3 kids in 2 countries and 5 states. Her first book, *IN TWO WEEKS* was originally published in 2007. In 2010 she helped form a publishing company (Cool Gus Publishing) with NY Times Bestselling Author Bob Mayer where she ran the technical side of the business through 2016.

Jen is currently enjoying the next phase of her life...the empty NESTER! She and her husband reside in Jupiter, Florida.

Grab a glass of vino, kick back, relax, and let the romance roll in...

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