

Heir Force: A Military Inspirational Romance Novel

By Michelle Connell

Chapter 1

Kate Langston sat next to John Kern, apprehension on her face. Both wore the United States Air Force uniform: black t-shirts, camouflage pants, black boots. They sat on a lumpy cushion on the donated castaway sofa, in the lounge of building 755, the Security Forces Building. Kate and her boyfriend were currently stationed at Scott Air Force Base Illinois, about twenty miles east of St. Louis, Missouri.

Kate didn't like this situation, but felt helpless. Everything was out of her control and she didn't like it one bit. She should be used to it by now, having lived the Air Force life for the past ten years. Her time, her wishes, and her desires were not her own.

"Just put one foot in front of the other, Kate. You'll be fine." John turned toward Kate, his blue eyes pleading.

"Ugh--you know how Ruth is. She'll make my life miserable." Ruth Vandervort was her enemy in the office and almost everyone else's also. She was rude, abrupt and sometimes downright cruel. It didn't matter that she previously dated John, however brief it was.

“Kate, just carry on. Don’t worry about her.” John started to say more, but changed his mind.

Kate leaned her head on John’s shoulder, not caring about PDA and all that. “I don’t want you to go.” She tried to swallow the lump in her throat, not knowing where it came from or why she was feeling like this.

What worried her so much this time? It wasn’t like either of them had never been gone on a Tour of Duty (TDY) before. Sometimes they were both gone simultaneously to different parts of the world and it never bothered her that much. Until now.

A whiff of John’s woodsy aftershave trailed under her nose.

“Me either,” he whispered.

An airman walked in and cleared his throat. Kate reluctantly got up and moved to a window, her back to John. Her throat swelled and her eyes misted.

The intruding airman left a minute later after making a racket at the soda machine in the corner. The clunk of the soda can falling into the bottom of the machine jarred her nerves even further. John walked over to Kate and squeezed her shoulder before leaving the room.

Kate turned to watch his retreating back, while tears streamed down her face. She rushed to the ladies room down the hall and let it all out. When she was finished, she washed her face and fixed her hair. She had to get her hat from her desk before she could go to lunch off base.

A few minutes later she spotted Spencer Coleman in the hallway outside the bank of cubicles in the main part of the building. He was a friend to both her and John, but he and John were friends for years before she met either of them. Spencer headed her way.

“Going to lunch?” he asked.

Kate tuned out the beeping computers, clacking keyboards, ringing phones, a myriad of conversations going on at once, and the squawking scanner at the help desk. It always took a moment to get used to the noise at work and then the near silence outside.

She nodded, looking up at him as she passed. He was several inches taller than her five-foot, ten-inch frame.

“Me, too. See you later,” he said. He was probably headed for the food court, attached to the Base Exchange (BX).

Kate glanced back at Spencer, watching him twirl his keys. He did that all the time. She shook her head before pulling the building door open, a wave of fresh air hitting her, reaffirming her decision to leave the canned air conditioning behind. She headed across the parking lot to her car. She wanted to eat lunch in peace. Not that she wanted to eat all that much.

John worked a different shift this week, so their lunch breaks didn't coincide. Which was just as well, considering her mood. She unlocked her car door and slid into the driver seat of her Toyota. Kate put the key in the ignition but didn't start the engine yet. Instead she rolled the windows down and removed her hat, tossing it to the passenger seat along with her small leather cross body bag. She wasn't a purse carrying member. The breeze blew her brunette hair around her face, though she kept it short, first for easier management, second for Air Force regulations.

She thought about what was bothering her. For some reason John's upcoming trip felt like a black cloud hanging over her. She didn't know why or what it could possibly mean. They had been dating a while, but their relationship seemed stalled. Kate wondered if they were on the brink of breaking up. Whenever she wanted to discuss their relationship, John seemed reluctant and changed the subject.

Leaning back on the car seat, Kate watched a pair of sparrows sparring on the curb, while she considered exactly how she felt. If she were to name the feeling, it would be fear. The realization made her shudder. But why? Fear of what? That John would meet someone else? That he would get hurt? That they would grow apart? There was always a chance of danger, every day in the life of an airman, whether in their field of Security Forces or not. One certainly couldn't control the lunatics in the world who hate Americans and all they stood for.

Kate met John and Spencer at Peterson AFB in Colorado a couple years ago where they were doing tactical training. Spencer and John had been friends for several years, stationed at two prior bases together, and with Kate, they made a trio. Kate had fallen for John, but liked Spencer too. Then the three got split up, sent to three different bases, and now were all together again at Scott. Kate and John had stayed in touch with letters, emails and calls. Occasionally she had emailed Spencer, too.

Then John and Kate both arrived at Scott within a month of each other and renewed their friendship, which over the last year had blossomed into some sort of love relationship, though John hadn't actually used the 'love' word. Yet. Kate still held hope.

Kate finally started the engine and turned her beater of a car down South Drive on base, her windows still down all the way. Most of the time the air conditioner didn't work. She didn't really have time or concern enough to mess with it since she lived only a few miles from the base. She tolerated hot air blowing through the windows on her drives back and forth to her apartment near a shopping center that included a Target and a Dierberg's grocery store.

Kate wasn't hungry for a full lunch, but she could at least get a taco and an ice tea, southern sweet. She could have gotten both at the Taco Bell on base, but she needed to leave the

military world, even if only for an hour. Her brain needed it, her mental psyche needed it, and her spirit needed it.

She drove through the Georgian Housing area and stopped for the light at Scott Drive. She turned left, passing by the commissary (grocery store, where the prices weren't much better than shopping on the economy, unfortunately) on her right and drove through the Belleville gate. She picked up speed as she turned east onto Carlyle Avenue, the main drag nearby that would take her past the local YMCA, the Wal-Mart plaza with a smattering of fast food places to the north and Southwestern Illinois College to the south. A mile or two further down she turned left into the fast food joint and parked facing the street.

Since the weather was as perfect as it could be for the area, she bought her lunch and ate it while sitting in the car. The constant traffic noise going by was her only entertainment. She let her mind wander, staring mindlessly out the window as she ate mechanically. She felt so uneasy with John's upcoming trip, but couldn't pinpoint the reason.

That afternoon, back at work, Ruth struck again. "You think you're so smart, Langston. I bet you cheated. Somehow, I bet you did." Kate ignored her sneering lie and focused on her reports. She opened the one she'd started before lunch so she could finish it-- if her nemesis would leave her alone. She continued with her report of a drug incident in base housing from the previous night.

Somebody else heard Ruth and hollered, "Hey, Langston, you gonna help me study for my test next month? I could use your brains."

Kate just ignored him, knowing he said it to get Ruth off her back. Everybody in the office knew Ruth ridiculed her and why. Kate tried to bide her time until Ruth's next leave in a few weeks.

“Hey, Ruth,” another airman that Kate didn’t know hollered, “maybe you should trade in your camouflage cap for a dunce cap.”

Snickers echoed around the room but Kate ignored them. She had enough to do without Ruth’s troublemaking. Apparently others in the office were bothered by her rude comments as much as she was.

Kate felt more than saw Ruth’s menacing stare and tried not to smile. She kept up her rhythm of typing without stopping. She feared she might giggle and then lose it. She busied herself in her cubicle, minding her own business.

“Go lay an egg, Carter,” Ruth shot back.

Kate hit the print button, turned toward the printer stationed on a desk across the room and removed her report. She just removed it off the tray when a voice interrupted her movement.

“What’s going on around here?” Sergeant Thompson bellowed. He stood in the corridor, his hands on his hips like a father dressing down his children.

Everyone in the area stopped what they were doing and quickly stood to attention.

“Oh, just a little banter between the troops, sir,” the airman who Kate didn’t know spoke up.

Kate kept her eyes on their superior officer and it was a good thing or she might have busted out laughing if she saw the serious look the young airman was trying to put on his face. She curled her toes in her boots, trying to remain calm and collected.

Sergeant Thompson looked at Kate directly. “Is this true, Langston?”

Her toes on her right foot uncurled so fast, she thought she broke a nail. Kate swallowed before answering. “Absolutely, sir. Just a little camaraderie among comrades.” She kept her eyes just a smidgeon to the left of his head, so she couldn’t see into his piercing eyes.

He didn't say anything for a moment as he glanced around the room. "At ease then and carry on. Vandervort, I need to see you in my office please."

Kate didn't dare look Ruth's way and turned to her document on the printer tray. She took a deep breath and hoped Ruth wasn't in trouble on her account. It wasn't her fault Ruth felt jealous Kate made rank and she didn't.

She had to wait to deliver her report to Sergeant Thompson, since he was busy with Ruth. She gathered the papers on her desk and started filing them. She decided an iced tea sounded good, so she left her cubicle for the break room.

Kate worked the rest of the day quietly, tuning out as much of the noise and commotion as possible and left the office relieved to be through another day.

When she got home, the sight of Buttons running for her always cheered her up. Buttons was her mixed mutt she fell in love with at the local rescue kennel. He always had a way of helping her forget the stress of her day. "Hi, Buddy, ready for a walk?"

He started jumping on her legs. "Hold on, let me get out of this uniform first." She plopped on the bed in her room and unlaced her boots, tossing them to a corner. She pulled out some sweats and a t-shirt with the St. Louis Cardinals across the front. She wasn't a big fan, but watched the games when they were playing well and made into the playoffs. She seemed to become a fan of whatever team was most popular at each station. She was a fair weather fan so to speak.

"Ok, Buttons, let's head out."

Kate enjoyed the breeze and the warm sunshine on her shoulders as they briskly circled the track near her apartment complex. She watched a couple playing tennis, a sport she never understood. She preferred racquet ball or bowling.

After a treat for Buttons, and a shower for her, she put a quick salad together and made a fruit smoothie in the blender. Buttons always took off when he heard the blender. She told herself she needed to find a quieter model, if there was such a thing.

Salad and smoothie in hand, she picked up her library book and read until bedtime.

The next afternoon when she got home from work Kate made her double fudge brownies with a caramel center and set them aside to cool before John picked her up. They were going to Spencer's place for dinner along with Andrew, a friend of Spencer's.

She opened the door when John arrived promptly at five. "Tough day?" he asked.

Kate let him in before answering. She led him to the living room after he put his dish on the kitchen counter. They sat on her sofa, leaning against a blanket in a southwestern turquoise pattern. "Just long. I'm waiting for Ruth to go on leave, and then it won't be as bad."

"Ah, I see." He rubbed her shoulders after sitting beside her. He wore kaki cargo shorts and a red polo. He paused a minute to ask her if her outfit was new.

She turned toward him, surprised. "Actually, it is."

"It looks nice on you." His eyes appraised her choice of the blue floral print top and slacks that hugged her curves perfectly.

"Thanks. I bought it last week." One of her favorite stores at the mall was Christopher & Banks, because they sold pants in 'tall' which she needed for her frame.

John stopped his massage and patted her on the shoulder. "I guess we should go. Don't want to be late for dinner."

Kate hid her disappointment and said, "I guess so. I'll get my dessert."

They were eating dinner at Spencer's place along with Andrew, an airman friend of Spencer's. Andrew stood a few inches shorter than Spencer and had brown hair. He always jumped in to help like he was your best friend, even if he didn't know you.

Kate didn't really want to do the group thing with John leaving so soon, but they'd made these plans weeks ago around their various schedules.

And her contribution to the meal- the most important part- happened to be dessert. Something chocolate and loaded with calories had been requested. Though she ate mostly a rice and bean diet, she certainly indulged periodically where chocolate was concerned. She happily obliged the request.

Spencer lived in a comfortable two-bedroom condo owned by a widow who lived next door. Martha Pettigrew (Mrs. P they called her) and her husband bought both sides years ago, and rented out the other side to a military family or person for as long as they needed it. They never had any problems, according to what Spencer had told her and John once. Kate knew that since Mrs. P's husband died a year or so ago, that Spencer checked in on her and did small handyman projects for her. She was always calling him her 'nice young man'. Kate smiled thinking about it.

Kate didn't mind getting together, but the timing wasn't the best with John's TDY looming. She would have preferred just her and John go out, which they will do in a day or two. They didn't seem to have as much alone time anymore.

Spencer grilled steaks and Andrew brought a veggie tray, John brought garlic bread and a salad.

Conversation centered on the price of gas (too high at nearly \$4 a gallon), their low pay (always, no matter the rank), and who would make it to the playoffs (Kate could care less). She

had offered to rinse and load the dishwasher, which the guys were quick to let her do. No surprise there. She let the guys do most of the talking after their meal while she sat next to John, lost in her own thoughts.

Later as Kate readied for bed, she thought over the evening. It seemed to her that Spencer was eyeing John about something, but every time she looked at either of them, they pretended nothing was going on. She wondered what those two were cooking up now. Spencer seemed almost exasperated about something, which was not like him at all. He was always easy going, very friendly and relaxed. Somehow it looked as if something had bothered him though. She wondered what it might be before falling asleep.