A SPECIAL PHOTO

By RumpleForeskin

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The petite, shy teacher looked up. Logan McClain, if you don't kiss me I'm going to slug you.

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Sensual and seductive, she lay amid the rumpled sheets of the bed where we'd just made love, relaxed and at ease within the golden skin of her petite, perfect body. Not posing, not looking at the camera so much as through it, into the photographer, into me. Waiting with an expression of amused tolerance for me to finish and rejoin her. It was a special photo of a very special model.

I'm in the military doing special operations type work that's supposed to be hush-hush. When people ask, I tell them I'm a security consultant specializing in on-site training. And, in a way, that is what I do. But that's about to be past tense. This is my last overseas tour of duty. In two weeks I'll be getting some time off, a promotion, and then become a headquarters man, a desk jockey, advising more than supervising the other, younger, guys who'll still be doing this type of work. After spending eleven months on this bitch of an assignment, most of it in the bush, that's starting to sound real good.

It's against regulations to get personal mail in the field. That's supposed to be collected when you go in for the monthly debriefing, delousing, and debauchery. Out here, it's just job related shit. That's the official line, anyway. But there are ways.

I was sitting alone in an early afternoon patch of shade outside my hut unable to take my eyes off the photo I'd just pulled from the envelope. It was almost a year since I'd last seen Holly Hightower, and maybe an hour or so since I last thought about her and about how we'd tried to cram a lifetime into one month. All that because my brother's girlfriend had an idea.

"Hey Logan, you remember Holly Hightower, don't you?" My kid brother, a high school senior, had just come in from football practice. He was leaning against the doorsill to the guest room in my

parents' house. I'd just finished unpacking and was sitting on the side of the bed, lacing on my running shoes.

"Sure. She was behind me in school. Cute as hell, but there wasn't much of her. Dated this college guy, can't remember his name, all through high school. They looked so much alike it was spooky. Both were short, good-looking, blue-eyed blondes. I think they got married right after she graduated. Why?"

"Well, she and that guy, his name's Bruce Dengler, they had a kid about a year ago. A few months later he split. And before you ask how I know all that, it's 'cause I'm dating her sister, Heather. Well, when I mentioned you were coming home for a month, she decided it'd do Holly a lot of good to get out of the house. So she wondered if you'd be willing to go on a double-date, you know, me and Heather, you and Holly."

I almost laughed. I'm a little old for double-dating. But Craig and I had always been close. So I decided it might be fun to tag along and check out his dating style, not to mention his girlfriend. And, okay, the idea of spending an evening with Holly Hightower had its appeal. That's why I agreed. Which proves, I guess, that sometimes it's better to be lucky than good.

On Saturday, Craig said Heather was spending the night with her big sister so we'd pick them both up at Holly's place. Heather turned out to be a younger, slightly taller version of her "big" sister. It was obvious why Craig was nuts about her and even I could tell she felt the same way about him.

As for Holly, she looked even better than I remembered. In part, because her face and figure had filled out a little. Unlike back in high school, she had boobs. Not big, but in perfect proportion to the rest of her slim body. When I said she looked great and mentioned her improved figure, she seemed pleased. "That's what having one of these will do for you," she said, jiggling the laughing baby she held in her arms.

But there was more to her improved looks than just a few extra pounds and inches. The Holly I'd known was a girl, a cute, quiet, super-nice cheerleader type. The Holly I'd just been re-introduced to was a woman, someone who'd been hurt but knew she could endure. I liked this new Holly more, a lot more.

The baby was named Hope, a tiny, blue-eyed, heart breaker with an uncanny resemblance to her mother and aunt. When I mentioned this, Heather said all the women in their family were runts and had names starting with the letter, H. The babysitter arrived and Holly gave her a quick orientation while I watched Craig and Heather playing with the baby.

Over supper at an Italian restaurant they all tried to catch me up on the local gossip at the same time. During a pause, I heard myself asking Holly about her separation. I started to apologize, but she smiled, laid her fingertips on the back of my hand, and said it was okay. At least I think she said it was okay. That gentle touch overloaded my circuits.

It seems she and her husband struggled for years to have a kid. Then when they hit the jackpot he started going weird. A few months later she learned he was having an affair with his fitness instructor. When Holly confronted him, he confessed, and then moved out.

There was no way we could all agree on the same music, so going dancing after dinner was out. Instead, we caught a movie and then, at Holly's suggestion, went back to her house. "That way I can send the babysitter home early and these children," she gestured at my brother and her sister sitting in the front seat, "can have some time alone."

We talked all the way back. She'd gotten a degree in education after putting her husband through law school. Now she was an elementary school teacher. "What can I tell you? I love kids."

At her place, Craig and Heather did as ordered and took the babysitter home. A few minutes later they came back but stayed out in the car to do their thing in private.

Inside, we old folks talked over coffee until the baby started fussing. I followed Holly into the dim blue light of the baby's room and watched as she checked out the situation. "Houston, we have a problem. The diaper must not have been on right 'cause we've got major leakage. And this nasty-nice baby hates messy."

After Hope had a new nightgown and diaper, Holly looked over at me. "Logan, would you mind holding her while I change the bed. It's pretty soppy." I've handled my fair share of babies, even helped in a delivery, but this was different. The moment this baby looked up at me and grinned, I was hooked. By the time her momma had replaced the sheet and blanket, Hope was nestled on my chest and nodding off.

At first Holly just looked at the two of us with this odd smile. Then she leaned down and took Hope who stretched and yawned. No longer having a baby to comfort, I slipped outside to wait, and think. This feeling I had was unreal. It'd been years since I'd last seen Holly Hightower. There'd been many women in many places since then. But now I was falling for this one, hard.

Before I could get my tangled thoughts even semi-organized, the source of my confusion came out. Motioning for me to be quiet, she took my hand and led me away from the door. What she did next still amazes me. Just before we reached the living room, she stopped, turned around, and looked up

at me. "Logan McClain, if you don't kiss me I'm going to slug you."

The funny thing is, I believed her. There wasn't the faintest hint of humor in her eyes or voice, just determination. Sure I was over a foot taller and outweighed her by at least a hundred pounds. But I had no doubt she'd hit me if I didn't follow orders. Besides, it was one helluva a tempting assignment.

The kiss was more than just two pairs of lips pressing together. Our two bodies seemed to mold into one. Arms, legs, fingers, lips, tongues all became hopelessly, marvelously, intertwined. She made no attempt to pull away. That was fine with me. I didn't want us to ever stop. But then came the point where the sexual energy that kiss was generating became more than I could ignore.

With an effort, I forced myself to pull my lips away from hers and look down into those incredible blue eyes. "Holly, let’s either go to the living room so I can calm down or to your bedroom and make love, ‘cause you’re about to blow..."

My plea was cut short by her lips pressing against mine. This time, she was the one who pulled back. Taking my hand in hers, she looked into my eyes as if searching my soul. Then she smiled and began leading me back down the hall, away from the living room.

I don't recall much about that first time. Oh, I'll never forget undressing her. My fingers were trembling like some high school guy about to get laid for the first time. The sight of those small, enticing breasts coming into view, then the image of slim hips and the perfect contours of legs being revealed as her jeans slid to the floor, those memories will be etched on my mind forever.

The same goes for how right it felt when I picked her up and the way she molded into my arms as I carried her over to the bed. The moment we first lay together, that's also a strong memory, for when our nude bodies came together, all my fumbling nervousness ended. And later, when I entered her and heard her moan and felt her warmth surrounding me, I knew it was the most natural, the most perfect, thing I'd ever done.

But after that, I don't remember much. All I have is a blurred image of bodies meshing, generating a passion, an ecstasy so intense all sense of time and place was lost. Everything seemed to fuse into a new emotion, one that felt a lot like love. So while it's a blurry memory, it's a great one.

We went into the thing, I guess you'd call it an affair, maybe a relationship, knowing it couldn't last. I'd be leaving soon for a year, going someplace I couldn't mention to do something I couldn't talk about. As for Holly, she and her husband were going to counseling, trying to work out some sort of reconciliation. The two of us were the proverbial ships passing in the night.

Maybe it was knowing we had no future together that made our lovemaking so uninhibited, passionate, and constant. Thanks to Holly having her own house, and with Craig and Heather running interference and babysitting, we made love on an almost daily, sometimes hourly, basis. But all the sexual activity, all the knowledge that our time together was running out, couldn't mask a growing attraction that was much more than just physical.

A week before I had to leave, we both knew it was time for "that" talk. After a late supper at the same Italian restaurant we'd gone to on our first night together, Holly began. "At the counseling session today, Bruce asked to come home. I hadn't figured on that. In my mind, it was all over and we were just going through the motions. But now," her voice trailed off.

Something told me she wasn't finished and to keep my mouth shut. "Logan, I don't think it'll work, Bruce and me, not now, not after, not after meeting you. There, I said it, okay? No pride at all. I love you, not Bruce-not like I did anyway. That's why it's not going to work. But damn it, Logan." Tears interrupted her.

We were sitting together in a back booth. I put an arm around her shoulders and felt her wilt against my chest. It was my turn to talk. "But you've got to give it a try, for the baby's sake and your own peace of mind."

She nodded and cried even harder. When the tears subsided, she apologized and went to the ladies room. I ordered two cups of espresso and tried to be grateful for the brief time I'd had with her and not bitter at what I was about to lose.

Holly came back and sat across the table from me. "Remember how I told you to kiss me or I was going to hit you?"

"I'll never forget."

"Well, this is going to be our last weekend together. If you don't spend every minute of it with me, I really will slug you."

"With a threat like that coming from a treat like you, how can I say no?"

She smiled. "But I want something to remember you by. So bring a camera, take all the pictures you want, you know, of me. Just let me take a few of you, for a keepsake."

"That's one heck of an offer coming from a shy, modest school marm."

"I am shy. And I'm modest. Just not around you. From the moment you first walked into the house with Craig I wanted you to take me to bed. And now, I want you to love me all weekend and do it so hard I'll be able to feel what we did for days afterward. And when the ache is gone, I can look at the pictures and remember you and this last month, like I hope you'll do, when you look at the ones of me."

"I don't need pictures to remember you. But I'll take plenty. The thing is, where I'm going, what I'll be doing, it's not a good idea to have personal photos. So you keep 'em for me. I'll be back and, who knows, maybe take a few more."

That was the right thing to do. But for the last fifty weeks, I've wished I'd risked keeping one or two of the photos I took during that weekend.

Just before leaving, I gave her the address where she could send regular, censored mail. But I also handed her a special envelope to be used if she needed to send a personal message. I explained that delivery was chancy and unauthorized but that with luck I'd get it within a week, even in the bush.

And today, less than two weeks before heading home, that envelope arrived. Inside, were two photos and a letter. The reconciliation didn't work. Her husband had gone back to his jock girlfriend. This would be mailed, Holly wrote in a PS, while coming home from the lawyer's office after filing for divorce.

The two pictures were in protective lamination. One was the special photo, the nude I'd taken of Holly lying on the bed where, moments before, we'd just made love. On the back she'd written, "If you still want me, I'm waiting." The other was a close-up of her and the baby. Judging from Hope's size, it was a very recent shot. Both of them were blowing kisses at the camera. There was no ring on the third finger of Holly's left hand.

I went into the hut and scribbled a quick note. "I do want you, forever. So hold that pose. You won't be waiting long." Then I wrapped it around the two photos, stuck it all in a waterproof envelope, and gave the native who smuggled our mail a little something extra to make sure it was on the next plane out.

For the second time in less than a year, I'd given up that special photo of Holly. But this time, I didn't mind. In a few more days, I'd be reclaiming it—along with the special model.