

When the Spirit Speaks

By Kimberly S. Brown

CHAPTER ONE

No Good Deed Goes Unpunished

It seemed such a simple thing, but she should have known better. Airports were, after all, merely passing points, and if she had remembered that and just kept passing, she wouldn't be jogging through Concourse B muttering under her breath "No good deed goes unpunished. No good deed goes unpunished" like a mantra. Of course, she admitted with a small smile of acceptance that comes with knowing yourself, she usually brought these things on herself. When she was growing up her mother always said, "Elliott Turnbull, you couldn't pass a wounded bird without trying to do something." And as an adult, someone always wanted to pour their troubles in her ears, which could be a royal pain, or could be very interesting. While as a journalist she found that particular trait useful, personally Ellie had worked over the years to try and stay more detached from the people around her. Sometimes it even worked.

But Ellie's plane *had* been scheduled out of Concourse C, and that old woman *had* looked so lost. And there should have been only a few gates for Ellie to carry the extra bag. (The woman was afraid of those beeping, noisy carts, of course!)

It wasn't until she arrived at her gate with five minutes to spare that she found out that the flight to Gallup, New Mexico, had moved to a different concourse, and was departing on time.

With a hurried word to that gate's attendant to get him to tell her actual gate that she was on her way, and a few angry looks from the passengers in the line where she had dashed up to the gate desk, Ellie was on her way.

Grateful to the hours spent each week working out in the gym, Ellie forewent the tram as she jogged down the moving sidewalk, her short ponytail bobbing in time with her gait. For some reason, the theme song from the old TV cartoon *The Flintstones* kept playing over and over in her mind in time with her pace.

After a couple of near misses, and what she thought of as two very athletic maneuvers around slightly startled tourists, Ellie dashed to her actual gate just as the attendant was closing the flight. On the last jog down the ramp to the plane while trying to stuff her ticket back in her carry-on bag, Ellie bumped solidly into someone in uniform waiting to board.

"Oops! 'scuse me!" Ellie said without looking up from gathering the contents from her larger purse that had fallen and ejected about half of what it contained. When Ellie finished repacking and finally did look up, and up, she couldn't help her outgoing nature.

"Wow! Are you some kind of GQ model, or are you really in the military?" she said with a smile as she took his offered hand and rose, giving him the once-over.

Ellie immediately recognized the uniform as Marine, and the smile as warm, but reserved. He was at least six-one, icy blue eyes, and chiseled features with a strong jaw that had been shaven closely and carefully. No missed spots on this Marine. His hat was tucked neatly under his arm, his dark brown hair cropped short, and his khaki service uniform was spotless, without wrinkle, and fit him perfectly. His body reminded her of those ancient Greek statues of gods and demi-gods chiseled from beautiful stone. The broad shoulders bespoke of strength, and the way he held himself bespoke of honed discipline. And those shoulders were attached to a broad chest

that tapered to a narrow waist that backed up her initial impression of disciplined fitness. He seemed to be dark of features, yet his lean face really wasn't very tan. Ellie filed that little tidbit away as a journalist does with information that doesn't quite fit.

Ellie also recognized what she called "The Look." It was the eyes, she realized long ago, that gave it away. Men in uniform, the good ones who made service their lives, whether they were police officers or Marines, had "The Look." It was like a tattoo that said, "I know the rules. I live by the rules. Are you going to give me any trouble?" She knew that look well. Her father, after all, was a general, and her two brothers were in the Army and the Air Force. She loved them all madly. But she figured both sides--hers and the military's--were thankful that she hadn't decided to make it her calling.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"Yeah, just too much in a hurry, I guess," said Ellie with a warm smile to one of the military "family." She tucked her bag under her arm and slung her laptop back over her shoulder. "Sorry, Captain..." Ellie recognized the two bars, but paused to read his name tag, "Tovey." She also noted the sharpshooter school patch and the Expert marksmanship ribbons.

Ellie moved around him to board the plane, thinking in a very feminine way what a nice package he made. She guessed with his looks he was used to being given the once-over, probably twice over. Not that he didn't deserve the attention. He had a body that filled the uniform in all the right places, especially across the chest and shoulders. Ellie had always been a sucker for strong shoulders and arms.

As Capt. James Tovey followed her to the plane door, he realized he wasn't annoyed as he often was at being sized-up by a female. His friends once said he was like a prime piece of meat hung up before hungry dogs. They were envious. He was mortified.

But even as his reciprocal "once-over" from head to toe left him lingering on the long legs in front of him—she had to be at least 5' 8"--James knew now wasn't the time for complications in his life. And this one, he bet, would be complicated. There was no ring and no shadow of one—something he had learned about the hard way. That bouncy walk and the energy she exuded were up front and in your face sexy to someone like him who demanded honesty in all things, especially relationships. And while the ponytail of brown hair drawn back from her face made her look younger than she probably was, he noticed the unmistakable mature feminine swing to her hips. She wasn't built like a model, but rather like a long-distance runner. Her movements were fluid, the type that one athlete recognizes in another. James appreciated fitness. No, he more than appreciated it. It was an important part of his life, and he had little use for people who didn't take care of their bodies. Straight brown hair and hazel brown eyes were common, but her hair seemed to have a life of its own, bouncing and swinging like the last person in a "crack the whip" line. And her eyes had been open and honest, and for lack of a better term, merry. She seemed to be a person who enjoyed life.

James also recognized an underlying energy that seemed to radiate from her as she moved quickly down the gangway. When she had looked at him through those hazel-brown eyes, for some reason they had sparkled with mischievous humor. He wondered just what the joke was, and whether it was on him. Then James reminded himself again that he wasn't in the market, so to speak, even though she intrigued him. And with a small smile he admitted to himself that he admired her quick walk in nicely fitted jeans.

James literally shook his head. He preferred his own rules, which didn't include being led on wild chases by women who wanted to be caught, or futile chases by the ones who didn't. He

didn't know if this woman fit either category, but he wasn't going to put himself in a position to find out.

He'd been born into in a military household, and he practically grew up in the military, so discipline and discretion became a way of life at an early age. James' serious manner around women got him the reputation as being a bit backward. Which, while not true, meant that his buddies constantly were trying to set him up with “the girl next door.” He was such a likable guy that some of his friends actually had tried to pair him up with their sisters!

That was exactly what James was trying to avoid. If he were being totally honest, which was another virtue that some found a flaw, James probably *was* a bit shy with a certain type of women—the wholesome ones who wanted you to settle down. Perhaps his whole outlook could better be labeled gun-shy rather than shy.

That “wholesome good looks” was a hard trait for most people to associate with a Marine special ops captain. James figured you didn't have to be a married and settled to parachute out of planes at night behind enemy lines and lead a successful mission. In fact, it helped if you didn't have any ties to home. With both of his folks dead, and no siblings, that left James pretty much in the select category when it came to volunteering for dangerous missions.

As Ellie waited for the people in front of her to stow luggage and take their seats, she pondered Capt. Tovey's voice. His was a mix of accents, or a lack of accent, that she couldn't quite place.