

Quiet Man

A Dream Man Novella

By Kristen Ashley

Teaser Chapter

1001 Dark Nights



EVIL EYE

CONCEPTS

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Chapter One

Call A Commando

Smithie

"I'm getting a breast reduction."

Smithie took his attention from the piece of paper he held in his hand, looked across his desk and all the way across his office to the woman striding through the room.

The woman who was the subject of the words written on the paper in his hand.

His throat was tight.

"I'm going natural," she finished her announcement.

Charlotte McAlister.

Lottie.

Known far and pretty damned wide as Lottie Mac.

Lottie Mac, Queen of the Corvette Calendar.

Though Smithie just called her Mac.

He'd been wrong. She wasn't done finishing her announcement.

Mac stopped at the front of his desk and proclaimed, “And you can’t talk me out of it.”

It took Smithie a minute to force his mouth to regain the ability of speech.

“I don’t care what you do to your body. It’s not my body. I don’t know why you think I’d have a say in it.”

Lottie gawked at him.

He got this.

He was a strip club owner and she was a stripper. His premier stripper. He had velvet ropes to contain the people who lined up, wanting to watch her dance. It wasn’t a stretch she’d think he’d have a problem with her getting rid of her implants.

Forcibly pulling his mind from the paper in his hand, he turned it over and laid it on the desk, giving his full attention to Mac.

And what she was saying.

Mostly, *why* she was probably saying it.

Before he could dig into that with her, she kept speaking.

“I interviewed seven plastic surgeons in the Denver area. I’ve chosen one. I’m doing it next month.”

“Why?” Smithie asked.

“Why?” Mac asked back.

“Not heard a thing about you doin’ this, now you’re not only doin’ it, you did all the research into it,” he pointed out. “So what’s the deal and what’s the rush?”

He knew both.

He just wanted to have the conversation.

“There’s no rush,” Mac lied.

When these women would learn that they couldn’t get away with lying to him, he did not know. He was in a variety of relationships with several women of his own, had kids with them, and he’d run a strip club for decades. He could spot a lie before the person even spoke the words.

Hell, his bouncers were the worst culprits. They thought they had that, “you’re a man and I’m a man” thing going on when no man was any kind of man if he lied through his teeth.

“Mac,” he stated warningly.

She didn’t answer his question.

She said, “People will still come watch me dance.”

“I know people will watch you dance. Had Joaquim do a head count coupla months ago for a few nights. Thirty-five percent of the people through the door were female. They say ten percent of the population is gay. So we can assume ten percent of that were lesbians who might have another reason they’re here to see you. But that means twenty-five percent of those females were here just to get a drink, but mostly to watch you dance. And you’re probably the only time a man can get away with saying he comes to a strip club to take in the talent of a dancer’s moves. You got big tits, you got regular tits, it’s not gonna affect your line at the rope. So let’s stop with the bullshit. Now, tell me *why*?”

Mac lifted her chin and stated, “I’m also looking into sperm donors.”

There it was.

Smithie sat back in his chair.

“Mac—” he began.

“I’m not getting any younger, Smithie,” she snapped.

As noted, he was in a relationship with several women. They knew about each other. Mostly, they shared because he was a lot to take and they didn’t mind the break.

But often, it was a juggling act and he was the juggler.

One thing he learned that helped him not drop a ball was never to field it when a woman lobbed that at him.

Though, he didn’t field it right then not just because of that.

“It’s your sister,” he noted.

She shook her head. “It isn’t my sister.”

“How many has she pushed out for Eddie so far?” Smithie asked a question the answer to which he already knew.

“Jet doesn’t make babies *for Eddie*,” Mac shot back.

Smithie sighed.

“I’m just ready,” she stated.

“You are not ready,” he returned.

Her face turned from confrontational to pissed.

“You think I haven’t thought about this for a long time?”

“I think, when you decide to bring a kid in the world, once you think you’ve thought about it long enough, you should think even longer about it. Then you should talk to people in your life

about it. Then you should think on what *they* say about it. And only when you're super, double, *extra* sure do you do it."

"I've got the money—"

Smithie shook his head. "It isn't the money, Mac. But even if you think you got the money, you don't got the money. It's not about the food in their bellies or the roof over their heads. It isn't about keepin' up with all the latest phones and kicks. It isn't even about saving for college tuition. It's all the shit times in life that are gonna rise up and bite you in the ass that you didn't count on. They're your kid. They're gonna roll with the punches. But are you ready to say you're in the spot you're good to make them do that if that shit happens?"

Mac said nothing, looked to the side, then took a step that way and sat her ass down in one of the two chairs in front of his desk.

She was not ready.

At all.

She was something else.

And Smithie needed to get to the bottom of it and not to save her fantastic tits.

To save her from jumping too soon into something for which she was not ready.

He leaned forward in his chair and dropped his voice.

"There's gonna be a mean kid in class that gets in their face. There's gonna be a health situation that's probably the croup or a flu that you're not gonna understand and it's gonna scare you shitless. Girls'll get their hearts broken by an asshole. Boys need to learn not to *be* assholes. You gotta have it together, Mac. No one can be fully prepared for being a parent. But you gotta *know* you're as ready as you'll ever be."

She held his eyes and said, "I'm ready, Smithie."

"You're watchin' your sister and her man make babies and you're so in love with your nephews you can't see straight so you're feelin' the time tick by and doin' that, the itch is comin' on to one you can't help but scratch," he returned.

"This has nothing to do with Jet and Eddie," she returned.

"Okay, then, how often does Jet go out with those Rock Chicks? Answer me that, Mac. How often?"

"She sees her crew all the time," Mac told him.

"Right, and she can do that because her husband is home, lookin' after their boys."

She got his point.

This was why she shut her mouth before opening it and saying, “Or Blanca looks after them.”

“Blanca looks after them when Jet and Eddie are out together. Unless he’s workin’, no one looks after his boys but him if their momma ain’t around to do it.”

Mac turned her head and studied the wall.

It wasn’t that interesting.

But she kept doing it.

“Mac, look at me,” he ordered.

She did, that stubborn lift in her chin.

Smithie took his voice to soft. “You’re gonna find him, darlin’.”

She got his point on that too.

“I don’t need a man,” she bit out.

“No. But you want one and you’re gonna find him. You just need to be patient.”

She was losing patience sitting right there. “This is not about finding a man, Smithie.”

“How many of the Rock Chicks don’t got a warm body in their bed?” he pushed.

“I can get a man whenever I want.”

She absolutely could do that.

She wasn’t beautiful. But she was pretty. Crazy pretty.

Her sister, Jet, had the quiet, shy, girl-next-door vibe going for her.

Mac couldn’t be more different.

She lived life large and loud. She was sexy, but not brash, instead ballsy. She had an opinion, she stated it. She loved you, she showed it. You were toxic, she scraped you off. She identified a goal, she worked to it.

If she wanted it, she got it.

Except a man.

She was a serial dater, not because she liked to play the field, but because most men were motherfuckers and she had zero tolerance for that.

Not that she should.

She just didn’t.

As far as Smithie was concerned, that Rock Chick posse had lucked out. Found the best men there were in Denver. Claimed them (or got claimed, whatever). Game over.

Then again, Lee Nightingale had essentially vetted them for his woman's friends, so he'd already taken the guesswork out of it.

"Havin' a kid is a lot easier when you got someone to help," he pointed out.

"*Havin'* a kid is all on the woman," she retorted.

"Okay then, smart girl, *raisin'* a kid is a lot easier, you got someone to help," he revised, and before she could get anything out of her mouth, he went on, "and you can't argue that. You had a single parent home and who raised you?"

That mouth closed.

"Your sister 'cause your mom was working," he answered for her. "Now what's your sister got?" He again answered for her. "Pointin' out the obvious, I didn't wanna hear this shit, but I heard it when you bitches were gabbin', and from the first, if he wasn't workin' a case, Eddie got up with Jet for every feeding. Every *damned one*. Went and got his boy and brought him to his wife. Took him back and laid him down. Same with the next one that came along. And so on. Jet didn't even have to get out of bed."

He had a point to make but he took that too far and he knew it when her chin wobbled before she got control of it.

"Mac—"

"I want a baby," she whispered.

He believed her.

She also wanted an Eddie.

"Give it time," he whispered back.

She threw up both hands. "How much?"

"As much as it takes."

"Sadly, I can't Mick Jagger this sitch and make a baby when I'm seventy."

Jagger shouldn't even be doing that shit.

"Honey, you're still in your thirties," he reminded her.

"They're all gone," she declared.

Now he had no idea what the woman was talking about.

"Who?" he asked.

She bopped forward on her seat with agitation. “*Them*. The good ones. The Hot Bunch. The only ones left are Roam and Sniff and they’re too young for me. Not to mention, if Shirleen thought I’d even spoke their names in a conversation like this, she’d cut me.”

She was not wrong.

Shirleen was Roam and Sniff’s foster momma, though in her mind, there was no “foster” about it and it wouldn’t matter one bit that Roam and Sniff were both long since of age and men in their own right.

She would cut her.

Mac was also not wrong that the Rock Chicks had snagged all there was of the Hot Bunch.

Maybe Lee was hiring.

“Mac, darlin’, just give it time,” he urged. “And in the meantime, spoil your nephews. Because when you find a man and you start makin’ your own babies, you won’t have the time for them you have now, but you’ll love it that you had the time you have now. You dig?”

She gave it a beat before she puckered her lips and blew out a breath.

Then she said, “I’m still going natural.”

She dug.

Crisis averted (or at least this one, he corralled strippers, bouncers, bartenders and waitresses, they were all young and fit and prone to do stupid shit, so it seemed his entire life was averting disasters).

This one over (for now), Smithie rolled a hand at her, turning his eyes to his desk. “Do whatever you want with your tits. Just give me some notice. I gotta prepare the staff to adjust to half the amount of asses in seats, I don’t got my headliner.”

“Smithie,” she called.

He turned his eyes back to her.

She was now grinning.

And she had a new declaration.

“You’re the shit.”

“I know that seein’ as I put up with your crazy ass. Now get out. I’m not up here twiddling my thumbs. I got shit to do.”

She kept grinning as she rose from the chair and sashayed her tight ass to his door.

“Close that behind you,” he ordered.

She didn't close it behind her.

She turned at it and looked to him.

"I'm giving it a year."

Something else Mac was.

Decisive.

"I'll take it," he replied. "Now get out."

She shot him a white smile that miraculously his retinas had built up a tolerance to so they weren't burned out, then she moseyed out the door.

Thankfully, she shut it behind her.

Smithie stared hard at it while considering hefting his bulk over to lock it.

He wasn't going to take the time.

Instead, he picked up the paper, turned it over and read it again.

It stated, plainly, he was fucked.

More alarmingly, it stated, chillingly, Mac was in danger.

This was a problem more than it was already a colossal motherfucking problem.

Any other one of his girls, he'd pick up the phone to Lee Nightingale, the man behind Nightingale Investigations, the commander of the baddest badass motherfuckers in Denver. He'd hand over this letter and he'd get this problem solved.

But Mac was Charlotte McAlister, Jet McAlister Chavez's little sister. Jet was married to Eddie Chavez. Eddie was Lee's best friend. And Jet worked for Indy, Lee's wife, the Queen of the Rock Chicks, and thus Jet Chavez was a bona fide Rock Chick.

Mac might not be a card-carrying member of the Rock Chicks, mostly because she had a job where she worked nights, the time those crazy bitches instigated the most fucked-up of their varying antics. Though they weren't averse to mornings and afternoons. It was just that the stunnings, kidnappings and the like mostly took place at night, and Mac was busy then.

She was still a Rock Chick, or at least she was by association.

Considering the Rock Chick link and the blood ties to Jet, if Lee knew Mac was in danger, he'd tear the town apart to put a stop to it.

And Eddie...

Now Eddie, Smithie didn't even want to think about it. The man was a cop. The shit Lee and his boys did with flair and a flagrant disregard to just about anything, Eddie could not do.

But Eddie wouldn't blink at doing whatever he had to do to make his sister-in-law safe.

And the man had mouths to feed.

So yeah.

This was a problem even more than it already was a colossal motherfucking problem because Smithie couldn't call Lee.

Which meant Smithie had to find a different set of badassess to deal with it.

His first call would normally be the Chaos Motorcycle Club. Mac wasn't one of theirs, neither was Smithie, but they had ties to Lee, they could keep a secret, and they didn't dick around when it came to women and their safety.

But they'd just come out of a war, and like any war, that had been some serious fucked-up shit.

They needed a breather.

Lee, and Chaos, also had ties to...

"Well, hell," Smithie muttered, the words on the letter blurring, the sick feeling in the back of his throat easing.

He dropped the letter and picked up his cell.

If you couldn't call a badass...

Then it was far from second best to call a commando.

* * * *

"Let me see it."

Smithie lifted his eyes from his laptop on which he was doing the club's accounts to the tall, built, black-haired man prowling through the door.

Behind him strode a man that even gave Smithie, who this didn't happen to often, a tingle of, "Holy fuck, don't let me meet that guy in an alley."

"Well, hey there, motherfucker," Smithie greeted the man in the lead. A man known as Hawk. "And by the way, come on in."

Hawk Delgado had made it to the front of Smithie's desk.

He stopped there and held out his hand.

"Smithie, let me see the letter."

Seeing as the man was wearing a tight black T-shirt over black cargos and black cargo boots, looking like he was about to invade Somalia, and more, *could*, but he was in an office over a strip club in Denver, Smithie dug the letter out from under a bunch of stuff on his desk and handed it to Hawk.

The hulk behind Hawk edged closer and read over his boss's shoulder.

While reading it, Hawk's face only tightened a little.

The face of the man behind him went from scary to *Jesus fucking shit*.

"I read it to you over the phone," Smithie reminded him.

He didn't have to, and Hawk didn't have to remind Smithie that he was a busy guy, but Smithie had phoned and Elvira, Hawk's assistant, had picked up. He'd read the letter to her and she hadn't messed around with getting her boss on the line.

When Hawk heard it, Hawk got un-busy, called Smithie, then Smithie had read the letter to him.

So he'd made even more time to drop on by.

And there he was, tight-faced and clearly taking that letter as seriously as Smithie took it.

He finished reading and looked at Smithie.

"Before this one, you get any more of these?" Hawk asked.

Smithie shook his head. "Though I think one is enough, don't you?"

He handed the letter over his shoulder to the monster behind him.

"One is enough," Hawk agreed. "You got the envelope?"

Smithie dug out the envelope the letter came in and handed it over.

Hawk didn't even look at it. He gave it direct to the man behind him.

Then he asked, "You call the cops?"

"You know who Lottie Mac's sister is?"

Hawk's mouth tightened even further.

He also knew how gonzo Eddie Chavez would go if he knew someone had written that letter about Mac. And any cop who read that letter would go straight to Eddie.

"Charlotte McAlister know about that letter?" Hawk asked.

Now Smithie understood Hawk definitely knew who Mac's sister was. He knew who Mac was. That letter didn't refer to Mac as anyone but Lottie Mac and "Charlotte McAlister" was not the name Smithie used on the marquee.

“I haven’t shared...” he paused, “yet.”

“She get an escort home?” Hawk kept at him.

“To her car at night.” After he gave him that, Smithie shook his head again and wished he wasn’t doing it. “Not home.”

“Fuck,” Hawk muttered.

“She will now,” Smithie told him. “In fact, I got a guy sittin’ on her house right now, which is where she is. She was here, but she took off and I put a man on her.”

Hawk jerked his head to the man standing behind him. “He’ll be relieved by Mo.”

Well, all right.

Smithie could get on board with that beast being Mac’s bodyguard.

Smithie stood. “I approve of your selection, Delgado, but what next?”

“We track that asshole down and put him out of commission,” Hawk replied immediately.

And it didn’t take long to slide right into the gray area with Hawk Delgado.

No, that wasn’t it.

Lee could do gray and did. All the time.

When it came to Delgado, shit got downright murky.

“What would that entail?” Smithie asked.

“Do you care?” Hawk returned.

“Kinda, considering I’m payin’ you for this shit,” Smithie told him.

“Whatever it needs to entail,” Hawk answered. “That letter,” Hawk did another head jerk, “we’ll need to make absolutely certain our message is received. Could be building a case to hand over to the cops. Could be something else.”

Right. For now, he could deal with that.

“Mac needs protection,” Smithie stated.

Hawk nodded his agreement. “And she’ll have Mo. Twenty-four seven. We aren’t Secret Servicing this shit, even if we are. He’s on her, day and night. He sleeps on the floor by her bed if she doesn’t have a chair or something in her bedroom. He goes to the grocery store with her. He stands outside the bathroom while she’s showering. I’m thinking you can fill in the rest of that picture.”

He could fill in the picture, but Smithie wasn’t sure he was totally following.

“Secret Servicing this shit?”

“Secret Service passes off. They do shifts. There will be no pass off. Mo’s hers for as long as it takes to find this guy.”

Now Smithie wasn’t sure he was liking what he was following.

“Is that smart?”

“I’m sure I can make a passable attempt at finding a decent stripper. Though I couldn’t pick a headliner if she tapped me on the shoulder. So how ’bout you let me make the calls I gotta make ’cause you assume I know what I’m doin’ like I would do for you if my business got caught up in yours. Something that’s happening right now. But I’ll let you do yours if you let me do mine.”

“Gotcha,” Smithie murmured.

“Your staff, on heightened alert. The dancers. The bouncers. The bartenders and the waitresses. I’ll brief them, tell them what they’re lookin’ for, this being after we interview them to ascertain if they’ve already clocked someone of interest. You tell McAlister. She needs to know and make smart choices. I’ll coach her on that.”

Smithie flicked his gaze to Mo and back to Hawk. “Won’t Mo coach her on that?”

“Mo’s not a communicator.”

This was not a surprise.

Hawk spoke on.

“Call her. Tell her she’s got Mo. Tell her he’s not on her house, he’s gonna be *in* her house. Tell her she’s gotta come in early. Tell her Mo’ll be bringin’ her in early. I’ll be here when she gets here, and you and me’ll share. I’ll tell her what she needs to know. And we’ll go from there.”

Smithie nodded.

Without another word, both men turned as one to walk out the door.

Smithie watched them go.

After Mo disappeared out the door, Hawk stopped there and turned back.

“Secret Service is also trained to put themselves in the path of the bullet,” Hawk said.

Shit.

“Right,” Smithie whispered.

“For that man on the mark, it isn’t about getting the target to safety. It’s about taking the bullet *for* his mark. You with me?” Hawk asked.

That Mo guy was a leviathan, but he wasn’t bulletproof.

Goddamned *shit*.

“I’m with you,” Smithie confirmed, because he had no choice.

Hawk studied him before he noted, “You haven’t asked me how much this is going to cost.”

“That’s because I don’t care,” Smithie told him.

They held eyes.

Hawk broke it by lifting his chin and exiting the room.

He shut the door behind him.

Slowly, Smithie sat in his chair.

He’d had trouble in the club from some assholes not long ago.

At the time, it had nearly broken him. He’d thought it had come in the form of a man’s worst nightmare about what could happen to women he held in his heart.

He’d been wrong.

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from 1001 Dark Nights

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