

Triple Team

Bonus Scene



Juliana

Eight Years Later

I stood in front of the mirror, turning this way and that to admire the dress. I hadn't worn it in a decade, yet I still filled it with my curves.

"Damn I look good," I muttered.

"I'll say."

I turned and found Donovan waiting in the doorway. He wore the same black tuxedo he always wore on nights like this one. A tuxedo that never failed to make me shiver with excitement. He was a deliciously good-looking man.

He leaned against the door frame. "I haven't seen you wear that dress, have I, Jules?"

"You have not," I said. "Michael will recognize it, though."

"Oh, so it's for *Michael*." A smile touched his lips. "Nevermind then. I'll stop eye-humping you."

I arched my back, stretching my hands over my head. "Nonsense. Like everything about me, this dress is for you three to *share*." I curled a finger toward him. "And why eye-hump me when you can do the real thing?"

He cut a dashing figure as he strolled toward me with his hands in his pockets. "Well I wouldn't want to ruin the dress before the others get to see you in it."

"Sure you would." I wrapped my hands over his shoulders and scratched the back of his head with my fingernails in that way he loved. "You'd love to have me all to yourself tonight."

His smile told me I was right. "If you insist..."

Our lips had barely touched when there was a stampede of footsteps down the hall. "Mom, tell Brandi to share! *Mom!*"

We both winced the wince of parents who, for a

short moment, had forgotten they weren't alone. "There goes our fun," Donovan said.

I gave him a peck on the lips and then raised my voice. "Brandi, what did we say about sharing?"

Two of our four children came stomping into the bedroom. "Gross!" Brandi said when she saw us embracing. She was 13, old enough to be grossed out by even the most innocent displays of affection.

Cali was too focused on her complaint to care. "Mom! Brandi isn't sharing!"

Brandi whirled on her. "The last time I shared my Legos, you ruined them!"

"I didn't *ruin* them," Cali said matter-of-factly. "I built something with them."

"I don't care about your stupid truck!" Brandi exclaimed. "I wanted to make a building!"

Cali rolled her eyes and looked at us. "It wasn't a *truck*. It was an armored personnel carrier. The kind daddy used to ride in."

"It's *stupid*," Brandi said.

I waited until they got their complaints out. In the six years since we adopted Brandi we'd learned to let her say her peace before trying to be diplomatic. She was at that age when having an attitude was expected on any given day.

"We bought you both more Legos than we can fit in the house," Donovan patiently explained. "Our

only condition was that you share.”

Cali crossed her arms and looked smug.

“That doesn’t mean you get to use all of Brandi’s pieces,” I said. The smug look disappeared. “There are plenty there for both of you.”

“But *mom...*”

“If I hear one more argument from either of you, we’re locking the toy room while we’re gone,” Donovan said. “Then you can spend the night doing your homework instead.”

“I like that idea,” I said.

The threat did its job. Suddenly both girls were apologetic and conciliatory, promising to share with the other. Donovan and I smiled at one another as they left and we finished getting ready.

Down in the living room we found our boys playing videogames together quietly. Trevor was 11 and Ernie was 10, and they were too focused on their game to argue. They barely even noticed when we hugged and kissed them goodbye.

“Bed time is 9:30,” I said as I grabbed my purse. I held out my phone. “If I see any internet traffic after that...”

I didn’t need to finish the sentence. “9:30 bed time,” Trevor declared, ever the rule-follower. “You got it, mom!”

“9:30,” Ernie muttered, thumbs flying on his

game controller.

It was almost unfair having a hacker mom who could lock down their internet access and monitor all other electronic activity. Part of me felt bad that they would never know the rush of visiting a porn website in the dead of night when the rest of the house was asleep.

The larger part of me was glad I could lock down their access. There would be plenty of time for that sort of thing when they were older.

Once we'd adopted Cali, it felt natural to adopt several more brothers and sisters for her. My mother had laughed at me for not "putting my child-bearing hips to use," but I had zero desire to physically carry a child to term. There were too many orphans in the world, as we'd seen in our travels. It felt better this way.

Our family was like a mercenary team. We picked up new members along the way.

Donovan and I climbed into his 4Runner. We'd gotten rid of the arsenal half of the garage years ago in order to make room for a second vehicle. Plus, we rarely went on dangerous missions anymore. Donovan, Gregor, Michael, and I had accumulated enough money from contracts over the years that we didn't *need* to risk our lives anymore. Besides, now that we had four kids back at home none of us wanted to put the family in danger. Traipsing through the Colombian jungle was all well and good when we were younger, but a mother of four had more important things to worry about.

Gregor still kept a small cache of weapons at the

gun range just in case, though. Some old habits died hard.

We drove into downtown Richmond for the Veterans for Mental Health charity ball. The foundation had grown by leaps and bounds in the last decade, and although nobody knew we were the founders we were the public faces on the board of directors.

We pulled up to the valet at the front of the convention center. Donovan held out his arm and led me inside. The event was in one large room. A stage was erected on one side, with bars and stations with appetizers spread around the outside. It sort of reminded me of the Boston convention center, where we had met all those years ago at Defcon East. Based on the smile on Donovan's face, it reminded him of it too.

"There's Gregor, and Michael too," Donovan pointed. They were on the opposite side of the room by the stage, mingling with Yvonne, the charity organizer and the evening mistress of ceremonies. Michael turned and smiled at me like he'd known the moment I walked inside. I grinned to myself like a silly girl.

As we made our way toward them we had to weave in and out of round tables spaced throughout the center of the room. On each table was an item up for auction this evening. There was a wide variety of items: signed sports memorabilia; action events like white water rafting or skydiving; military heirlooms collectors loved to get into bidding wars over. Services offered by local businesses.

In fact, we passed one table offering a free consultation from a Network Security company. “Juliana!” called an old, familiar voice.

A smile split my face as I saw him standing there. Mr. Pendleton! You came!”

He hugged me close and grinned at me with that same proud grandfather look he always used to have. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world! I was already on the east coast, anyway. You look radiant! How are the children?”

“A handful,” I said with a sigh every parent understood. “Brandi is 13 and makes sure everyone knows it. I have a lot more sympathy for what my parents put up with in me at that age.”

“The struggle is what makes it so fulfilling!” he declared.

Donovan hugged him next. “How many grandchildren do you have now?”

Mr. Pendleton had to pause to think before answering. “15. Alexandria had her fourth last May.”

Donovan whistled at the number.

The lights dimmed and Yvonne strode out on stage. “Looks like it’s starting,” Mr. Pendleton said. “I’ll catch up with you later! I have my eye on one of those signed footballs...”

Yvonne greeted the audience and welcomed us to the Fifth Annual VMH Charity Fundraiser. I marveled at the applause; this was a bigger crowd than

we'd ever had! We were going to raise a lot of money tonight. Money that would go to a good cause.

"Now, then, let's get started with the auction!" Yvonne announced. "Our first item up for bid is a trip across the country on a private jet."

A drunk man screamed, "WOOO!" at the top of his lungs and went running on stage. Yvonne looked surprised as Ernest grabbed the microphone from her. "I'll take *this*. What's up, y'all! Who here's having a good time? Don't be shy now, let me hear it!"

Donovan and I reached the table where Michael and Gregor were standing. "How many drinks has he had?" I asked.

Gregor kissed me on the cheek. Seeing him in a tuxedo was like seeing a German Shepherd on a bicycle, but he pulled it off well. "You know Ernest. He was three sheets to the wind when he *arrived*."

"Wouldn't want it any other way," I said as I watched our drunk pilot sauntering around stage in a hideous blue suit.

"Now, let me tell you all about this item," he said, pointing out at the crowd. "This ain't just a normal private jet ride. No way. I'll let y'all come up in the cockpit and fool around while we're in the air. Dive and do flips and *whatnot*. Don't, uhh, tell the FAA about that though. Not supposed to do any of that fun stuff. That'd get old Ernest in a lot of trouble, know what I'm saying, amigos? Point is, whoever bids on this? Your money's going to a good cause, *and* you're gonna

have a lot of fun with old Ernest.”

The crowd ate up his shtick and the bidding intensified quickly. By the time Ernest was roaring a victorious yell into the microphone the final bid was \$12,250.

“Shit,” Ernest said.

“What?”

“Nothing,” he mumbled.

I slipped past him and gave Michael a kiss on the cheek. He wore the same ivory tuxedo he always wore to these things, which only accentuated his dark hair and features.

“Has anyone ever told you you look like an Israeli James Bond?” I asked.

He caught the reference. It was the same thing I’d told him all those years ago in Switzerland. “Manischewitz and soda. Shaken, not stirred.”

We grinned at one another.

“I have not seen that dress in a long time,” he said. “You look marvelous.”

I dipped my head and blushed at the compliment. Gregor was looking at me ravenously, the way he always did.

The bidding finished and Ernest banged the wooden gavel, then handed the microphone back to Yvonne and jumped off the front of the stage. He jogged through the audience giving high-fives like a cult

leader greeting his members. When he reached us he held out his hand to Gregor.

“Pay up, hombre.”

Gregor pursed his lips. “You rigged the game.”

“Bro, don’t even!” Ernest said. “You bet me the bidding wouldn’t go above \$10,000. You never said I couldn’t run up on stage and coax more money out of them. Pay up!”

Gregor grumbled some more, but fished a \$100 out of his pocket and slapped it into Ernest’s waiting palm. Only when that was done did he turned to me.

“Girl,” he said in that redneck accent, “you look finer than the sand in an hourglass. And I do mean *hourglass*.” He outlined the shape with his hands, then kissed his fingertips.

I gave him a big hug. “Thanks, Ernest. And thank for pumping the crowd up. *Some* of us appreciate your work getting the highest bids possible.” I punctuated the comment with a glare at Gregor.

“Hell yeah, amiga. Anything for y’all.” He whipped his head back toward the stage. Yvonne was announcing the final bidding for the next item: an autographed baseball jersey from Mike Trout, the current center fielder for the Nationals. “Wait! Hold on one second!”

The four of us snickered as Ernest went running back on stage and stole the microphone from Yvonne again.

“I know y’all ain’t gonna let this jersey go for just \$500!” His glare scanned the crowd. “Y’all know this is for *charity*, right? Don’t be stingy!”

“\$600,” someone called.

Another paddle went up into the air. “\$1,000!”

“That’s more like it!” Ernest announced.

Donovan handed me a glass of champagne and smiled. “It wouldn’t be the same without him.”

The rest of the auction was as hilarious as the beginning. Yvonne took over for most of it, occasionally interrupted by an angry and increasingly belligerent Ernest who whenever an item was about to sell for less than what he deemed it was worth. He was the hit of the night. By the end, audience members were yelling at Ernest to get up there and drive the price higher on certain items, and they roared with laughter every single time he scolded them.

A few of the big ticket items went last, and then we had our final total: \$710,500 raised for the VMH charity. Yvonne announced the total and the crowd, now thoroughly lubricated with free drinks, roared with applause.

When they settled down, Yvonne looked around the room. “How about a word from one of our directors?” She squinted in the darkness as she tried to find us.

“Get up there, Jules,” Donovan said.

“Why me!”

“You are far prettier than the three of us,” Michael said.

“Show off that dress, kiddo!” Gregor gave me a push. “She’s right here! Here’s Juliana!”

A spotlight hit me and then the crowd cheered, so there was no going back. I walked as fast as I could in my heels up on stage while they applauded. Yvonne handed me the microphone.

I paused to look out over the crowd of smiling, intent faces. I felt the same butterflies tonight as I did a decade ago giving my first—and only—presentation at Defcon East.

“I want to thank all of you for coming out tonight,” I said. My voice reverberated through the speakers throughout the massive room. “I’m Juliana Ellersby...”

Somewhere in the crowd Ernest screamed, “YEAH JULIANA WOOO!”

“...And I’m not just a member of the board of directors at Veterans for Mental Health. I used to be one of its patients. I was in the Army, and although I was lucky enough to never go into combat, I did deal with traumatic stress that affected my life. Because that’s the thing about PTSD: there’s a wide spectrum of ways it can affect a person. It’s not just the soldier who loses his legs from an IED, or the medic who watches a friend bleed out on the side of the road. It’s their friends and family dealing with it. It’s the lingering grief from a variety of traumas, whether incurred in

combat or outside it.”

My eyes found my three partners standing over to the side. Donovan, his blond hair combed and oiled perfectly above a huge V-shaped torso underneath his tux. Gregor with his knowing smile and sharp eyes. Tall and lithe Michael, who stared up at me from behind his aquiline nose.

They smiled up at me. My three soldiers, my lovers, the joint fathers of our children. They bolstered my courage with their cumulative gaze.

How could a girl be nervous about something when she had three men behind her every step of the way?

“I owe a lot to VMH,” I said, though I was really speaking to the three of them. “If not for the incredible, loving, *strong* people there I wouldn’t be the woman I am today.” I swept my gaze back across the audience. “And I’m overjoyed that all of you have joined with me today in helping fund VMH for many more years to come. Thank you again for your overwhelming generosity, and we’ll see you next year!”

They applauded against as I left the stage, but I hardly heard any of it. My eyes were locked onto my three men as they clapped and smiled at me, then took me in their arms and hugged me together.

Music started playing and a dance floor opened up in the corner. We had some more drinks and enjoyed ourselves. Donovan popped and locked around the dance floor like a fool, just like he’d done in that

hotel in Quito the night we dropped into Colombia. Ernest tried breakdancing but ended up splitting his pants, which made the already boisterous crowd roar with laughter. I danced with all of them, even Ernest for a little while, until we were sweaty and spent.

I found my three men seated at a table, passing around a bottle of champagne. They looked like the remnants of a wedding party, with their ties loosened and sweat glistening in their hair.

“Let’s go home to the kids,” I told them.

“Gladly,” Donovan said, groaning as he rose. “I’m not as limber as I used to be.”

“You? Limber?” Gregor barked a laugh.

“Do we have ice cream at home?” Michael wondered out loud. “I would very much like a bowl of ice cream.”

“The chocolate?” I asked. “I’ll bet Gregor another \$100 that Brandi ate it.”

We laughed together, arms around each other as we called an Uber to take us home.