



TONYA COFFEY

CLAWED

A PANTHER'S PRIDE SAGA
BOOK 1

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CLAWED

First edition. May 28, 2020.

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Saguaro Books, LLC
16845 E. Avenue of the Fountains, Ste. 325
Fountain Hills, AZ 85268
www.saguarobooks.com

ISBN: 9798640047554
Library of Congress Cataloging Number
LCCN: 2020937484
Printed in the United States of America
First Edition

Chapter 1

I stood on the sideline, watching for my teammates to finish the obstacle course. My blood rushed through my veins with excitement as I waited for them to cross the finish line. I wanted to be on the course with them, to be one of five girls chosen to compete but I wasn't fast enough. I loved running. It was something I did every chance I got; however, my time landed me on the bottom. It didn't register to the drill sergeants who pulled the top fifteen cadets from ten different schools. I stood out at my high school, but not at Fort Knox for the summer leadership program. Here I was 1 of 100 cadets in OCPs.

When I first moved to the small town in the Appalachian Mountains, I didn't get a choice of what classes I wanted to take in high school. Because it was halfway through the year, I got the classes no one wanted. The Junior Reserved Officers Training Corps (JROTC) was one of those classes. The JROTC wasn't a class I'd normally picked. After all, they wore camouflage. I didn't mind wearing some green but a whole outfit. What kind of a girl do you ask wears cammies? *Well, I do. Now that I've been in the class for a year.* I wouldn't trade it for anything.

Cheers erupted at the end of the course pulling me from my thoughts. Cadets, decked out in cammies ran full speed from the last obstacle to the finish line. One after another, I watched as my team, along with others, came into view.

"Yeah," I screamed, "way to go."

Rob Anderson was the first runner to cross the line. He looked as if he belonged on the course. When he stood next to the drill sergeant, he fit right in. He was the leader of our group and the highest ranking officer in our school. When we returned in the fall, he would be our battalion commander. It was a pretty amazing spot to be in.

Tony Jenkins was the second runner to cross. He was hot on Rob's heels at the finish line. When he met a group of girls cheering the race on, he had to stop and say hello. He cocked his head to the side and smiled at them. It was who he was, a big flirt. He played the part well, looking as if he stepped off the movie screen with his dark lashes and green eyes.

"Here she comes," Sarah Jean called out, alerting me to the first girl to come running up the hill to the finish line.

I looked at the crowd to see Mandy Sutton, my best friend, finish the course. We screamed and cheered, proud of what she had accomplished. Right behind Mandy, a slew of OCPs followed. Cadets roared as they flooded the field, welcoming their teammates over the finish line.

I stood foolishly watching Rob—a definition of a country boy, Mandy—the prom queen, Tony—the boy next door and Sarah—the sister you always wanted, hug each other. They smiled and laughed giving one another the praise they deserved. I didn't know why I couldn't join them. Why I couldn't tell them how proud I was of each of them. It was as if I would intrude on their celebration. They had been friends since grade school. I was the new kid. I'd only been a part of their group for a year now.

The crowd settled down when Sgt. Matthews, the drill sergeant over our school, stepped forward to read out the times. "I will be awarding a medal to the female cadet who, not only, finished the obstacle course first, but she broke the record for female cadets."

The girls who ran the course stepped forward. We screamed out Mandy's name. The drill sergeant smiled. "Mandy Sutton." Cheers erupted as Mandy walked up to Sgt. Matthews. She stood at attention, her hands at her sides, as he slipped a red, white and blue ribbon with a gold medal on it over her head.

"Congratulations, Sutton." He shook her hand.

"Thank you, Sir."

When she turned and headed into the crowd, the girls stopped her and the boys tried to get her attention. I envied her. She was everything I wanted to be. She was smart, pretty and athletic and she had a big family. She knew they loved her. Being in JROTC showed me I could have the family I always wanted. When I turned eighteen, I was signing up for the service. I was going to say goodbye to foster parents and bratty kids who liked calling me names. I sighed. Too bad it was three long years away.

Chapter 2

Five days of getting up at 0500 hrs, I was ready to sleep until 1400 hrs. I didn't mind rising before dawn or the exercises we did, it was the lack of sleep and every muscle in my body felt like wet noodles.

Tonight was our last night as military cadets at Fort Knox. The school's instructors decided to award the schools for the week of hard work by taking us to the local PX so we could do something other than watch TV and play pool.

Hurrying to the shower, I tried to beat most of the girls. Instead, I was next to last in line. When it was finally my turn, I rushed through my routine, dried my hair and dressed in a pair of white shorts and a blue tee-shirt. Standing in front of the mirror, I ran a brush through my stringy brown hair, trying to get it to lay the way it should. When it wouldn't cooperate, I sighed loudly giving up on the task.

I walked out into the hall. Mandy came out of the barracks and met me at the top of the stairs. She had a look on her face as if she smelled something really gross. "Are you seriously going to wear that?"

I looked down at my clothes. "What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing. It's you." She sighed then smiled. "I got an idea. Let me put some makeup on you."

I shook my head. "I don't like to feel all cakey."

She rolled her eyes. "Cakey?"

"Yeah."

"A dull white cake," she said, putting her arm around my shoulders.

"You should be happy, my hair's down." I normally wore it in a messy bun on the top of my head.

"That's true," she said, with a nod.

We headed down the stairs to the parking lot where the schools lined up next to their bus. "When are you going to let me dress you up?" She just wouldn't let it go.

I laughed. Mandy was all about being pretty. It surprised me she fit into JROTC. Most girls, who joined, didn't like getting their hands dirty. She didn't care, she jumped right in.

"How about when I go on a date?"

She perked up. "Really?"

I nodded as we closed in on Sarah. I know it would never come true because boys didn't notice me. Standing out was something I didn't do, especially when Mandy was near.

The Post Exchange (PX) was a large department store with everything you could ever want or need. The front consisted of a food court, clothing took up the right side and other things went on around in a square-ish circle. It reminded me of the peddler's mall with the stores combined under one roof and one place to pay in the center.

Mandy, Sarah and I scanned the clothing racks, trying to decide which Army souvenir we would buy. It wasn't long until Rob and Tony joined us. Even though there were twelve kids from our school who came, we were the closest. They welcomed me into their group with no care of where I came from. It was the first time I felt special.

"Are you going to buy a shirt?" Mandy asked Rob. "Or are you strictly Marines?"

Sarah and I knew Mandy had a big crush on Rob. They even flirted from time to time. He had dated a girl named Ashley for years. When she found out he was going to the Marines, she dumped him. That was six months ago.

Rob leaned in next to her. "Don't tell my recruiter but I have a drawer full of Army tees."

They just stared at each other making us uncomfortable, so Tony turned to Sarah, because she was next to him, and I walked on into the clothing racks to browse.

From time to time, I'd glance back at my gang. When I spun around the next time, my face slammed into a guy's shoulder blades. I assumed it was a guy or a block wall. My breath whooshed from my lungs and I staggered backward. Just as I was about to hit the floor, a hand gripped my wrist, stopping me.

I grabbed hold of his wrist, steadying my body and my breathing. I'd never live it down if my friends saw me fall on my butt. My eyes lifted to tell him how sorry I was for running into him but when I took in his face, my mouth went dry and all my thoughts slipped away.

He had these amazing green eyes. "Um...I'm sorry." I finally managed, trying not to notice how defined his chest and arms were. He looked as if he could bench press a bus. "I should've been watching where I was going."

He smiled. "No harm done."

I glanced down at his hand wrapped around my arm. His skin tone was tanned more than mine as if he spent every day in the sun. "I still apologize for it."

"Don't." He kept smiling. "I'm not hurt." His eyes dropped to his hand. "I should probably let you go."

I didn't want him to. It was the most attention I'd ever gotten from a boy.

"If I do, you won't fall, will you?"

I cleared my throat, as I shook my head.

When he let go, he looked around the store. "You with one of the schools?"

Fidgeting, I answered, "Yeah."

He extended his hand out to me. "I'm Dean."

I couldn't believe it. Why was he introducing himself to me? He was older, maybe twenty-one and he was cute with his buzz cut and squared jaw. He was definitely out of my league.

"Chris." I took his hand.

He raised one brow. "Is that short for Christy?"

"No," I said, "Christa."

"Huh."

"I know it's different that's why everyone calls me Chris."

"Chris?" Mandy called across the store.

I glanced over my shoulder at her then smiled at Dean. "I'd better go." I took a few steps away then faced him. "I hope I didn't hurt you."

"Nah."

I smiled lightly. "It was nice to meet you, Dean." I meant it.

"You too."

When I walked back to my friends, I took a million deep breaths to keep my heart rate under control and bit my lip to keep from smiling like a fool. I was so nervous, afraid I would fall on my face.

When I rejoined them, Tony stared at me with narrowed eyes. I turned to the shirts next to the aisle so they wouldn't ask me any questions.

My lack of eye contact seemed to fuel Tony's interest.

"Who was that?" He acted as if he were my brother instead of my friend.

“Dean,” I said with no emotion, as I picked up a shirt. “I just ran into him.”

Because Dean was the first boy they had seen me talk to, I expected them to bombard me with weird questions and silly comments but they didn’t. They stared at me for a moment, waiting for me to elaborate and that made me even more nervous.

“I’m starving,” Tony said, “Yons want to get some pizza?”

“Sounds good to me,” Sarah added.

Mandy shrugged, as she took Rob’s offered hand.

I let out a held breath, thankful they let it go, and followed them to the pizza stand.

Besides, I couldn’t wait to get a slice of pepperoni. The cheesy goodness would take my mind off the cute boy. *Maybe*, I thought, as I looked over my shoulder where he stood. He was gone. As I turned back around, I wondered where he ran off to in a hurry. My biggest question, would I ever see him again?

Chapter 3

I sat and gulped half my coke before I even tried the pizza. A week of only drinking water was hard, especially when you drank pop for breakfast every day. I needed my caffeine boost and I didn't drink coffee. *Yuk.*

The pizza smelled heavenly. The way the cheese dripped off the sides with a golden color made my mouth water. I took a big bite, relaxing into the back of my chair while the tomato and cheese teased my taste buds.

My eyes floated over Tony and Sarah sitting across from me. Walking across the PX was Dean. His eyes were locked on my location, as he strolled down the aisle. I glanced over my shoulder to see if he was eyeing someone behind me instead. When I turned back, he put his hand up and grinned. I almost choked on my pizza.

"Chris," Dean called, as he walked up to the table.

I forced the bite down, hoping I didn't have it all over my face. "Hi." I felt my friend's eyes on me so I quickly turned to them. "Guys this is Dean. Dean, Mandy, Rob, Tony and Sarah," I introduced them going from my right around the table.

He gave everyone a quick nod. "It's nice to meet you." He introduced his two companions. "This is Carter and Becca."

I glanced at Carter. I thought Dean's eyes were intense. Carter's eyes were a blue color that reminded me of the pictures of water around deserted tropical islands. His hair was shaggier than Dean's. The tips of his brown hair were golden like he'd spent one too many days in a chlorine filled pool. He was also tall, taller than most boys, close to six foot four.

"Hi," I mumbled. He didn't say anything. He just stared. My body broke out in an intense heat. My heart hammered against my ribs. I felt as if I couldn't breathe and I was starting to panic.

"When I saw you walk away, I remembered seeing your friends."

I ignored my nerves and refocused on Dean. "You saw them before?"

He nodded. "This morning."

He saw them run the course. I tried not to slouch from the disappointment I felt. It was the only thing we had done today.

"My team and I saw how well you all did on the course. To prove it, we'd like you to come to another camp that'll start in a couple of weeks."

I looked at Rob and Mandy. He watched them run, so he was asking them, not me.

“Chris?”

I turned to Dean. “What?”

“Would you like to be a part of it?”

“Me?” I was surprised. “I didn’t run.” Why would they want me to come?

He smiled, as he glanced up at Carter. “We are inviting all five of you.”

Really? I glanced at each of his friends. *Why?* I couldn’t figure out why or who would invite us. It had to be some kind of joke.

Rob asked for me, “What is this camp you’re talking about?”

“It’s a summer training facility for high school cadets who are interested in special operations. We make the habit of only asking JROTC students to attend because they already have a basic knowledge of the life we live.”

I wondered, “Are you affiliated with the Army?”

“We are an elite group,” he added vaguely. “This summer is the first that we’ve started in this state. We have other programs in Missouri and Georgia.”

As I listened to him, I remembered some of the other kids talking about a group of SOPs watching the training. They told of a General walking with the group, talking to certain cadets. There were rumors of a secret organization that were looking for their next recruits. *Is it true?*

“Where is it?” I asked.

“Eastern Kentucky,” Becca answered, as she slid in next to Tony. “I’d insist you come, handsome.” She pressed her cheek against his and let out this sigh that sounded more like a purr. “We could have some real fun.”

A little attention was all he needed. “I’m in.” He grinned causing the rest of us to roll our eyes. He was ridiculous.

“I don’t know,” Rob answered.

“Come on, Rob, it’s a great program. You’ll learn from captains, lieutenants and other sergeants,” Dean explained, “We only consider the best and, from what I saw, you guys are part of that group.”

Even though I wasn’t the best, I wanted to do it. I wanted a guarantee I would be part of their elite group. My chance at the family I’d always wanted was in my grasp. All I had to do was say yes to them right here, right now.

I have to take the chance. “I’m in.”

“Good,” he said, as he pulled out his phone. “Give me your number and I’ll send you the info.”

I felt as if I sank into my seat. “Um, I don’t have a cell phone.”

His eyes widened. “Seriously?”

Becca laughed. “I thought everyone had a cell phone.”

I felt bad for having a foster family who didn’t buy me things as the other kids. We got an allowance and I saved it for other things. At least I got clothes and food from them. I wouldn’t complain about that.

Rob handed Dean his phone instead.

“I’ll see you all in two weeks.” Dean smiled then turned and walked away.

Becca gave Tony a peck on the cheek before she followed Dean and Carter. When they got so far, Carter stopped as if he didn’t want to but had to. He turned toward us. His eyes locked on me, staring as if I had two heads. *Why did he do that?* Then in a rush, he turned and hurried after his buddies.

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