

HIS GRACE AND MERCY

BY

Katherine Freeman

Chapter One

Miss Mariah

Sergeant Spenser Marshall turn the key in his front door lock. Opening it he stepped into the cool quietness of his living room. It was a welcoming change from the day's heat of Fort Hood that he left outside. He had been stationed there at Fort Hood, Texas for the past six years, reenlisting once. Fortunately he and his wife had been able to get a house on base after the second child. It was convenient for his job and barely no expense for the income he received before he made rank. After the fourth child, his wife became seriously ill. They were to later find out it was lung cancer. A year from the date his wife was diagnosed she died. Sergeant Marshall had continued to live in the same house, not wanting to move and leave the memories of his wife.

He was glad to be home. Being in the field was never fun and he missed his children. And he missed the very familiar voice of Miss Mariah, which was what the children called her. It had been three years since his wife's death and Spencer Marshall was sure he would never be drawn to a women the way he had been to Sarah his wife, but he often found himself thinking about Miss Mariah.

It was one o'clock in the afternoon and quiet as he suspected it would be. Three of his four children were in school and he was sure Emmy his toddler would be napping. There sitting in the living room chair, his favorite chair was Miss Mariah in a peaceful deep sleep it seemed. He had gotten home a week early from the field and he wanted to surprise her and he knew he would.

If he had called ahead he knew she would have been waiting at the door for him to come and then take off quickly as usual, as if it was some kind of taboo to be alone with him. Standing there he took the opportunity to take in her features entirely. Usually there was only a glimpse of her on the run. She sat in the chair with knitting on her lap. She was working on something pink and probably for one of his girls. Spencer loved the way she took care of them. She spoiled them and seem to love them, just as Sarah would have had she lived, he was sure.

Mariah wore a blue print dress. Her long dark brown hair fell over her shoulders nearly to her knitting. That was the first time he'd seen it loose. Her feet were covered with white anklet socks. Looking at her there and able to take in all her features, he was sure she was Native American and African American, which was not usual in Fort Hood. It was the melting of the south. There were all types of mixture of nationality there. The soldiers came from all over the United States and there was the native Texicans which was a mixture of Mexican and Chicanos or Native Americans. There were Cubans and Haitians because those islands were not far off. Also Chinese and Japanese. Soldiers married often basically because of loneliness, so there was a mixture of many people. He too was part of it. His wife had been Caucasian and he was an African American.

He noticed Mariah stir a bit. Her eye lashes moved just a little over her light caramel color skin. Even sleeping he could still see a hint of the dimples on each cheek that showed clearly when she would smile. Her lips were slightly full and the natural color of dusty rose. Her nose was small yet held a hint of arrogances and Native American attitude. She moved again slightly and her knitting fell from her lap. The movement woke her and she opened her eyes. They were large and brown the same color as her hair.

Spencer watched her as she focused in on him then stood up quickly staring at him uncertain. She slowly stepped behind the chair she sat in seeming to have a need to put something between them. He smiled slightly wondering why and if she thought he would pounce on her or something.

“Sergeant Marshall” she said slowly. Her voice was low and light with a melody flow to it. “I wasn’t expecting you until next week.” Her voice faltered.

“We got back early, so I decided to come straight in. I hope I haven’t inconvenienced you by showing up” Spencer smiled slightly knowing that’s exactly what he wanted to do. Catch her off guard and make her have to talk to him and spend longer than a moment with him before leaving quickly.

He watched her look at him in dismay and speechless as she began to bite nervously on her bottom lip seeming to decide what to do.

“I better go” she said slowly “Emmy is napping and dinner is on the stove.” She moved from behind the chair and went quickly to the hallway escaping down it.

Spencer knew she would return in a few minutes packed and ready to leave. He stored his gear in the front hall closet and took off his jacket. Underneath was his army t-shirt, sweaty from the field. His dog tags dangled from his neck on a chain. He went to the refrigerator listening intent for any sound that Mariah would make. He heard nothing as he pulled out a beer and threshed off the cap. Just as he lifted it to his lips, Mariah appeared at the hall entrance. She had slipped on a pair of sneakers, pulled her hair back into a pony tail and slipped on her sweater with suit case in her hand.

“That was quick” Spencer replied a little frustrated that she had no desire to be in his company. Then he replied cynical “I’m parked behind you so I’ll have to let you out”

With those words he stared at her intent, sure she realized she would only be able to leave when he wanted her to. He watched her closely then for a reaction. She returned his stare for only a moment or two before she looked down and for the first time she seemed afraid. Spencer felt like a heel then, realizing his game playing had gone far enough. He realized Mariah was afraid of him and not sure what to do with the situation she was in. He sat the beer on the counter and pulled his keys from his pant pocket.

“I’ll let you out” he said apologetic “Thank you for taking care of the children. We’ll see you Monday morning?”

She looked up then and nodded yes slowly, still watching him doubtful as he open the door for her. Inside his car Spencer watched her watching him through her rearview mirror. He wondered what she was thinking and if those thoughts were of him. He backed his car out leaving room for her to pull out. She did and took off up Chandler Court quickly as if he were following her. Spencer chuckled to himself as he pulled back in the drive way.

As he entered his house he could smell a hint of her perfume, a flowery fragrance and he notice the knitting still on the floor where it fell. He picked up the knitting, finished off the beer and went down the hall to see Emmy. She was nearly three years old, but not old enough for preschool. Then there was Malcolm who was an inquisitive seven. Marc was six and very quiet, then there was Shannon who was bubbly, loud and always happy.

Spencer peeked into the girl’s room noticing that Emmy still napped. Mariah had combed her hair in curls that fell about her face. She wore a little pink jumper and white lace socks. Spencer tipped in and kissed her slightly on the cheek. She didn’t stir but continued to sleep. He returned to his room where he stretched out on the bed and quickly drifted into a light

sleep, thinking of the dark brown eyes of Mariah watching him through her car's rear view mirror.