

**No matter how hard she tried to stop the caring from creeping into her heart, she couldn't.**

She liked Mitch Dalton. She liked him very much.

“Why do you love pearls?” He studied her, waiting.

“Everyone knows that a pearl starts with a tiny grain of sand, but to me, it's like faith. We are like that grain of sand, and it's God's grace that can cloak us and make us shine, if we are humble and faithful enough. In the end, it's a thing of true beauty.”

“Yes, it certainly is.”

He wasn't looking at the pearl, but at her. Somehow his gaze deepened and there he went, feeling too intimate, as if he could see too much. But how could he look past the layers of defense in which she cloaked herself so carefully?

*New York Times* bestselling author **Jillian Hart** grew up on her family's homestead, where she helped raise cattle, rode horses and scribbled stories in her spare time. After earning her English degree from Whitman College, she worked in travel and advertising before selling her first novel. When Jillian isn't working on her next story, she can be found puttering in her rose garden, curled up with a good book or spending quiet evenings at home with her family.

# A Soldier for Christmas

*New York Times* Bestselling Author

Jillian Hart

If you purchased this book without a cover you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as “unsold and destroyed” to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this “stripped book.”



LOVE INSPIRED BOOKS



Recycling programs  
for this product may  
not exist in your area.

ISBN-13: 978-1-335-14702-8

A Soldier for Christmas

First published in 2006. This edition published in 2019.

Copyright © 2006 by Jill Strickler

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the written permission of the editorial office, Love Inspired Books, 195 Broadway, New York, NY 10007 U.S.A.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

This edition published by arrangement with Love Inspired Books.

® and TM are trademarks of Love Inspired Books, used under license. Trademarks indicated with ® are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office, the Canadian Intellectual Property Office and in other countries.

[www.Harlequin.com](http://www.Harlequin.com)

**Printed in U.S.A.**

I wait for the Lord, my soul doth wait,  
and in his word do I hope.

—*Psalm 130:5*



To Frank Heidt. Thanks for taking the time to answer my questions about Force Recon. I'll keep your family in my prayers, always.

## Chapter One



Kelly Logan closed the textbook with a huff and blinked hard to bring the Christian bookstore where she worked into focus.

Math. It was *so* not fair that she, a twenty-four-year-old college student, had to take the required course so she could graduate. She intentionally hadn't thought about quadratic equations since high school, which was six years ago. Hello? Who would want to have to think about this stuff? Unfortunately, she was paying good tuition money to have to think about this stuff. She rubbed her forehead in the hopes that her equation-induced headache would go away.

No such luck. Pain pounded against her temples as though someone was inside her skull, beating her with a mallet. Lovely. She'd

been studying algebra for thirty minutes in the quiet lull of a Friday afternoon. Thirty minutes was all it took for her neurotransmitters to quit working in protest. Not that she blamed them. Definitely time for a study break before her head imploded. She leaned a little to the left over the counter to check on the store's only customer, busily browsing in the devotionals display. "Do you need any help, Opal?"

"Any more of your help and I'll break my budget, honey." Elderly Mrs. Opal Finch wandered away from the decorated table with a small book in hand. "I got this one. The one you recommended. I see one of your bosses put up a written recommendation on it, too."

"Katherine has exquisite taste."

Opal slipped the book onto the counter. "Since when have you two steered me wrong? It's such a pretty cover, I couldn't resist."

"Neither could I. I bought it today—pay-day." Kelly gestured toward the identical small pink book next to her textbooks before she rang up the sale. "I already took a peek at it. The first day's devotion is awesome."

"Wonderful. Are you going to want to see



my identification? That new girl did last time I was here.”

“Nope, I know your account number by heart.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Opal’s merry green eyes sparkled with amusement. “So you can verify my senior citizen discount! It’s a hoot, that’s what it is, questioning my age. Oh my, it’s good for the soul.”

“You look eighty-three years young to me,” Kelly assured the lovely octogenarian as she scribbled down the purchase on an in-house charge slip.

“Bless you, dear, I surely appreciate that. And I don’t need a bag, sweetie. Conservation, you know.” She opened her wide paisley-patterned purse, hanging by sturdy straps from her forearm.

Kelly leaned over the counter to slip the book and receipt into the cavernous purse. “Thanks for coming by. You stop in and tell me how you like the devotional, okay?”

“I most certainly will.” Opal snapped her purse shut, her smile beaming and her spirit shining through. “Don’t study too hard. An education is important, but don’t you forget. There are greater blessings in this life.”

In yours, yes. Kelly filed the in-house copy of the charge slip in the till and held back the shadows in her heart. She feared that a happy family may not have been in God's plan for her. Sometimes it was hard to accept, to see the reason why she'd been given the parents she had.

Some days it was all she could do to have faith.

"Kelly, dear," Opal called over her shoulder on the way to the door. "Be sure and tell Katherine good-bye for me. That girl works too much!"

"I'd tell her that, but she won't listen."

The bell over the front door chimed cheerfully as it swung open with a force hard enough to keep the bell tinkling a few extra times.

"Let me hold the door for you, ma'am." A man's rugged baritone sounded as warm as the intense August sunshine, and the bell jingled again as he stepped aside, holding the door wide as Opal passed through.

Something puzzled her. His voice. There was something about it. Kelly couldn't see him well because of the glare of bright sun-

light slanting through the open window blinds lining the front of the store.

All she saw of the newcomer was his silhouette cutting through the strong lemony rays of the western sun. It was a silhouette cut so fine, everything within her stilled, awe-struck by the iron-strong impression of his wide-shouldered outline.

“Why, thank you, sir,” Opal’s genteel alto rang with admiration. “You’re a fine gentleman.”

“You have a nice afternoon, ma’am.” He stepped out of the touch of the light. His shadowed form became substance—a fit, capable soldier dressed in military camouflage, who looked as if he’d just walked off the front page of the newspaper and into the bookstore.

Wow. Definitely, one of the good guys.

“Good afternoon.” The soldier removed his hat, the floppy brimmed kind that was camouflage, too, revealing his thick, short jet-black hair. He nodded crisply in her direction.

“Uh. G-good afternoon.” Was that really her voice? It sounded as if she had peanut butter stuck in her throat. Totally embarrassing. “Do you need any help?”

“I might. I’ll let you know.” He stood too far away for her to see the color of his eyes accurately, but his gaze was direct and commanding.

And familiar. There *was* something about him. It wasn’t uncommon for soldiers to find their way in here, down from the army base up north.

Could he be a repeat customer? She considered him more carefully. No, she sure didn’t think he’d been in before. His face was more rugged than handsome, masculine and distinctive with piercing hazel eyes, a sharp blade of a nose and square granite jaw.

Kelly, you’re gawking at the guy. Again, a little embarrassing, so she went in search through her backpack instead. Her aspirin bottle was in there somewhere—

“Hey, I know you. You’re Kelly, right? Kelly Logan?” The handsome warrior grinned at her, slow and wide, showing straight, even white teeth. Twin dimples cut into lean, sun-browned cheeks. “South Valley High. You don’t remember me, do you?”

Then she recognized the little upward crick in the corner of his mouth, making the left side of his smile higher than the right. Like a

video on rewind, time reeled backward and she saw the remembered image of a younger, rangy teenage boy.

“Mitch? From sophomore math class. No, it can’t be—” Like a cold spray from the leading edge of an avalanche, she felt the slap and the cold. The past rolled over her, and she deliberately shut out the painful blast and held on to the memories of the man standing before her. The shy honors student who’d let her, the new girl, check her homework answers against his for the entire spring quarter.

“Yep, it’s me.” A very mature Mitch Dalton strode toward her with a leader’s confidence. “How are you?”

“Good.” A sweet pang kicked to life in her chest. She remembered the girl she used to be. A girl who had stubbornly clung to the misguided hope that her life would be filled with love—one day. Who had still believed in dreaming. “You have changed in a major way.”

“Only on the outside. I’m still a shy nerd down deep.”

“You don’t look it.” She glanced at the pile of textbooks on the counter. She, on the

other hand, was still a shy bookish girl—and looked it.

“You haven’t changed much.” Mitch halted at the edge of the counter, all six feet plus of solid muscle, towering over her. “I would have known you anywhere.”

“Why? Because—wait, don’t answer that.” She saw the girl she’d been, so lost, so alone, in and out of foster care and relatives’ homes. She belonged nowhere, and that had been a brand she’d felt as clearly as if it had been in neon, flashing on her forehead. She still did.

Forget the past. Life was easier to manage when she looked forward and not back.

Mitch jammed his big hands on his hips, and the pose merely emphasized his size and strength. “It’s been a long time since we sat in Mr. Metzger’s advanced algebra class.”

“Math. You had to go and remind me of that particular torture. I was lost until you took pity on me and gave me a little help. I wouldn’t have passed Algebra Two without you.”

“Math’s not so bad. I’m planning on getting a math degree after I get out next summer.”

“Out of the army?”

“Please. I’m a marine.”

“I should have known. The distinctive camouflage outfit gives it away. Not.”

His left eyebrow quirked as he glanced down at his uniform and then at his name on his pocket—M. Dalton. “Did you really remember me, or did you just read the tag?”

“You were too far away when you walked in. So, this is what you’ve been doing since high school?”

“Yep. Being a soldier keeps me busy and out of trouble.”

Kelly wasn’t fooled. His hazel eyes sparkled with hints of green and gold, and humor drew fine character lines around his mouth. He didn’t look as if he caused trouble. No, he looked as if he stopped trouble when it happened. “Are you stationed up north?”

“It’s only temporary. I’m here for more training. Then it’s back to California, and the desert after that. They keep me pretty busy.”

“The desert, as in the Middle East? Like, in combat?”

“That’s what soldiers do.” His smile faded. He watched her with a serious, unblinking gaze, as if he wanted to change subjects. “How’s Joe doing?”

“J-Joe.” She froze in shock. Didn’t Mitch

know what had happened? Her chest clogged tight, as if she were buried under a mountain of snow. She wanted to be anywhere, anywhere but here. Talking about anything, anyone.

It felt as if an eternity had passed, but it had to be only the space between one breath and the next.

Silent, Mitch loomed over her, the surface of the wooden counter standing between them wide as the Grand Canyon. The late-afternoon sun sheened on the polished counter, or maybe it was the pain in her eyes that made it seem so bright. Looking through that glare and up into Mitch's face was tough. It was tougher still to try to talk about her broken dreams. They were too personal.

She'd stopped trusting anyone with those vulnerable places within her when she'd buried Joe.

And that's the way she still wanted it.

She slipped her left hand into her jeans pocket so he wouldn't see that there was no ring. She could not bring herself to answer him as the seconds stretched out longer and longer and she looked down at the counter,



too numb to think of anything to say, even to change the subject.

The truth of the past remained, unyielding and something she could not go back and change. There were a lot of things in her life she would have wanted to be different. A man as forthright and strong as Mitch Dalton wouldn't understand that. Not at all.

The phone jingled, like a sign from above to move on and let go. She had a reason to step away from the tough marine watching her, as if he could see right into her.

"Excuse me," she said to him and turned away to snatch the phone from the cradle. "Corner Christian Books. How can I help you? Oh, hello, Mrs. Brisbane."

Mitch retreated from the counter, captivated by Kelly's warm, sweet voice. It was still the same.

*She* was not—quiet, yes, sweet, yes, but wounded. So, what had happened?

Years ago, the first time he'd come home on a much-deserved quick break from his Force Recon training, he'd gotten up the courage to ask his mom first about any hometown news. And then about Kelly in particular.

She's marrying that McKaslin boy she's been dating, Mom had said.

Married. That word had struck him like a bullet against a flak jacket and he'd hidden his disappointment. That had been the last time he'd asked about Kelly Logan.

She wasn't married now, whatever had happened. As he sank into the rows of books, he cast another glance in Kelly's direction. Her gentle tone continued. Clearly she knew and liked the customer who'd called. But this didn't interest him so much as what he could read by simply looking at her. The way she held herself so tightly and defensively, as if she were protecting the deepest places in her heart. The way her smile didn't reach her pretty blue eyes. Sadness clung to the corners of her soft mouth and made her wide almond-shaped eyes look too big in her fragile heart-shaped face.

How much of that sadness had he made worse by putting his foot in his mouth? Troubled, he turned his back, determined to leave thoughts of the woman behind, but they followed him through the long shelves of Bibles and into the Christian fiction rows. He still

reeled from the raw pain he'd recognized in Kelly's eyes.

He'd been so wrapped up in his life, in his demanding job and nearly constant deployments, that he'd almost forgotten that heartbreak and tragedy happened off the battlefield, too.

Pain. He hated that she'd been hurt. He hated that he'd been the one to bring up the past. He should have looked at her hand first, the ringless left hand she'd been trying to hide from him, before he'd said anything. Something had happened to her, something painful, and he was sorry about that.

Wasn't pain the result of relationships? He saw it all the time. Marriages failed all around him, it happened to his friends, his team members, marines he barely knew and to his commanding officers.

Between the betrayal when a spouse broke wedding vows or changed into a different person, and the grief when love ended, he didn't know how anyone could give their hearts at all, ever, knowing the risks. Knowing the pain.

That was why he kept clear of relationships. Not only did he not have much free time to

get to know a woman, but he wondered how anyone knew when it was the real thing—the kind of love that lasted, the kind his parents had—or the kind of relationship that ended with devastation.

Either way, it was a lot more risk than he'd felt comfortable with.

So, why was he searching for a view of Kelly? From where he stood, the solid wooden bookshelves blocked the front counter, so he stepped a little to his left until he could see her reflected in the glass like a mirror. Perfect.

He wanted to say it was guilt, of bringing up something painful that had happened with Joe, that made him notice the way the soft fluff of her golden bangs covered her forehead and framed her big, wide eyes. And how the curve of her cheek and jaw looked as smooth as rose petals. Her hair curled past her jawline and fell against the graceful line of her neck to curl against the lace of her blouse's collar.

But that wasn't the truth. Guilt wasn't why he was noticing her. Concern wasn't the only reason he couldn't seem to tear his gaze away. He was interested. He was stationed here for

a short stint, that was all, and he wasn't looking for anything serious—that was a scary thought.

No, he wasn't ready for that. He didn't have time for that. He wasn't a teenaged kid anymore with an innocent crush, and by the look of things, Kelly'd had her heart broken. She probably wasn't looking, either.

He'd come here to find a gift—nothing more—and he'd be smart to get to it. That was the sensible thing to do. He wandered back to the aisle of Bibles, determined to keep his attention focused squarely on his difficult mission: finding a suitable birthday gift.

The rustle of her movements jerked his attention back to her. He was at the end of the row, giving him a perfect view of Kelly. She'd hung up the phone and was circling around the edge of the long front counter. She was keeping her eyes low and intentionally not looking his way, but he kept observing her as he went on with his browsing.

He couldn't say why he watched her as she padded to the far edge of the store. Or why he noticed how elegant she looked in a simple pink cotton blouse and slim khaki pants. It was a mystery. He wanted to attribute it to his

training—the marines had trained him well and paid him to observe, but that wasn't it at all. Not truthfully.

He couldn't say why, but he listened to the whisper of her movements and kept listening...even after she'd disappeared from his sight.