

Sample chapters from
Losses (Book Three in *The Ro Delahanty Series*)

Chapter Twenty-Five / Rope-A-Dope

Saturday, October 1, 2005, early evening

Foxtrot raised his glass of Hennessy and Coke. “To Whiskey, *the* Top Dog.”

Ro acknowledged the toast with a nod and lifting her own glass of merlot.

They were in the restaurant of the Estherville Hotel a few miles from the Fort Defiance campus for a celebratory dinner – Foxtrot’s suggestion – for having earned their SWAT accreditation and because Whiskey had won Top Dog designation for the entire training session. Both certificates would end up on the wall of Ro’s study, next to her bachelor’s degree.

Foxtrot looked like a different person without the no-nonsense scowl, his face now relaxed and quick to smile. Instead of the formidable black tactical garb, he was wearing a tan, stylized Nehru-inspired sports jacket over a white collarless shirt, which, of course, highlighted his dark skin. Ro, having assumed she was staying on campus between her SWAT and sniper training, had not packed any dress-up clothes, so fell back on a dark green knit Henley shirt and jeans for their...

Date? Is that what it was? It sure felt like one.

“I feel bad for Oscar, though,” Ro said, “to have his certificate yanked on the last day.”

“Hey, Whiskey, it wasn’t your fault,” Foxtrot protested, but then with a devilish grin added, “well, come to think of it, it sort of *was* your fault.” He was teasing her, but then turned serious. “Look, he knew the rules, but couldn’t keep his macho crap to himself.”

They had heard “the rules” during their orientation on the first day.

“Here at Fort Defiance, there are three absolute rules: There is *no* alcohol or drugs allowed on campus; there is *no* sexual contact of any kind; and *no* sexist bullshit. Break any of these rules and we send you home, no exceptions.”

For their last exercise, Whiskey, Foxtrot, Kilo, and November were each made team leads and then needed to choose five additional members for their team. Whenever Ro’s turn came, she selected one of the other four females in the class, finally passing on adding a fifth member, which would have had to be a male. It caused several raised eyebrows and Oscar to humph under his breath, “Ahh, the Pussy Patrol.”

Unfortunately, an instructor overheard the comment and immediately sent him to the dorm with orders to pack his gear and go home, as he had just lost his certification.

“I have to admit, I might have entertained a thought or two about why Whiskey was taking only the females,” Foxtrot said. “I know cops, and that the females probably would have been the last ones picked, but I was hopeful you weren’t making some sort of feminist statement.”

Ro gave him a sly look suggesting, “Hardly,” but with no need to say it aloud.

“Then I figured out you were pulling a rope-a-dope on us,” he announced with a smile.

Now it was Ro’s turn to raise her glass, acknowledging he’d been right.

“You figured they’d under-estimate an all-female team, let their guard down... Am I right?”

The final op had been for each of the SWAT teams to assault a group of gunmen hunkered down on a mock superhighway overpass. Like with the urban setting, Fort Defiance had gone to great lengths to create a realistic simulation. The “bad guys” were heavily armed, had the advantage of the high ground position, and were well-protected by the bridge’s concrete side railings and parked cars and trucks.

Each team had sixty minutes to either capture or neutralize the gunmen.

“Which is exactly what they did,” Ro said, agreeing with Foxtrot.

Where all the other teams used some variation of a frontal assault tactic and had prevailed by “killing” most or all the gunman and losing one or two of their own team, Team Whiskey had captured the entire group of bad guys and with no one on either side even wounded.

“I know our team and one other used smoke grenades to hide our assault, but I’m embarrassed to say none of us thought of using it to mask a flanking maneuver...and we should have,” Foxtrot said. “I guess we let our testosterone influence our thinking more than it should have. My hat is off to you, Whiskey,” he added, raising his glass in salute.

“Thanks, I was lucky and had the team to pull it off.”

After assembling her team, Whiskey asked if any played softball; three had. Then asked if any were tomboys who liked to crawl around in the mud; all four grinned and raised their hands. Finally, were there any deer hunters and had they used a ghillie suit for cover? The surprise was two nodded. Her nascent plan might work...

The “plan” was for two of the softball players to throw smoke grenades one after the other as far as they could out into the open field approach to the overpass; Whiskey even requested double the number of issued grenades from the instructors. The idea was not to obscure a frontal assault, which the two grenade throwers tried to imitate by running back and forth in the smoke firing at the gunmen, but to disguise Whiskey and her two colleagues in Ghillie suits splitting off to the right.

Their mission was to climb the highway embankment unseen in their camouflage suits, cross the road sixty yards on the shooters’ left flank, then make their way back to their rear. When Whiskey and her team were in position, the softball players switched from smoke grenades to flash-bangs, but lobbed them up high over the shooters’ heads as a final distraction, allowing Team Whiskey to get the drop on the bad guys.

Her plan indeed worked exactly as intended.

“Well, I’m not so sure luck had *that* much to do with it,” Foxtrot protested. “Seems to me you put together a plan and made the best use of your people’s skills to get the job done. Smart,” and, after a brief pause, added, “and beautiful.”

It was the first time Foxtrot had conceded he was not just talking to another genderless teammate. And it finally opened the door on the sexual tension that had been gradually building between them as they’d competed in the various SWAT exercises, eventually developing into an elaborate but unspoken foreplay.

It had started in the first exercise, although at the time Ro had only thought of it as two good cops being in synch in a potentially dangerous situation. As the two weeks unfolded, it had become increasingly obvious the attraction between them had grown. While scrupulous to avoid any hint at the mutual pull – no glances with extra messages, no comments with double meanings – their contrived arm’s length relationship was obvious to them if no one else.

“Thanks. I’ll take the smart part. I’m not so sure about the other...”

“Of course, you’re not beautiful, Whiskey. As a female cop you’re not allowed to be ‘beautiful.’ You need to be tough and poker-faced. By the way, you *do* have a damn good poker-face. I bet you’ve been honing it for years.”

Ro couldn’t keep from smiling, partly at Foxtrot’s now obvious flirting, but also recalling how Sissy Pinchon had called her on her cop-face affectation last spring.

Foxtrot straightened up in his seat, his mouth hanging open in pretend astonishment. “Uhhh, a minute ago I was having dinner with this really tough-looking SWAT officer, definitely not my usual type... So, who are *you*?”

“Well, I suppose if we’re breaking rules here,” Ro said, holding out her hand. “My name is Ro.”

Foxtrot took the offered hand, not only to shake it, but to hold it longer than was necessary for courtesy’s sake.

“I’m glad to meet you, Ro. I’m Wes. Is it Ro for Rowena?”

“Nope. Ro as in Rowan. I’m at least the fourth or fifth female in my family tree to be called Rowan.” Touching her head, adding, “In Irish it means, appropriately enough, red-headed one. Is Wes for Wesley?”

“Nope, it’s short for Wester. My father was from Haiti. Wester is a popular male child’s name there.”

They continued to eat and chat; much more relaxed now they’d dispensed with the “you’re just another cop” pretense. Wes learned Ro was a deputy sheriff; Ro learned Wes was a big city cop. Ro learned Wes was a sergeant; Wes learned Ro was a corporal. Minor details... Innocent details... Studiously sidestepping any consequential specifics, especially like if either was married or in a relationship.

As they were finishing the meal, Foxtrot arrived at the question Ro had suspected was coming.

“Do you *really* want to go back to the Fort Defiance dorm tonight, Whiskey?” he asked.

Maybe it was the two weeks of mandatory genderless interaction finally catching up with them. Or that they could no longer disregard their implicit foreplay. Or Whiskey liked the idea of a little variety. Or her long-suppressed wanton streak was re-asserting itself. Or the wine...

“No.”