



LEST
OLD

Marines
BE FORGOT

ALWAYS A MARINE SERIES



HEATHER LONG



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Lest Old Marines be Forgotten

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Welcome Letter

I never planned to write “military romance.” I didn’t wake up one morning and think, huh, I should write military heroes and the men and women who love them. In fact, it was the last thing on my mind until I wrote about Luke Dexter, a retired Marine, in *Once Her Man, Always Her Man*. He left the woman he loved when he enlisted because at eighteen he didn’t figure on surviving. He was a young man going to war to defend his country—and he grew up to become a man, a Marine, and an officer.

The level of honor I discovered in this one hero, drove me to explore

others. We're a country that has been at war for over a decade. We've an entire generation who has known nothing but this activity and who have seen their fathers, brothers, sons, sisters, daughters, and wives serve overseas in hot zones.

Keeping It Real

As romantic as military heroes are, I like to keep it real. Most of the heroes I wrote at first were retired or no longer on active duty. But for those still on active duty—they don't have control over everything they do because they have to be on call 24/7 even when they're on leave.

They can't always commit to a lifetime because their lives aren't their own. At the end of *Her Marine*, Brody had to go because his leave was only for a couple of weeks. He enjoyed his time with Shannon and you know that he and Shannon are in touch, but he can't just "quit" and stay with her for a happily ever after.

They Don't Get To Pick

Applying for jobs or assignments in the military can take time and dedication and clearance. So when you get an assignment you've wanted, you can't just change things overnight because you met someone. The same is true for the

potential military spouse—they have to be ready to pick up and move when their spouse gets orders.

The best part of this series is putting a human face on these people who are dedicated to our country and give up what so many of us expect as essential freedoms. I respect and admire those who love them for the sacrifices they have to make as well. At the end of the day, our military and their families are heroes because they go to the places no one wants to be and they do it, knowing they might not return.

The friendships forged, the class walls that collapse, the fact that in the military you aren't a race, or an economic status or a region—you're

Marines—battle buddies, comrades, companions, and their relationships are forged through your shared experiences.

They are the few and the proud...

Every hero or heroine I write inspires me. The *Always a Marine* series fills me with an inexplicable hope—because it's these men and women who protect my way of life.

Semper Fi
Heather

A Note from the Author

The mission of the U. S. Marine Corps Reserve Toys for Tots Program is to collect new, unwrapped toys during October, November, and December each year and distribute those toys as Christmas gifts to less fortunate children in the community in which the campaign is conducted. The primary goal of Toys for Tots is to deliver, through a new toy at Christmas, a message of hope to these youngsters that will assist them in becoming responsible, productive, patriotic citizens.

This holiday collection of the *Always a Marine* series is dedicated to

Toys for Tots and the men and women of the United States Marine Corps Reserve who dedicate their time, their efforts, and their funds to delivering this message of hope. A portion of the proceeds from each of these books will be donated to Toys for Tots to continue that mission. Semper Fi.

<http://www.toysfortots.org>

Lest Old Marines be Forgot

Always a Marine Book 21

**By
Heather Long**

~DEDICATION~

Love never dies....

Chapter One

Tossing three bills onto the growing stack in the center of the table, soon-to-be-retired Lieutenant Colonel Tom Baxter leaned back in his chair and stared patiently at the younger man across the table. Luke Dexter, a former captain, studied Tom, not his playing cards.

Just like his father. Nostalgia stabbed him. Tom had known the Dexters for years, stood up with Luke's father when he married his mother—and stood again when they'd buried her and Luke's sister. And, one final time, when he'd been a pallbearer at the Colonel

Dexter's funeral—standing in for Luke when the captain hadn't been able to attend.

Years of practice kept his expression neutral. Whatever tell Luke searched for in his face—he wouldn't find it. More experienced men than he had failed in the attempt.

Tapping his cards once, Luke added another set of bills to the pot. "I'll see your thirty, and raise you another twenty."

"You should hold onto your money, Marine. You have a pretty new wife to feed." Tom didn't hesitate to add another crisp twenty to the stack. The pot currently sat at around six hundred

dollars. Three other men occupied the table with them, though they'd folded one by one—it was only a matter of time before Luke did as well.

Their dealer flipped the last card for the game of Texas Hold'em; a queen of diamonds. Logan Cavanaugh let out a long, low whistle. Two queens showing meant a possible three of a kind or four of a kind for that matter, depending on who held the lucky ladies.

Barely sparing a glance at the card, Tom kept his attention on Luke. The captain maintained his cool. He had a lot of his old man in him—a lot. But Luke didn't have his patience. "Your bid," Tom reminded him.

"It's kind of like watching an old

West showdown,” Damon Sinclair, the resident chef and restaurant entrepreneur murmured to Cavanaugh. The two men had folded halfway through the hand.

Westwood, their headshrinker, chuckled and tapped the table. “Ante up or fold, Luke.”

Shifting, Luke pulled out his wallet and counted out four crisp fifty-dollar bills. He tossed them with an almost nonchalant air onto the stack. The men’s chatter cut off and every gaze in the room swung to him. Tom put his hand on the stack of bills next to him and shoved them all to the center.

“All in.”

Luke studied him.

Tom waited.

The younger man blinked. “Fuck it.” He shoved the rest of his cash to the center as well. “Call.”

Smiling slowly, Tom flipped over the first card. Queen of Spades. Damon whistled. Moisture decorated Luke’s upper lip as he smiled ruefully.

“I am so screwed.”

Flipping the second card, the Queen of Hearts, Tom nodded. “Yes, young man—you are.”

“Dammit.” Luke laughed and revealed his king and jack, which when matched with what lay out in the spread would have given him a straight.

Whistles cut the air and the men

cheered. “And now that we’re all broke, we can really get the drinking going.” Cavanaugh was up and heading for the bar.

“No drinks for me.” Sinclair shook his head, grabbed his keys and mimed a salute at Tom. “I gotta go. It was good to meet you Lieutenant Colonel. But I’m off to kidnap Helena for the weekend.” The men had given him a hard time about his attorney girlfriend earlier, but the Cajun hadn’t seemed to mind.

“She say yes yet?” Westwood stacked the cards before sorting the cash in the pot into piles by denomination. They’d been playing for charity.

Sinclair shrugged into his coat. “Why, yes she did. That’s where we’re

headed—Las Vegas.”

Tom hid a smile as the other men froze then the war whoops began as one by one they rose, pounded Sinclair on the back and gave him handshakes.

“Why the hell didn’t you say something?” Cavanaugh demanded.

“Because she doesn’t have a ring on her finger yet, but before that clock strikes midnight, she damn well will.” Westwood and Cavanaugh walked Sinclair out, offering a wide range of advice and teasing comments. Luke rejoined Tom at the table and finished counting out the cash.

“Four thousand, pretty nice donation, sir. You sure you will want us to drop it

in the kitty for the drive?” They’d hosted fundraising events all month—doubling up their donations to Toys for Tots and Mike’s Place.

“Wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t, son. Why are you questioning my orders?” The last he asked without heat or censure and Luke laughed.

“Fair point, sir. Fair point.” Finishing the count, Luke tied off the roll of cash with a rubber band and locked it in a safe. “It’ll be a while before they get back. I expect they’re going to give Damon a hard time. Cigar?”

One habit he’d never given up in thirty-plus years of service—the occasional cigar during a social situation. Retrieving his jacket from the

coat rack, Tom followed Luke out of his office and down a hallway to a sheltered portico. Outside, the air was brisk. A deep freeze had set in following Christmas and their breath easily fogged. Both men were silent as they clipped and readied their cigars.

Tom had considered how to broach a difficult subject all evening, electing to avoid it at least while they were in mixed company. Finally, he said, “You’ve done a fine thing with this place, son. Your dad would be proud.”

A solemn shadow passed over Luke’s face and he glanced out into the dark. “I’d like to think so, sir. We were not close in those last few years.”

Yes, Dex had shut everyone out after his wife died—including his son. Laying a hand on the younger man's shoulder, Tom gave Luke a light squeeze. "He was proud of you. Don't doubt it."

"Thank you, sir." Clearing his throat, Luke gave him a small smile. "So how does retirement feel?"

"Like a dark road."

A lot of guys looked forward to the day they cycled out, retiring with full benefits, and getting on with their lives. Their spouses celebrated the final PCS and their kids enjoyed having Dad at home. Tom didn't even own a home much less have a wife or kids. The Marines had been the sum total of his

existence—until the first of December when he'd begun terminal leave.

“My offer stands; we could use a man with your experience and wisdom.” They'd been the first words out of Luke's mouth when Tom mentioned his retirement.

“I'm not a touchy-feely guy, Luke. I wouldn't know the first damn thing to say to someone who needs help. A boot to the ass—that I can do. The rest of this crap—not so much.” It wasn't in his nature. A man did what he needed to do and a Marine did what had to be done. Fussing about it after was a bunch of politically-correct bullshit and the result of a generation weaned on self-help television.

“Sometimes a boot to the ass is what’s required.” Luke chuckled. “But the offer stands.”

“Understood.” He went quiet, puffing on the cigar and considered the frosty evening. The fact that he still avoided one topic aggravated him. Sweeping his gaze across the darkened, empty area surrounding the portico, Tom paced a step forward and turned to face Luke. “I am going to discuss one matter with you. It will go no further than the two of us. After this conversation, we’re not going to speak of it again. Understood?”

Eyebrows raised, Luke shifted back a step and leaned against the wall. He

nodded once. “Yes, sir.”

Done with beating around the bush, he went right for the throat of the matter. “When you sign up for a 1Night Stand, what exactly is expected?”

To his credit, the younger man didn’t laugh, but humor did make an appearance in his smile. “I would think that’s rather self-explanatory, sir.”

Tom simply stared at him. It was self-explanatory, but he’d never engaged someone via a service before. It was one thing to pick up a woman in a social situation; it made for an entirely different matter to plan a date with a complete stranger who had been selected for him.

Luke shifted and his smile flattened. “My apologies sir, I wasn’t trying to be

a smart ass.”

“Yes, you were.” Tom forgave him. “But I’d still appreciate an answer.”

“Basically what Madame Eve says on her site. You fill out the paperwork. You answer the questions. She pairs you with someone she feels is an ideal match and you get together. Dinner is an option. A show. Or you can cut straight to the chase and meet in a hotel room.” It was his turn to look uncomfortable.

Fixing on the discomfort, Tom gestured to him with the cigar. “What did you choose?”

“Drinks.” The reply rode on a hard rush of breath. “I thought drinks were a good icebreaker. We could have dinner

and see where things went naturally.”

“So to a hotel room?”

Luke didn't answer immediately, but he winced. “Not precisely, sir.”

“Not precisely? You either went to a hotel room or not.”

“Well....” He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “The drinks and dinner were planned at the Sybarite Club downtown. It's private, discreet—and offers certain amenities in the back. Including rooms.”

“So you used one of those.” It seemed a rather sanguine way to approach the scenario. A room in a club, an assignation, and then both parties were free to leave and never see each other again. Tom wasn't sure that fit his

interest either.

“Not...exactly....”

Though intrigued by the younger man’s grimace, Tom let him off the hook. “I signed up for a date a few weeks ago. When I didn’t hear anything for a while, I assumed the lady hadn’t been able to find anyone. Two days ago, I received an email confirming I would be in Dallas through the New Year.”

“She found you a date.” It wasn’t a question. Luke’s confidence in the mysterious Madame Eve had been a deciding factor after Tom had done his information gathering.

“Apparently so. I’ve been asked to confirm the details and I don’t really

have any idea of the location. So I need to choose a location and give all the information to her. If I decide to go through with it.”

Straightening, Luke’s unease vanished. “You should. Seriously.” He held up a hand when Tom would have interrupted. “Madame Eve has a gift. Whether you get anything more than a pleasant evening with an interesting woman out of it, sir—you deserve to give yourself the chance.”

“Son, I’ve been a confirmed bachelor for most of my life. Women—they’re a passing fancy. Not many are going to put up with a Marine as set in his ways as I am.” He’d long since accepted that part of his reality.

“Then you’ve got nothing to lose... unless you’re chickening out.”

Tom stiffened at the accusation, but Luke wasn’t finished.

“A lot of guys come home screwed up. They dump their girlfriends or their girlfriends dump them. Divorce is another painful factor in their lives. We’re Marines, we endure—but we don’t have to endure alone. You’re retiring and that means you’ve got a whole new battle plan to put into place. What does it hurt to scout for the right person to be at your side on this next part of the journey?”

When he put it like that.... “It’s a fair argument.”

“I know it is. I walked away from the love of my life to be a Marine, sir. I was a damn good one—”

“Still are, son. You still are.”

He accepted the compliment with a nod. “Thank you, sir. My point is—I walked away and I spent ten years alone when I didn’t have to. Signing up for that service was the best damn decision I could have made—it brought Rebecca back into my life. Maybe this is your chance to make a second life for yourself—maybe it’s just a great way to spend a night. Go—find out.”

“Good argument. Facts over emotion.” But he didn’t disagree with it either. Truth be told, he wasn’t a

coward. He simply wasn't comfortable with the idea either.

“I have a few suggestions for places to go—we should make a decision tonight because New Year's Eve will make it hard to get reservations. I can make some calls, too. Becca knows pretty much every high end vendor in the state, so she can pull some strings.” Pride and affection crept into his voice whenever he mentioned his wife.

“I appreciate that.” He did. The arrival of the confirmation email had stumped Tom. He hadn't expected anything to come from signing up—and now that it had, he wanted to make a good impression at least.

“It will be my honor, sir.” Luke's

grin took on a sly edge. “Do we need to have a conversation about condoms?”

Amused, Tom suppressed the emotion, instead giving him a hard look. “Don’t make me beat you, son.”

“I can’t believe you talked me into this.” Brenda stared at the contents of her closet. “Why did I let you talk me into this?” Heart in her throat, she reached for her go-to, semi-formal peach dress.

“Oh, hell no.” Amelia Valentine—Brenda’s best friend and the closest she had to a real sister—jerked the creamy silk dress out of her hands and tossed it across the room.

“Hey, I love that dress.”

“I know.” Amelia nudged her to the right and began to flick through the other dresses hanging in her closet. “But you are not wearing *mother-of-the-bride* on a *date*.”

Brenda scowled. “It does not say *mother-of-the-bride*....”

“No, it actually screams Sunday morning church with all the old farts, but I was trying to be nice.” Amelia continued to sort through the clothes. “No. No. Oh, my word—Brenda, donate this to the collection box at the Salvation Army or something.” She pulled out a shapeless black sweater dress that had certainly seen better days.

“It looks fine with a belt.”

“Honey.” Her best friend turned, one

hand propped on a hip while she held the sweater dress away from her as though it might give her a disease. “It’s about six sizes too big. You lost all of that weight. Why do you keep this?”

Sighing, she took the woolen dress and held it up to her body. “Because it used to make me feel pretty.”

Sympathy creased Amelia’s face and she leaned into Brenda until they could see themselves cheek to cheek in the long mirror attached to the closet door. “You’re beautiful.” Her soft, comforting tone encouraged Brenda to believe her. The corner of her lipsticked mouth turned up. “But the dress is hideous. Toss it.”

After a quick squeeze, Amelia dove into the closet again. “This is about getting out of our comfort zone, meeting a handsome man and letting him rock your world.”

Rolling her eyes, Brenda sat down on the corner of her bed. She wore a light robe and she'd already showered and blown her hair dry. She should have known Amelia would show up at the eleventh hour to help her get ready—and make sure she didn't chicken out of the date. She couldn't complain, the whole of the last year had taken Brenda out of her comfort zone and helped her confront her ghosts. “I could just—”

“No.” Amelia whirled away from

the clothes and pointed a finger at her. “You are not going to cancel. I don’t care if we have to drive to the mall and go through every dress they have to find you the perfect outfit, but you’re *going* to go tonight. You are going to have mad sex with some stud, and you’re going to wake up tomorrow a new woman.” With her ice-blonde hair and cool blue eyes, Amelia looked as amazing as always. No one would ever know she was forty-nine and the mother of three. But, then, she swore it was a diet of healthy loving that kept her young.

Glancing away from the furious certainty in her expression, Brenda studied her own manicure. She’d chosen a dark burgundy, it was hardly her

normal color—which was clear or the palest of pink. Wanting something bold, she'd gone for darker and added glitz to the injury, the manicurist had touched up her painted toes and nails with a glittery sheen. They sparkled.

I am way too old for this shit.
“Amelia....”

“No. You do not get to *Amelia* me.” Hands on her hips, Amelia wound up to a good temper. After thirty-seven years of friendship, Brenda knew all the signs. “Last year—on New Year’s Day, I rushed over here because you’d collapsed. If you don’t do this, I know I’m going to find you unconscious. Then I’ll have to cart you to the hospital. We

are so over this—*he* wouldn't want you to keep doing that to yourself. So tonight, tonight it's a fresh start, a new man, a new way to be....”

The diatribe continued even as Amelia returned to the closet. The quaver underscoring the words and the sheen of tears stifled any further objection from Brenda. She'd agreed to apply to 1Night Stand after the second hospital trip, but she'd managed to delay half a year before Amelia sat her down in front of the computer and walked her through the process. What Amelia hadn't realized was that second trip to the hospital scared the crap out of Brenda and she'd finally started seeing a therapist. When she'd applied for the

1Night Stand, she'd thought she'd been ready.

When months went by with no offers, she'd thought maybe she'd narrowly averted disaster. Then two days before Christmas, the mysterious Madame Eve sent her a request for confirmation that Brenda was free on New Year's Eve.

“Oh, this is lovely.” The sudden change in Amelia's strident tone dragged Brenda's thoughts back to the room. She held up a body-hugging black cocktail dress with a white piping design that gave it a color block effect. Of course, its dangerously daring neckline promised something else altogether.

“I can't—” She'd been meaning to

return it, having picked it out totally on impulse.

“Oh, you most certainly can.” And with those words, she advanced on Brenda and, hustled into her bathroom, and left her with the orders to change.

“I don’t have a bra I can wear with this,” she informed the closed door.

“Honey, gravity has always been kind to you and if that fits the way I think it will—well, you won’t need a bra and you’ll be grateful to be missing it later.” Amelia said the most outrageous things. Thank God she couldn’t see the heat flaming up Brenda’s cheeks.

“You’re an awful influence.” Still, she held the dress up to herself in the mirror. She didn’t have to imagine how

she would look in it—one of the reasons she'd purchased it was the way it hugged her figure and turned her from a career loan officer into a femme fatale.

“Brenda.” Amelia’s voice softened and took on a serious, sober edge. “Put on the dress, let’s do your makeup and send you out tonight like the million-dollar woman you are. Do it because you deserve to feel beautiful and treat yourself that way. I don’t care if this guy turns out *not* to be the one, or the date flops, but you *need* this.”

Biting her lip and hating the indecision waffling through her, Brenda conceded without another word. It only took her a few moments to trade her robe

for the dress. Not glancing at herself in the mirror, she held her breath and opened the door.

Amelia lit up. “Perfect. Let’s do your makeup—and what kind of panties are you wearing?”

Rueful, but amused all the same, Brenda hiked the skirt up and showed off the lace she’d already picked out before her courage faltered.

“Woo hoo!” Her friend tugged her out of the bathroom and sat her down at the table in front of the vanity in the bedroom. “You sit there and visualize how awesome you’re going to look and I’ll take care of the rest....”

Well, I can always cancel after I’m on the road. What could it hurt?

Enduring Amelia's chatter and cosmetics turned out to be fun—and a half of glass of wine didn't hurt. When Amelia had finished, she turned around and let Brenda see the results of her labor.

Brenda stared.

The woman looking back at her in the mirror couldn't possibly be her. The cosmetic choices had been subtle and gave her plain-Jane features smoky eyes and glossy lips. Tipping her head from side to side, she tried to see what exactly Amelia had done—but she couldn't discern the type of blush—only that her cheeks bones seemed higher. Diamond tear drop earrings added a hint

of whimsy and a touch of magic to the silver streaks in her shoulder-length medium, mousy-brown hair

“A million bucks,” Amelia whispered next to her. “That’s who you are—a heart of gold, a priceless intelligence, and a million-dollar smile.”

At forty-nine years old, Brenda couldn’t believe the butterflies in her stomach. They could have competed with the flutters she’d had over prom—and this time her date wasn’t even picking her up. She was supposed to meet him.

“Amelia—” When her friend tried to cut her off, Brenda smiled and touched two fingers to her lips. “Shush. I just wanted to say thank you.”

Stealing a glance back at herself, she shook her head. She didn't know who that woman in the mirror was supposed to be. *But I guess I'll find out tonight.*

All right, Mr. Tom Baxter. Here I come.

Chapter Two

The waitress brought him a cup of coffee and a wine list—fortunately, she also gave him her opinion when he'd studied it for fifteen minutes with a scowl. "I would recommend that we let the lady choose—unless you have a specific wine preference."

No, he preferred vodka or whiskey when he drank, and that wasn't often. The wines he'd had at some social functions didn't really appeal except—"Do you have California reds on this list?" He scanned it.

"We have a delightful shiraz. It's full-bodied with black raspberry and

pomegranate, complemented by vanilla oak aromas.” She offered a hell of a lot more detail than he needed. A simple yes would have sufficed, but Tom nodded once.

“If she prefers red, let’s go with that one. And a Riesling for the white.” He wasn’t a man who hedged his bets, but he also wasn’t in the custom of meeting perfect strangers for dinner and sex—a man had to make allowances and be a little flexible.

“Excellent.” She took the wine list. “Would you like an appetizer with your coffee while you wait?”

“No, thank you.” He gave the cheerful little brunette a smile and

settled back in his chair to wait. Nearly an hour earlier than the appointed time, he'd taken an opportunity to verify the hotel was exactly as advertised and the dining location private, while not being isolated. Luke's recommendation paid off. The Turtledove Mansion may have been over a century old, boasting a colorful history as part of the elite social scene, but it was the attention to detail the current owners had exerted when they transformed the grand lady of a mansion into a luxury resort that made it the right choice.

Meticulously restored interiors, hand-carved mantles and surrounding details outlined the fireplaces, marble floors, and stained glass windows

preserved the magnificence and transported visitors to a different world. Tom had walked the halls of Saddam's palaces in Iraq, and The Turtledove Mansion easily competed with their luxury. Luke's suggestion allowed him to provide a discreet location and an option of a room when he and his date, Brenda, were ready.

Their table sat in an alcove that also doubled as a private balcony and overlooked a lit garden. According to his hostess, he and his date would also be able to see the fireworks over Dallas later should they still be at their table at midnight. If not, then their reserved suite also had a balcony and a good vantage

point. A marble-floored hallway led to their dining table and though the alcove was simply one of several such isolated settings, theirs possessed heavy cream curtains that could be closed to afford them further privacy.

Overall, it was an excellent choice on Luke's part. Fortunately, years of not doing much with his salary meant Tom could also afford the evening comfortably. He finished the cup of coffee and checked his watch. Fifteen minutes to operation launch and he heard heels tapping on the marble floor caught his attention. Glancing sideways, he spotted a pair of elegant, long legs. Trailing his attention upward, he studied the woman approaching.

The body-hugging sheathe of a dress molded her curves, and what a shape she had.... Dark hair brushed her shoulders, the silvery streaks amidst the deep brown seemed almost artistic. Straightening, he frowned when she hesitated and checked her phone. The curl of anticipation in his gut flattened out.

It didn't matter if the elegant woman searched for another date; he couldn't take his attention off her. She all but glared at her phone. A heartbeat later, she rewarded his captivation when her exasperation transformed into sparkling laughter.

Squaring her shoulders, she lifted

her chin and their gazes collided. Her smile faltered for a heartbeat, then warmed. At her look, he rose to his feet and enjoyed her long walk down the hall.

“Ms. Connors.” He extended his hand automatically, her smooth palm gliding against his.

A hint of shyness softened her expression, but she didn’t look away. “Mr. Baxter. Can I just say that you chose the loveliest spot for dinner?”

Boosted by the compliment and her gracious manner, he inclined his head. “Only if you’ll allow me to say that you outshine the location—and then some.” He’d never really been that good with flowery compliments, but a hint of color

bloomed over her cheeks and he let out a breath. “Here....” To pull out her seat meant he had to let go of her hand.

She had slender fingers, beautiful and tapered, and they’d been silky-soft with the barest hint of callouses on her index fingers and thumbs. Callouses that meant she used tools, but probably didn’t build or work with anything. His brain’s need to catalog details had proven a godsend in the field, but he didn’t need to pick apart his date.

“Thank you,” Brenda murmured and slipped around him to take the chair he held out and he scooted it in just as she sat. From his vantage point, he had a direct view of her cleavage and the

teasing hint of a dark mole on the curve of her right breast.

Clearing his throat, he moved back to his seat. “Of course.”

Any other conversation had to be tabled as the waitress chose that exact moment to reappear. Fighting his own instincts to take care of the orders, and because Luke advised him that his natural inclination to lead might be mistaken for controlling and bossiness, he let Ms. Connors handle the initial order.

The server took their drink orders. Brenda preferred red. Appetizers—bless her, she liked combo platters so they could have a selection of everything from pot stickers, to stuffed mushrooms,

to crab puffs, and shrimp cocktail.

“Do you mind if we wait to order the meal?” Ms. Connors glanced at him and it took a moment of silence to realize both she, and the waitress awaited his response.

“If that’s what you want to do, Ms. Connors. I have no objections.” He nodded once and the waitress whisked away with quiet efficiency.

“Brenda,” she murmured, setting a tiny clutch purse down on the table before reaching for a glass of water. Her lips barely skimmed the rim of the glass and she took a quick drink. “Please, call me Brenda.”

“I’m Tom.” He had nothing else to

add onto the topic, so an uncomfortable silence stretched across the table. Considering all the topics he could broach to continue a conversation with her, he hadn't managed to identify much when their waitress returned with food and wine. She poured and that bought him a few moments, but all too soon she was gone again.

And they were alone.

“Tom?” Brenda shifted and he focused on her. Twice she went to bite at her lower lip, and twice she fought the urge because her teeth never quite caught the gloss-decorated skin. “Does this feel as awkward to you as it does to me?”

She'd thrown him a lifeline. “I want to say no, because I think it would be

comforting if I could—but honestly, yes. It feels awkward, ma’am.” A hell of a lot more uncomfortable than he’d expected. At least when he met a woman in a bar, he could chat about something and get her talking. In his experience, women liked to talk. All he had to do was sit and listen, maybe even nod his head occasionally.

“Fantastic.” She picked up her glass and laughed, the musicality of it brushing across his senses in a gentle caress. “Because I have no idea what I’m doing, and I’ve never been very good at small talk or inane chatter.”

The corners of his mouth twitched. “I’m not a fan of inane chatter, either.”

After a hesitant look over her shoulder, Brenda edged her seat a little closer. “I’m going to be honest with you; I nearly didn’t show up tonight.”

“Why not?” He’d had some misgivings, but a commitment was a commitment. Having met Brenda, and all awkwardness aside, he was glad he’d made the choice to show up.

“I don’t date.” She grimaced. “Which is probably not what you want to hear.”

Not particularly, except.... “I don’t dislike hearing it. I don’t date much myself.”

“No interest?” Chin propped against her palm, she studied him with a level of

intensity that told him he had the full weight of her focus. It wasn't an altogether unpleasant situation.

“Inconvenience. Lack of opportunity. Admittedly, times when it was lack of interest. I've spent the last several years stationed abroad. It wasn't conducive to a relationship or even seeking one.” Whether he'd been in Iraq, Afghanistan, Germany, Panama—the locale had been about work, not women. Taking a sip of wine, he glanced at her elegant fingers again, her ring finger in particular. Its smooth, even color, didn't have a hint of a pale line. “What about you?”

Brenda took a deep breath and even longer drink of the wine. He recognized the boost of liquid courage for what it

was. “I’m afraid if I tell you the answer to that, you’ll give me the patient look of sympathy,” she said in a rush. “Nearly everyone does and very few understand. Not entirely sure I’m ready for that.”

Since she’d opened the door to that dialogue, he considered her quietly. “Fair enough, but I have a beautiful, charming woman sharing my table this evening and I do want to know about her.” Surprisingly, he did. Her deep chocolate-brown eyes were an invitation to sweetness. More than that, he wanted to thrust his hands through her hair, test the weight of it and feel the soft texture. Judging by the tightness in his lower body, attraction was not an issue.

Trusting his field instincts, he picked up a piece of the shrimp cocktail. Dipping it into the cocktail sauce he held it out to her. She blinked at the action, but then the faint lines of tension in her expression eased and she leaned toward the bite. Hesitant and gentle, she let him offer it, but he held the tail to pull away the pit of shell as she drew the shellfish into her mouth. Her blissful expression was a shock to his system.

“I’m retiring,” he told her for no particular reason. “Two weeks from tomorrow marks the first day of the rest of my non-military life.” And he still had no idea what he planned to do to fill the empty time. Fish, maybe. Read a book.

Maybe build a house—he'd always been good with his hands.

“But you're so young.” She frowned, the note of disbelief in her voice as much a stroke to his ego as it was an invitation to tease.

“It's not the wear and tear on the body, but the mileage under the hood.” To his immense delight, she laughed. No artifice existed in it; the full-throated sound came up from her belly. Her eyes lit up and her smile widened.

Adding to his delight, she picked up one of the stuffed mushrooms and held it out in silent offering. He accepted it, letting his teeth graze her finger. Her pupils dilated at the contact and satisfaction thrummed through him. She

wasn't immune to him. He could afford to be patient.

Holding her gaze while he finished the bite, he enjoyed the flush warming her expression. In his experience, only the very young—or the very honest—still managed to blush. “Tell me about yourself...” The demand came out more of an order than he meant, but he wanted to know. “You’ll have no judgment from me.”

When she dropped her gaze and stroked her thumb against her wine glass, frustration added spice to his disappointment. He wanted to know—and he didn't like being denied. But she wasn't his to order around, and in his

experience, women didn't respond well to commands. So, he waited.

“What the hell.” She exhaled. “I'm really not good at this dating stuff.”

“You're doing fine,” he soothed, barely recognizing the gentle gruffness in his voice.

“Amelia's going to kill me,” she muttered, and then her chin came up and her shoulders straightened. She was bracing herself and he'd seen that look in many a young Marine's eyes. She fully expected to upset him with her confession—whatever it was.

Determined to stand his ground no matter what, he reached across the table and laid his hand atop hers. “No,” he told her with a surprising sense of

conviction. “She won’t. Whoever she is. I’ve asked, you can choose to tell me or not—and I’m hoping you choose to do so.”

“I was engaged to be married.” The whispered words were so low he had to strain to catch them. It was a gut check moment, but considering she spoke in the past tense, he suppressed any negative reaction.

“Okay.”

“Thirty years ago.” She looked up from beneath lowered lashes. “God, I can’t believe it’s been that long....”

He waited, letting her tell it. Catching sight of the waitress heading in their direction, Tom gave the young

woman a firm shake of his head. Nodding, the woman pivoted and left them to their privacy. Returning his attention to Brenda, he was enormously satisfied to see she hadn't noticed.

Her hand trembled beneath his and he tightened his grip, offering strength.

“I was engaged right out of high school. His name was Steve...Steven Erickson.” Her expression softened. “He was a year older than I was, and his sister was—still is—my best friend. He graduated a year ahead of us, gone to basic and boot—and then he came home for our graduation and asked me to marry him.”

“You said yes.” It wasn't a guess, she'd said she'd been engaged.

“Without reservation.” Her expression softened, turned wistful and nostalgic. “Steve was one of those guys. Patient, unfailingly kind, dedicated—honest. If he said he was going to do something, he did it. Even when he asked me to marry him, he had a plan. I would go to college and he would continue his military service.”

She blew out a breath, a husky note in her tone. “We would meet on his leaves and spend vacations together as we could. Then when I graduated, we would discuss whether he would stay in and I’d travel to his bases with him or if he would step out and come to where I was. Every decision, he used to tell me,

we would make together.”

Dread sat like a dark rock in the pit of his stomach, but he had far too much training to betray his unease. The gentle light in her eyes when she spoke about her fiancé and the nostalgia in her voice—they were for the past. Whatever had happened to Steve—happened a long time ago.

Clearing her throat, she said, “Sorry. I don’t get to talk about him that often anymore. It hurts his sister and, I think, I’ve bored my friends.”

“Not boring at all,” he replied, wanting to reassure her.

“Well, we had a plan.” She gave him a quick smile of gratitude and he gave her hand another squeeze. “So I went to

school, and he deployed, and we wrote all the time. Steve had a very romantic soul, not that he let other people see it—he reserved it for me. He wrote me every week, the most wonderful letters. Playful, thoughtful, sometimes introspective, other times...other times filled with ideas for what we might do five years, ten years, twenty years down the road. Sometimes I think we lived an entire lifetime together in those letters.”

She sipped the wine, but made no move to take her hand from his.

“In October of 1983,” she began and stopped. Ice slithered through his veins. It didn’t take a leap to put together military service, grief and October of

1983. “He was on deployment in Beirut.” Dampness shimmered in her eyes.

“The Marine Barracks bombing.” Tom had lost good friends that day.

She nodded once. “Yes. He didn’t die right away, so many others lost their lives that day—but he was gravely injured. They flew him to Germany....”

“Ramstein.” He covered both of her hands with his now, cradling her fingers and stroking his thumb across her wrist. Her pulse raced, hammering against her flesh like it wanted to escape.

“He didn’t wake up, and the doctors weren’t hopeful. But they did everything they could. When he lapsed into a coma, they suggested that perhaps it was his

body's way of trying to heal his brain. I flew overseas with his family and we went to see him. We were there for two weeks, but he didn't wake up. I had to go back—I didn't want to, but....”

“You had school.” He supplied the words when her voice faltered.

“Yeah, and tests. Steve would have been furious if I screwed up my GPA or any of our plans because I was wringing my hands in the hospital.” She shook her head, and for a moment exasperation sparkled behind her very deep grief. “So I went home, I spoke to Amelia and her parents every day. Eventually they came home, too. Steve was still in a coma, and the doctors were guarded, but optimistic.

Every day, he seemed to improve some stat or another. So perhaps—perhaps he needed a good long sleep and he would be better.”

That hadn't been the case. She didn't have to say that for him to recognize the danger of hope. In all likelihood, the physicians had been trying to be kind to the family. He released her long enough to pick up her water glass and hand it to her, and she rewarded him by taking a drink.

“I'm sorry.” She sighed and reached out to settle her hand on his. “Sometimes it all feels like yesterday and other times it feels so very far away.”

“Grief comes and goes, usually when we least expect it. It's not the friendliest

of companions.” He’d picked up his share of ghosts along the road.

“No, it really isn’t.” She glanced down at their joined hands, and when he cradled her palm between his again, she smiled. “On Christmas Day, Steve woke up. I was at the hospital having flown over to see him for the Christmas break. I put a lot of miles on my brand new passport that year. But I was there when his eyes opened—I can’t begin to describe the joy I felt.”

He wanted to scoop her out of her chair, sit her in his lap and shield her from whatever came next. Every instinct in him wanted to protect her, but he couldn’t stop whatever had already

happened.

“It was amazing, he was laughing and talking and he was him again. Best Christmas present ever. I spent the whole week, just being with him, talking to him and living again. New Year’s Eve, they let me sleep in his hospital room and at seven a.m. that morning—it would have been midnight here—a clot broke loose and went straight to his brain. One moment he was sitting there smiling and the next moment—he died.” A tear trembled on the edge of her lashes and when it tumbled over, Tom brushed it away with his thumb.

“I’m so very sorry for your loss.” He could imagine exactly how hard that had been—or maybe he couldn’t. It really

didn't matter what he felt, it only matter that she'd been hurt. She'd loved a Marine and she'd lost him. No matter whatever else happened that evening, Tom had a mission—and that was to take care of this woman and make her smile again.

“It was thirty years ago, and most days I accept it and I've dealt with my grief. But New Year's Day is the hardest.” She gave him a watery smile. “Good God, I'm such a sappy mess. You poor man, you sign up—”

“Enough. I am rather delighted with sharing this evening with you.” The statement came out hard and firm. “Finish telling me the story.”

There was more. He knew it.

“Bossy.” Humor appeared beneath the soul-deep sadness and the flash of a smile donkey-kicked him.

“Marine,” he replied.

Surprise flickered across her face. The news seemed to startle her, but her smile softened. “Really?”

“Yes.” No artifice, no ambush. She’d loved a Marine and he wouldn’t let any misunderstanding about him sneak up on her. “Lieutenant Colonel, retired.” And for the first time, that didn’t feel so bittersweet nor as lost as he had when he’d first signed his papers.

She studied him and nodded. “I see it. I noticed it from the hallway when

you stood and the way you hold yourself. That's great. Congratulations.”

“Hmm, thank you.” Though not a man given to impulse, he lifted her hand and brushed a kiss to her knuckles. “Now stop trying to distract me from the story and finish. You were engaged thirty years ago and he died in service to his country. What does that have to do with your date tonight? And why have you not let yourself be involved since then?”

Because she hadn't—he didn't need her to tell him that. It screamed from every part of her.

“There you go being bossy again,” she said, but he heard only affection, not annoyance in the words. “While I may not have been on that many dates in the

last thirty years, even I know that talking about my fiancé is not flirtatious behavior.”

Chuckling, he picked up another piece of shrimp cocktail and fed it to her. The ease with which she accepted the offering pleased the hell out of him. “No, I simply respect loyalty, honor, and devotion. No flirting required.”

She chewed the shrimp thoughtfully and washed it down with wine, rather than water that time. “I’ve always had a tough time on New Year’s. Amelia, Steve’s sister, is still my best friend. She’s done everything over the years to encourage me to get back out there. Fixed me up, arranged dinners, but no

one ever really interested me. Then we get to this time of year and I can't help but remember it. And on New Year's, at midnight....”

The catch in her throat had him easing his chair over to sit next to her, shoulder to shoulder. “At midnight, what happens?”

“I panic. My heart races, I can't catch my breath, and in the last couple of years, I've passed out. Amelia found me the first time. She called 911, thinking I'd had a heart attack.” Her mouth twisted into a rueful grin. “I promised her it wouldn't happen again—and then it did. Last year was the last straw—according to Amelia. She was right. It was a wake up call and the doctor told

me that on the anniversary of his death, I'd get this rush of adrenaline. My pressure rose, my chest hurt, I had trouble breathing, and then I passed out. I always spent New Year's alone, and until I went to a therapist about it, I hadn't realized just how much I isolated myself. Every year made it worse. So, I got some help...and oh, Lord, this is embarrassing....”

Yet the strength with which she spoke, the gradual easing of the stiffness in her shoulders and the tears said much more. “I think it's beautiful. You still care enough about him to mourn him thirty years later. No man could ask for more, but I don't think he'd like it.” He

didn't have to know Steve, but based on what she'd said, Tom couldn't imagine the young Marine would never have wanted this for a woman he cared about. "You had an issue, you faced it. Tonight is about being somewhere else and not in that moment."

"Guilty." She blew out a breath. "Amelia wants me to let it all go."

"What do you want?" Because her would-have-been sister-in-law wasn't the woman who interested him.

"I don't know, not to be crying on the shoulder of a man I just met. To be flirty and playful and have that good time I signed up for—maybe laugh and dance and...and not pass out when my heart hurts." She bit her lower lip then grinned

ruefully. “Maybe get to know you a little better.”

“What do you want to know?”

Mission accepted.

Chapter Three

Brenda blinked at the question. Tom Baxter was not at all who she'd expected. Nor had she thought she'd bare her soul so blatantly in the first few minutes of their date, but something in the way he watched her, as if she were the solitary thing holding his attention, had wrapped her up and cocooned her in a blanket of security.

“What do you mean?”

“You said you wanted to get to know me a little better.” The gruff growl of his voice wasn't remotely unpleasant. If anything, it had a deliciously sexy power, tempered by the sincerity of

patience. “What would you like to know?”

“I’d like to know why it is when you have a million questions you’d like to ask and someone offers you the opportunity to ask them, that you go blank.” She widened her eyes then winced, and to her immense delight he laughed. It was a slow, easy sound like whiskey pouring over ice with just a hint of a crackle.

“Questions make us vulnerable—reveal our interests. One intelligence-gathering technique is to allow someone else to interrogate you. Their questions say a lot not only about what information they already have, but what they are

trying to verify and what they classify as important.” He picked up a piece of the shrimp and fed her again.

Licking a drop of cocktail sauce from her lips, she considered his statement. “That’s such a cold way of looking at the world.”

“It’s practical. I’ve spent a lot of time in hot zones. Knowledge and trust are the only things that can keep you and the guy standing next to you alive.” But he didn’t shrug off her comment or make light of them. “It’s why you aren’t sure what to ask. How about we do this—you can ask me any question you like without fear of judgment or recrimination, and I am free not to answer any without any reprisal or judgment on your part?”

It wasn't an unreasonable request, however she could do him one better. "Tit for tat."

Amusement curved his mouth. "I'm sorry?"

"Question for question. If I can ask you, then you can ask me. Whoever doesn't answer one first gives a pass to the other when they choose not to answer one. But as long as we're both answering...fair?"

"Exceptionally, though I admit to being ahead of the curve since you told me about your fiancé." He chose a stuffed mushroom and offered it to her. Accepting the bite, she shivered at the way his gaze lingered on her mouth and

the stroke of his thumb along her lower lip as a bit of mushroom tried to escape.

No one ever fed her—it was an intimacy she couldn't recall ever experiencing. Tom offering to do so was novel enough. That she allowed him to, even more so. “I don't mind that you know about Steve.” Oddly enough, she really didn't. “I don't talk about him anymore. Most everyone who knew about us back then have gone on with their lives. It's been thirty years, so for them it's a distant memory. A sadness from the past. Amelia remembers, but even for her, he was her brother and she misses him. But her life went on.”

“And yours didn't.” Tom shifted in his chair and drummed a finger against

the tabletop. “Why?”

“I don’t have any easy answer for that. At first, I know it was because I couldn’t imagine being with anyone else. It was everything I could do to put one foot in front of the other. If my parents hadn’t made me stay in college, I think I would have dropped out.” Folding her arms, she leaned on the edge of the table. Those first years after Steve died remained hazy in her memory. She vaguely recalled school and classes, but college life lost any luster. “I finished my degree, graduated with honors, got a job—kind of went down the checklist of life and did everything I was supposed to do. But guys didn’t interest me.”

Chewing the inside of her lip, she picked up her wine glass and considered Tom. “Honestly, I don’t think it occurred to me to find one that interested me. Then I was thirty and I didn’t see much of a point in changing, and when I turned forty—well, by then Amelia had been married for years and her three kids are all my godchildren. I lived vicariously through them.” Grimacing at how forlorn all of that sounded she shook her head. “I don’t want you to feel sorry for me or think, wow, what a crappy life. It hasn’t been crappy.”

“I don’t feel badly for you.”

Relief nearly had her sputtering her wine. “I’m glad because I didn’t tell you

to have you pity me.”

“You’re a beautiful, accomplished woman. You’re confident, smart, and funny—an altogether attractive package. Am I sorry you were hurt? Yes. But pity you? No.” The categorical way he stated it might have sounded harsh in any other situation, but she found his honesty refreshing. “I know what you mean about living vicariously through others. My best friend got married and I treated his family a lot like my own. I was the favorite uncle. I spent holidays with them when our leaves coincided, and when Dex retired out to spend more time with his family, I made a point of visiting them. Then life took a hard left turn and sheered away that family. I

mourned them as I would have my own.”

“That’s—sad.”

This time, he shrugged. “No, darling. That’s life. We get two choices when bad things happen. We go on or we don’t. I’m proud of the choice you made.” He shifted his attention behind her briefly. “Would you care to order some dinner? Our waitress is hovering because she doesn’t want to interrupt.”

Swallowing a smile, Brenda nodded. “Why don’t you order for me?” The offer startled the hell out of her, but he didn’t miss a beat.

“Any food allergies or intense dislikes I should be aware of?”

In any other situation, she would

have demurred to answer the question. She wasn't allergic to any foods and she didn't like to make waves or put other people out. Tom's laser focus held her captive, and somehow she suspected if she weren't honest—he'd be disappointed.

“Not a big fan of chicken or pasta.” For one, she had to eat it at every damn event she went to and for another—she'd simply never cared much for either.

“Anything else?” Satisfaction brimmed in his tone. Yes, he did like her frankness.

“No salad or soup. I always end up feeling too full by the time we get to the real food and I don't enjoy it as much.” Her face warmed, but what the hell.

Considering everything else she'd shared, and the ultimate goal of the evening, she had a hard time not embracing this side of the conversation.

“Oh, thank God.” He motioned the waitress over. “I hate rabbit food.” Switching his attention to the waitress, he held up two fingers. “We'll take one of the porterhouse steaks, thirty-two ounce cut, cooked medium. Two plates so we can share. One large, baked potato, and two orders of the steamed vegetables.”

“Absolutely, sir. Should I leave the appetizers?” And it wasn't until she'd asked that Brenda realized they'd demolished three-quarters of the plate.

Tom checked with her and she smiled. “The wine is fine until the steak gets here.”

The waitress lifted the platter out of the way and slipped out of their private alcove. A whisper of sound brushed across Brenda’s senses and she glanced back to see the curtains drift closed. While they’d hardly been subjected to any other noises, the hush filling their private space added another layer of intrigue to the evening.

“Why didn’t you ever marry?” She watched him curiously. Tom rested his arm along the back of her seat and the warmth of his jacket heated her bare shoulders.

He didn't sugarcoat the response. "Never met the woman I wanted to leave the service for—or that I wanted to make those kind of concessions to. I have been a Marine first and a man second, for a long time. Wives, girlfriends...they need men. I couldn't give to both, so I didn't try."

"You didn't want to retire, did you?" It didn't matter that he wore a suit and tie. Everything from his haircut, to his posture, to his personality declared exactly what he was—a man in control, and one who knew how to get to his destination even if it continued to shift on him.

"Not really, but I aged out and it was

time.”

“What are you going to do now?” Her job at the bank was just that; a job. One she enjoyed, certainly, but besides giving her income and a place to be everyday, it didn’t do much else.

“That is the ten-thousand dollar question.” He shifted to refill both their glasses and handed hers to her before settling once more with his arm around her shoulders. The casual ease of the possessive gesture wasn’t lost on her, but she enjoyed the way he bracketed her, too. “One I’ve been thinking about for weeks.”

“And you haven’t come up with anything?” What would it be like to walk away from the bank and have the empty

road of the future in front of her—if she could do anything she wanted? What would she do? She'd stopped thinking about what if—or her future—a long time before. Her stomach gave a nervous flutter.

“No, my godson runs a rehabilitation facility here, and he's offered me a job. But I'm not sure I'm suited to it.”

“Well, you're very easy to talk to.” And she meant it as a compliment.

Tom stared at her for a long moment then chuckled. “That's exclusive to my present company. Most Marines would tow the line to the rank and I doubt I'd be that interested in their backstory.”

He cared more than he let on, but she

let it slide. “Well, what would you like to do? I am assuming you’ve got opportunities. Computers? Banking? Teaching?”

His expression didn’t change with any of her suggestions. “Fish.”

“That’s it? Fish?” Disbelief filled her. “Wouldn’t you get bored?”

“Boredom never killed a man. I think I’d like to be bored for a time. Maybe get a boat on a lake, or head out to deep sea and do some sea bass fishing. Enjoy the time away from the noise.”

“You could sail to the Caribbean or the Bahamas. They have some beautiful resorts.” She’d always wanted to go to one, come to think of it. She had several travel sites bookmarked on her computer

and daydreamed about vacations all the time.

“It’s just an idea; one of many, I’m afraid.”

“When do you have to make a choice?” Regulations, as she recalled, governed most of a Marine’s living arrangements and activities. A confirmed bachelor like Tom probably lived on a base or at least through base-subsidized housing. When he retired, that would go, too.

“January fifteenth. I’ve already packed up the apartment, and I can move it all into a storage unit. What about you?”

“I’m not retiring.” She laughed. “At

least another fifteen years before I'm eligible for social security.”

“But I thought you said you'd been at your bank for twenty years or so.”

“Twenty-five.” She made a face. Had it really been that long?

“And you're not eligible for retirement benefits now?” The quirk of doubt in his voice made her laugh.

“Retirement sounds old. You don't ask a woman if she's old.” She wagged a finger at him and he captured it.

“I wouldn't dream of calling you old. You're a sexy, beautiful, dynamic-as-hell woman. But you don't have to be stuck in a bank unless that's where you want to be.” The compliment added another log to the fire his company had

been stoking since she arrived. “Let’s say you could retire—what would you do?”

She opened and closed her mouth twice while rethinking her response. Tom shifted as their food arrived and the line of questioning was tabled. The moment the scent of the steak and potato hit her nose, hunger cramped her stomach and her mouth watered. The appetizers had helped, but she was most of the way through her second glass of wine. Warm from the alcohol, she didn’t feel at all muddleheaded, but she had relaxed.

The chef had taken the time to cut the meat into two equal halves. Tom took

over serving after the waitress left them and he settled a portion on each of their plates and split the baked potato right down the middle. As it turned out, she liked hers loaded with butter and sour cream and he preferred only butter with a bit of pepper.

They both sipped wine, though he'd barely touched his second glass and she'd needed a third to wash down her meal. "So you were saying," he murmured between bites, "what would you do if you could retire?"

"Damn, I'd hoped you'd forgotten the question." She speared a chunk of meat with her fork and considered it as though it might provide her with an answer. "I don't know—"

“You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to,” he reminded. “We’re allowed to refuse one or two.”

“It’s not a matter of refusing, it’s more a matter of truly having no clue as to what I’d do. I belong to a book club, I go out once a month and meet five other women to discuss what we’ve read, we share a bottle of wine and then I go home. I have two cats. I—I go to Amelia’s some Sundays after she gets home from church and we play cards while her husband watches football. A couple of times a year, I invite her kids to stay at my place so Amelia and Ron can have some quality time together. Beyond that—all I have is work.”

What the hell? She really was turning into the crazy cat lady. When had that happened?

“What’s wrong?” His deep gray eyes fixed on her, and she tried to smooth out her frown, but her lips were pinching together in distaste.

“I just realized what a tremendous bore I am.” Utterly disgusted with herself, she clicked her teeth together at his soft chuckle. “Why are you laughing at me?”

“Not laughing at you at all.” He stroked her cheek with a light caress of his thumb that was as sweet and caring as it was intimate and easy. “I’d wondered how long it would be until

you wanted a refund after being stuck with a tired, dried-out, old prune like me.”

When he put it like that—her lips began to twitch. “That’s a terrible thing to say, you’re very handsome.”

He raised his brows, skepticism flaming hot in his eyes. “Hardly.”

“Are you telling me I don’t have good taste?” She bit the tip of her tongue between her teeth to contain her amusement. The arch tone worked on recalcitrant bank employees who tried to tell her how to do her job when they’d been there six months, but it didn’t so much as ruffle Tom.

“Not at all, I’m too damn grateful for it.” And while she was still trying to

wrap her mind around that, he kissed her. It was the lightest, swiftest of contacts—but her system went a little haywire. Heat flooded her cheeks and her heart began to pound in earnest against her ribs.

Skin tingling, she tried to get her breathing under control. “What was that for?”

“Because, ma’am, you are a woman who should be kissed.” And on that note, he took another bite of his steak and she tried to get her rioting neurons under control.

Chapter Four

The rest of the meal passed in similar fashion. Every statement he made, she challenged with her own experiences—and while he'd taken a chance with that kiss, it paid off in spades. Her lost vulnerability vanished. The heat in her cheeks reflected in the sparks in her deep brown eyes. He watched her, in between bites and whenever she spoke. Her gaze snagged on his time and again.

Direct contact didn't bother her, nor did his attention. If anything, she grew more daring as they finished their meal and traded out the wine glasses for

coffee. Any time he came into contact with her, she leaned into it—and she'd long since angled her leg against his beneath the table.

She loved television, and he had no idea what half the shows were that she mentioned. It surprised her that he wasn't as big a sports fan as most, though he didn't mind watching the big games on the holidays. Neither had any interest in hunting, but he loved fishing—and she'd never been. She loved the idea of traveling to exotic ports, and he nixed about of five them right off the top of her list as being unsafe for travel. The other five—well he wouldn't mind taking her to see them.

They'd gone through an entire carafe of coffee when the waitress stepped in to murmur that they would be turning the lights down soon. At Brenda's slow blink, Tom checked his watch. It was five minutes to midnight. Surprise jerked him upright, and he motioned to the window. "Do you want to watch the fireworks from here? Or would you like to go upstairs?"

All evening they'd skirted the night portion of their 1Night Stand-planned assignation and he hadn't minded in the slightest. It had been a long time since he'd had that much fun. Still, she'd had trouble with New Year's Eve before—a harsh reminder of her loss.

The quiet animation drained away from her expression. “It’s almost midnight, isn’t it?”

He nodded once and when she made a move as though to stand, he rose and caught her chair for her, easing it out of the way.

“I think I’d like to go upstairs.” She didn’t quite look at him, but he felt the weight of her attention. Following her line of sight, he caught her staring at their reflection in the window. Side by side, he seemed a dour companion to her elegance.

He’d settled the bill before dinner had even been served. She collected her purse and they slipped out of the quiet

alcove. The ride up to the room was short and quick, and the suite had been prepared in anticipation of their arrival, right down to a bottle of champagne on ice and a tray of chocolates. Most women seemed to like those types of things.

Sliding the keycard into his pocket, Tom followed Brenda inside. She kicked off her shoes and set her purse on a table and walked across the room to the French doors leading to a private balcony. A glance at his watch told him they still had a full minute to go.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” she whispered.

He’d been ready for that response. “We don’t have to do anything.”

Walking over to the sofa, he tugged a light decorative throw blanket off the back and laid it over her shoulders before pulling the doors open. Aware of her bare feet, he caught her before she stepped out onto the cold marble balcony. “We can watch from right here.”

A shudder passed over her and he wrapped his arms around her from behind, fisting the blanket closed in front to keep out the chill.

“You did not pay for all of this beauty to simply watch the fireworks with a neurotic woman.”

Giving her a gentle squeeze, he shook his head. “It’s a good thing I’m

not. I rather like my company, stop insulting her.” Below them, a roar went up and the sound of music drifted on the cold breeze. Beyond the horizon, where the city lights glowed, fireworks began to explode in the air.

“Happy New Year,” he told her quietly. The silent shaking of her shoulders didn’t surprise him, and he cradled her closer—gratified when she leaned against his chest. Fixing his attention on the fireworks, he measured out the time as she cried. The pauses between the shakes grew longer and longer, until they seemed to cease with the last of dazzling, radiant conclusion of the celebratory show.

“Happy New Year,” she managed in

a voice choked with tears. “I’m sorry, I didn’t meant to start crying....”

Shifting enough to reach a box of tissue, he held it out to her and smiled. “It’s quite all right. Honoring the man you loved, even with tears, is a thing to behold.”

When she moved away from him, he relaxed his grip on her and closed the doors to block out the chill.

“You’re being unbelievably nice about this.” She dabbed at her eyes, but the tissue wasn’t quite up to the task of fixing the black streaks the tears had made of her mascara.

He’d never been a man gifted with words, and he wanted to tell her the right

thing. Uncertain of what that could be, he went with his gut. “I don’t know anyone who would cry even five minutes for me much less every year, for thirty years.” Considering what she’d told him earlier, he kept a watch on her respiration; she wasn’t panting or showing any shortness of breath.

“I’ve only known you a few hours and I’d cry for at least that long.” She managed a watery laugh and a hint of her earlier sparkle returned. “I can’t believe I almost forgot.” She saw the dark stains on the tissue and grimaced. “Oh, Lord, the makeup.”

“It’s really not that bad,” he lied, catching her before she could flee into the bathroom to see the damage for

herself. “Here....” Taking a fresh tissue, he carefully dabbed at her face. No one who knew him would believe that he’d stand there trying to help a woman clean up the evidence of her tears, but something about this one provoked a deep and protective instinct in him.

No way could he let her suffer alone, and seeing the black streaks would only increase her level of embarrassment. “But you didn’t forget, you simply didn’t dwell on it.” He picked up the thread of her earlier statement.

She sighed. “No, I forgot. For a little while, I was only thinking about you.”

“And how are you feeling now?” Maybe his short visit to Luke’s little pet

project had rubbed off. He wouldn't look too closely at why he was asking her about her feelings.

Frowning, she seemed to consider the words. "Embarrassed? Sad and, maybe, a little worried."

The first two he understood. "Why worried?"

"Usually when I start crying, I can't stop myself and—" She winced.

"And you had an episode like when you passed out?" He didn't smile at the mild shock on her face. Yes, he'd been paying attention when she told him that downstairs.

"Yes." But though sadness lingered in her eyes, her tears had begun to dry. She pushed a hand through her hair and

brushed it away from her face. “I—but I don’t understand.”

Uncertain if she meant why hadn’t she continued crying or how she’d forgotten, he pursued a third idea. “Have you ever been with someone on New Year’s?”

“Oh, God, no, I usually spend it alone with a bottle of wine, and a box of pictures, or maybe a movie. I figure if I’m going to be miserable, I should do it up right. And no one needs to see me fall apart.”

And therein lies the key. “Tonight, you’re not alone. You’re starting this new year off a little differently.” He paused. “We both are.”

“Yeah?” She sniffed, but her lips tilted upward. “Where were you last New Year’s?”

“In Germany. I was posted there. Iraq for the four years before that.” He had to think about it. “Afghanistan on and off for six years. Though two of those were spent at Pendleton overseeing training exercises. Africa, Okinawa, the Atlantic Ocean, Japan—a detail in Belgium for a short time.”

“The Pacific Ocean?” She dabbed her nose, a puzzled frown drawing her brows together. “I don’t understand....”

“Aboard the USS Bataan.” Unlike some of his fellows, he’d enjoyed the hell out of that assignment—sailors

notwithstanding. “I haven’t celebrated as a civilian in years, so as you can guess—you’re loads better than some of my previous companions.”

A soft laugh escaped. “You’re funny, but I think I like that about you more than anything else. You don’t make me feel stupid.”

“Good, you have nothing to feel stupid about.” If he’d had a girl like her waiting for him and he’d died—he’d want someone to look after her. That no one had all those years was a damn shame, but he planned to make some changes. She just didn’t know it yet.

“Actually, I do have a small favor to ask.”

He straightened. “Name it.”

“Could you set your watch back by....” She twisted briefly and glanced toward the clock on the wall. “Ten minutes?”

Glancing down at the timepiece, he nodded and did as she asked. “It’s one minute to midnight.”

“That’s right somewhere in the world, I’m sure.”

He didn’t agree with her, but it was hardly important enough to argue over. “Thirty seconds to midnight.”

Brenda closed the distance between them and murmured, “I’m sorry about the fireworks.”

“I’m not.” What did he care about a bunch of gunpowder-loaded explosions?

He'd seen his share in and out of combat. "Twenty seconds."

She placed her hands on his shoulders, light and delicate. Grasping her hips, he matched her gentleness—though he wouldn't mind in the slightest if she wanted to dig her nails into him. He kept a mental count, though the elusive hint of her perfume teased his concentration.

"Ten seconds." He recognized what she was attempting to do and weighed whether he should discourage her against the desire to explore their connection further.

"Nine." She pushed up on her painted toes—belatedly he realized they matched the dark glitter she'd decorated

her fingernails with.

He could almost see the rapid beat of her pulse. “Eight.”

“Seven.” Her breath hitched.

“Six.” He canted his head down until their gazes locked.

“Five.” Flush with him now, she slid her hands up to lock behind his neck.

He forgot to inhale for a moment, captivated by the blush spreading across her cheeks.

“Three.” She tickled his nape.

Focused on the dilation of her eyes, he knew the moment the count hit one. He stroked his thumb to the pulse on her neck. It hammered like a baby bird’s, erratic and nervous. “Ten,” he

whispered.

She blinked and drew away a fraction, stopping only because he held her still. “We were at one.”

“You weren’t ready yet. Eight.”

The line between her brows went tight. “I was ready.”

“No, you weren’t.” He smiled, continuing to stroke the skin over her frantic pulse. “Seven.”

“Six, and yes, I was.” The jackhammer rate slowed, and the color flushing her face deepened.

“Five.” He rubbed his palm along the curve of her lower back, and her heartbeat dipped to a more reasonable rate.

“Four.” She sounded positively

grumpy about it.

“Three.” He took advantage of her distraction to brush his nose to hers.

Her breath hitched again and a note of strain turned her word taut. “Two.”

Not bothering with the last word, he angled his head and took possession of the sweet mouth he'd only brushed before. That first gentle kiss had ignited a slow-burning fire in his blood.

With the smallest of gasps, she opened to him and welcomed the sweep of his tongue—and detonated the tight rein he'd leashed on his passion all evening. The sharp sting of her nails digging into his neck had him lifting her. She was a gorgeous, curvy woman, but

he was taller, and lifting her one-armed and keeping control of her head as she met his tongue stroke for stroke gave him a better angle.

Her groan meshed with his. Tom had meant only to indulge a taste for her, not gorge like a starving man set before a banquet. Brenda, however, came to life in his arms, and the air sizzled.

They needed to come up for air or he would be taking those last two steps to the bed, to hell with the consequences.

Her emotions seesawed between old, familiar grief and fresh interest. The ease with which he comforted her embarrassment over her breakdown and accepted her need to cry, kindled a heat

so foreign it had actually taken her a moment to recognize the sensation as desire. Asking for a do-over had seemed a fair compensation for the dignity and respect he'd shown her. Anticipation rising, she'd nearly choked when he'd started the count over. The spike in her frustration had also amped up her determination. It had been difficult to start the count over again, but when he closed his mouth on hers—a wild burst of ecstasy swept washed her under and she forgot to think.

Short, jagged bursts of color dazzled her and she arched into the kiss, demanding more from the bold invasion of his tongue that came straight out of her wettest dreams, all masculine and hot.

The steel band of his arm around her flexed and then she wasn't on the ground anymore, but held to him and damn, what a man to be wrapped up with. Hot, and unapologetically male and her palms itched to find the skin beneath the crisp fabric of his jacket and shirt.

Breasts aching, she had to settle for caressing his nape and skating one hand up to stroke through the short, crisp hair on his head. If he let it grow out, it might thicken up. As it was, the softness teased her palms. She wanted to fist her fingers into it and feel his luscious mouth on her naked skin.

Raw, wanton need exploded through her veins and it had nothing to do with

the holiday, a lifetime of loss, or anything more than she wanted to explore the passionate side of this man who'd been so focused on her all evening. He lifted his head and she He lifted his head, and she whimpered a sound—all low, needy. Panting hard, she opened her eyes to meet his gaze—*God, he's acting as half-starved as I feel....*

A purely feminine shudder passed over her. Kissing her had put that look on his face and it was a wonder to her. “Happy New Year,” she managed to whisper, barely recognizing the husky note of her voice.

“I meant what I said earlier,” he said, all sober control and steady focus. The hungry dilation of his pupils,

however, betrayed the calmness of his voice. “Nothing has to happen.”

Who was he trying to convince? Swallowing, she fought to pull her fragmented thoughts back to the realm of reality. No, clearly nothing *had* to happen. The man’s restraint was a thing of beauty, but.... “I want something to happen.”

His nostrils flared and a hint of a smile touched his gorgeous mouth. “Brenda....”

“Shh.” She pressed her fingers to his lips, aware of how easily he continued to hold her, as though she were light as a feather. “You know, I thought Amelia was insane to push me to do this.”

Actually she'd used far harsher words—interfering and pushy being only two. “But...” Her heart stuttered and her stomach clenched. “But I like you. I've been in a holding pattern for years, and you are way outside my comfort zone, and utterly not, all at the same time.”

Strange how saying it out loud increased her vulnerability. She didn't want to feel so raw and exposed, but she didn't want him to walk away either. He didn't answer immediately, but a muscle worked in his jaw. “I'm not sure I won't be rough....”

The concern underscoring that admission melted her. “I'm not going to break,” she promised. “I'm not that fragile.”

“No.” He stroked a thumb over her throat and everything in her went loose and hot at the low growl in his voice. “You’re perfect.”

“Then be as rough as you need to be.” She didn’t know where that encouragement came from, but she wanted to go with it. She wanted to be used until they were both wrung out from the pleasure. If words weren’t enough, she caught his face in her hands and pulled him into the kiss, pouring all of her longing into the contact. One moment she was in his arms and the next, she was on the bed, her dress landing somewhere on the floor.

Heat scorched her as he paused to

look down at her. She fought the urge to cross her arms and hide herself from his view. Time had been kind to her, at least she'd always thought so—her too small breasts didn't sag, and she didn't tan regularly—so she was pale. Uncertainty wrestled with desire and she fisted her hands against the coverlet.

Some of her hesitance must have shown because he stopped with one hand on his tie. “Brenda?”

Be bold or go home. She could almost hear Amelia's devilish whisper. *No—no more thinking about what Amelia would do or would tell you and no more thoughts about Steve.* Brenda had loved him and she'd always love him, but she'd been dragging out the hair

shirt of her grief every year to wear like a fashion statement.

New Year.

New beginning...the freedom of it all exhilarated her.

“Why am I the only one who’s naked?” She lifted her brows. “I don’t mean to be awkward, but a gentleman would at least be shirtless by now so I didn’t feel so out of place.”

In a swift move, he’d swooped down and had her mouth open beneath a fierce kiss that promised a sensuality she’d forgotten could exist. She was still trying to catch her breath when he retreated and began to strip out of his suit.

Swallowing, she started to slide off

the bed, but he stopped her with a quick shake of his head. “You stay right where you are.” He toed off his shoes and nudged them to the side, his socks followed and then his pants along with his boxers—or briefs—she didn’t catch what he wore and—oh, my....

The man was hard and compact everywhere, and the springy curls dusting his chest were almost pure silver in contrast to the deep bronze of his tan.

Fit and trim just did not do him justice.

Soft laughter pulled her gaze away from the length of his erection tapping at his belly to the deep humor in his expression. A humor that did nothing to disguise his blatant sexuality. “You keep

staring at me like that and we're going to be over before we start."

"We haven't started yet?" She'd never been so arch, or open in such a wanton fashion before. Enjoying the freedom of it, she held out her hand in invitation. "I disagree."

He paused to pull out his wallet, flipped it open and slid out a couple of condoms. "I only brought two." Holding them up, he almost sounded apologetic.

Biting her lip to keep from laughing, Brenda shook her head. "I like the way you think."

The locked focus of his attention sizzled over her and, without a shadow of a doubt, the only thing interesting him

right then was her. Moistening her lips, she slid over on the bed to make room for him. He stalked her with the grace of a predator and her tummy took another tumble.

At the bedside, he reached for the lamp. “On or off?”

While she admired his dedication to her comfort and the rigid self-control he demonstrated, it was time for both of them to cut loose. “What do you want?”

Lights off meant he couldn't see any of her softer bits where her tummy wasn't as tight or her hips were just a little fuller, or even the not-so-generous lines along her thighs. Yes, she'd always had small boobs, but she'd put on weight over the years and though she'd lost it,

her stretch marks gave her away. But it also meant she couldn't see him and—damn, he had nothing to be ashamed of. He may be retirement age, but she couldn't recall any man she'd seen recently even half again as young who looked as good as he did.

“I don't care about the light,” he answered, then he was on the bed, and wrapping his arms around her, his mouth finding hers. Sighing into the kiss, she let him tumble her onto the sheets. He squeezed the rounded curves of her hips before stroking his very capable fingers along her sides to cup and shape her breasts.

The calloused warmth of his palms

ignited a second wave of heat and whatever happened, it would be wonderful. He kissed a path down her throat to her chest, spending so much time teasing one breast and then the other, she writhed beneath him. Her thoughts drowned in a sea of sensations brought on by the raw, naked length of him pressing her down into the mattress and the slick strength of his gorgeous muscles beneath her hands.

When he would have continued downward, trailing wet kisses along her belly, she tugged at his hair to pull him up for another toe-curling kiss that seemed to invade her soul. He hooked a thumb in the side of her lace panties and the scrap of fabric ripped.

The sound had him jerking his head up and he glanced down at the lace in his hand with an almost boyish grin of delight. Brenda threw her head back and laughed. Her laughter sparked his and Tom settled atop her and buried his face to her throat. The length of his erection served as an erotic caress where it teased her.

“Oh,” she whispered, caressing his skin. “I thought that only happened in books.”

“I didn’t realize it was that delicate.”

Their words tripped over each other, but when he lifted his head, the flashes of humor peeked through the passionate

storm. Another thrill shivered up her spine and she reveled in the abandon she found in the tangle of their naked limbs.

“I can buy another pair....” She traced the line of his face and down around his lips. Catching the pad of her finger with his teeth, he sucked on it. Everything in her when low and tight.

“I might rip the second pair, too.” He kissed her palm and began a slow sensual assault along her arm—who knew the crook of her elbow could be an erogenous zone?

“Oh, I’ll definitely buy several pairs then.” She moaned as he found her breast and tugged at her nipple.

“Good.” He stopped talking then, teasing her to the point of madness. Then

his mouth returned to hers and the kiss was wild and wet, and paid on the promise of his raw attraction. Vibrating with urgent need, she groaned when he abandoned the kiss—but jerked her eyes open at the sound of foil ripping and he rolled the condom into place.

“God, you do everything well,” she told him with unabashed delight. Her only regret that she hadn’t been the one to caress him before he did that. What would it be like to wrap her hand around him—

He nudged her thighs apart and cupped her sex with the barest amount of pressure. She split apart on a wave of ecstasy that rolled her under so swiftly

she could only gasp and grab his forearms, holding onto him lest she drown under the tidal force.

“Sensitive,” he murmured, but the word barely registered because he began to circle his thumb around her clit. Another electric shock. He continued to use his hand and fingers until her body tightened all over again. And the whole time, he watched her. The heat of his gaze added another layer of intimacy and whenever her hips bucked up, he gave her more of the same.

When he took his touch away, she cried out at the loss. But he whispered another word she couldn't hear, stroking over her thighs then shifted her. It registered what he attempted and she

lifted her legs, hitching them around his hips. He gave an approving sound and dropped to kiss the corner of one eye and then the other before pushing into her.

He was as hard and unyielding as his thrust, taking her in a slow, intense, patient fashion—as deliberate in his invasion as he'd been in every other interaction. Gripping his shoulders, she reveled in his changing expressions as pleasure tightened his face into a grimace.

She'd feel it in the morning, but right then she didn't care how deep he went or how much he stretched her. The sting of adjusting to him was nothing

compared to the spasms of pleasure beginning to radiate out as he glided against her sensitive flesh. When he was seated, all the way, they both let out a little groan.

Sweat beaded along his forehead and he teased her lower lip in a brushing caress. "I want to go slow for you." The tension shaking him told her it took everything he had and she didn't want him to restrain himself for her.

Scissoring her legs around him, she drew her hips away a fraction of an inch and arched up to meet him. The rocking motion seemed to snap something inside of him and he slammed his mouth down on hers and thrust freely, driving her with a tidal wave of barely restrained

need that sent her pleasure skyrocketing.

She held onto him, rocking to meet his rhythm, and sucking on his tongue with every hot, tongue-twining kiss. Pinned beneath him, she orgasmed with a harsh cry, and clamped down on his length, but Tom continued to move, his low groans almost growls. No sooner had she begun to float down than he pistoned his hips and drove her up another peak, following her over, the hard shout of her name another caress that would linger on her pleasure-ravaged senses.

Collapsing against her, he rolled onto his side, taking her with him, but didn't pull out or away. His trembling

muscles betrayed the gratifying depth of his reaction to her. Nuzzling his chest, she floated on the lazy river of bliss.

Chapter Five

She rubbed her nose over the crisp hair dusting chest, her simple affections adding to the intimacy of the moment. Though she'd said she wasn't fragile, he'd had to fight bruising her soft skin. He glanced down. The vision of her curled to him, her leg thrown lazily over his, the contrast of her pale skin against his darker, ruddier tan, was a hell of a turn-on.

An odd feeling spread through him and it took a moment to identify the heaviness as contentment. He could get used to this—used to her. More than that, he wanted to be used to her, to take the

fresh bond of intimacy and turn it into something familiar and welcome. Snap decisions were nothing new to him, he'd seen the lay of the land, spent an evening talking to her—and even in that fragile connection, he found real value.

“I can almost hear you thinking.” Her breath whispered over his skin in a pleasing caress.

“I'm planning.” He didn't see any sense in beating around the bush. Stroking her arm, he smiled when she spread her fingers over his skin, and above his heart. The weight of it added to the increasing need tightening his gut. He had two choices, coax her into agreement or take down all her

objections like a battering ram.

“Dare I ask what you could be planning?” Her throaty chuckle was an invitation and when she tilted her head up, he kissed her long and slow. His body stirred at the promise of a future, but this wasn’t about passion—it was all about Brenda. He wasn’t good with words, but showing her how he felt—that he could do.

By the time he released her, they were both panting. “I’m planning tomorrow, and the day after that....”

She propped herself on her elbow, but made no attempt to escape contact. “Have you figured out what you want to do for your retirement?” Curiosity softened her voice.

“Yes, ma’am.” He’d figured that out far earlier in the evening, but he hadn’t wanted to put the future before the kiss as it were. “What about you?”

“Hmm, no real deep thoughts here.” She gave a little shiver. “Too busy feeling good.”

“My ego appreciates the compliment.” She was exactly the way she should be, her delighted peal of laughter reward enough. He slid out of the bed, dealt with the condom, and returned with a glass of water for her. She pressed her lips to his jaw and he closed his eyes, savoring the gentle feel of her kisses as she nuzzled her way to the corner of his mouth. Another long

kiss nearly derailed him, but when he opened his eyes, all he saw was the smile in hers. “I want to run away with you.”

Shock rippled across her face. “What?”

It had come out a little more blunt than he'd intended, but once committed to the course, he decided to play through. “I want to run away with you. We can sail to all those places you wanted to see, and I can fish along the way.”

“Tom, I have a job....”

“So?” Touching his finger to her face, he traced the arch of her cheekbone.

“So it's reckless and impulsive.” She caught her lower lip in her teeth.

“I’m not sure I know how to do that.”

“Me either, but I’m willing to give it a shot if you are. I spent the last several decades committed to my country, to the job, to getting it done. I think I’m due to committing the next few to someone else.”

“I—” She hesitated.

“Hey, you tell me what’s going on in that beautiful head. You can say anything you want. I won’t be offended.”

Exasperation rippled through her satisfied expression. “Do you have to be so damn perfect?” Brenda laughed and shifted on the bed until they were face-to-face. “I have a job and people who depend on me.”

“Okay, well if it’s what you live for and you love it, there’re plenty of places to fish around here.” The one thing he excelled at was adapting to the situation. “But we’ve been grownups our whole lives, so I don’t see anything wrong with going to play and being impulsive. If it’s money—I’ve got a lot set aside. I never had anything to spend it on before....”

“It’s not the money.” She struggled to find the right explanation. “I have a tidy sum and some investments, too. One thing I know how to manage is money. But what do we do? I mean if I quit my job and we run off? Amelia would look after my cats for me, but—what do *we* do?”

“Whatever we wanted. You wanted to see St. Thomas. I want to deep-sea fish. We could do both. We could sail the Bahamas, go to the Cayman Islands, head to Mexico and you can see a Mayan Temple. We don’t have to stay there, either. The beauty of playing is when we’re bored or we’re tired of it, or hell, even if we don’t like it, we can come home or go somewhere else.”

Her expression wavered with indecision. “Tom, we just met.”

He shrugged. “So, we date for a few months and when you’re satisfied I’m not going anywhere, then will you run away with me?”

“How do you know you won’t get

bored with me?” It wasn’t an unreasonable question, and he recognized it had more to do with her own insecurity than lack of faith in him. She didn’t trust him yet—and that was okay. If it took five months or five years, he would prove it out for her.

“Less than thirty days ago, I had to face the fact that my future wasn’t charted. I’ve had someone else giving me orders or sending me on missions for most of my life. I didn’t have to make a choice because—they did it for me.” If she understood nothing else about him, she needed to understand this. “The future is this dark road, not clearly defined—I didn’t have any idea what I wanted to do with my retirement. Now I

do. I want to get to know you, what makes you laugh, what makes you sigh—what causes your eyes to narrow and your nose to wrinkle. I want to exasperate you and I want to make you smile. The rest of it is just window dressing.”

Pushing a hand through her hair, she tried to lift it away from her face. Tom helped, catching some of the damp strands and stroking his fingers through the length of it. Giving into the impulse, he wrapped the long tendrils around his hand and tugged her close for another pulse-pounding kiss.

“You make it a very hard offer to say no to,” she whispered beneath his kiss.

“Then don’t say no.” He wanted to make it impossible, but coaxing might be easier for her.

Brenda groaned. Stretching, she looped her arms around his neck and he rolled onto his back, enjoying the feel of her draping across him. “If I say yes, then what?”

Joy flared in his gut, but he tamped down the reaction. She’d said *if*. “Then we spend the rest of our night here, and when my stamina returns, I’m going to make love to you until neither of us can walk.”

She shivered. “Go on.”

“And when we’re able to walk, I think I should do it again for good

measure. After that, it's all up to you. If you want to stay and work your job, then I'll find a place close by." *Coax, Marine. Coax.* "And we'll do the day-to-day thing, take every moment as it happens." *I can go help out Luke if I need to keep busy.*

"Hmm." She brushed her lips to his chest. "Every year for the last thirty years, I've spent this night by myself—and I've cried and mourned."

Tensing, Tom held her tighter. "I'm not asking you to forget him." She had to understand that.

"I know, oh I know that. You were right about what you said earlier though—that he wouldn't have wanted this for me. You made tonight so much easier for

me, better—I think I even forgot for a little while. For a moment, I felt guilty—and now....”

A fist tightened around his heart. *Patience. First engagements can be tricky. If she backs off, that just means you have to go slower....* The last thing he wanted was slower, not with her in his arms, relaxed and warm and so soft.

“I’m thinking about these plans of yours and there’s no guilt.” Wonder echoed in her voice. “Is this too weird for me to talk to you about?”

“No.” He wanted her to tell him everything. He couldn’t battle demons or fears he didn’t know about. “You never have to hide him or what you felt about

him. Ever.”

“But that’s just it, I don’t feel guilt. I feel—lighter—hopeful.” And the bruising grip on his heart relaxed. “I want to say yes, but I’m terrified we’re going to make this crazy leap and both regret it. It hasn’t even been twenty-four hours since we met and I’m wondering what it would be like to make love on the boat you keep mentioning.”

The words evoked a very provocative image of her sprawled on a sun-kissed deck while he nibbled his way across every inch of her skin. “We don’t have to wonder. All we have to do is find out—maybe we’ll love it, or maybe we won’t. Half the fun will be in the discovery.”

“And the other half?” She traced the spot on his chest she’d kissed with her tongue and his body responded with a wave of desire. It may not take him that long at all to find his stamina again.

“The other half,” he tumbled her over and looked down at her, “will be because I’m with you. Say yes, Brenda. Leap...I’ll catch you.” To hell with coaxing. She sat right on the verge and he wanted to grab her hand and jump.

“Crazy. Impulsive. We’re not eighteen, we both know the consequences of this—I have a house, mortgage payments—well, not really. I actually paid it off early by doubling—oh....”

So close, she was so close to saying yes.

Ease back or stay in the game?

She stroked his scalp with her nails, the sensation soothing and turning him on in equal measures. “One year.”

“What?” He blinked.

“This is our year.” Her shaky voice grew stronger. “We rang it in together, we take this year and we go crazy. Go where we want, do what we want...and next New Year’s Eve...we decide then if we want it to be permanent.”

“Together, all year, anywhere we want to be?” He clarified the terms.

“We’ll go fishing....”

“And to the Caribbean, and

anywhere else you want to go,” he promised. That dark road turned into a summery field. “What about your job?”

“It’s a job. I’ve had a career. I want a life.”

One year. Oh, he could do a lot with one year.

“Mission accepted.”

~ABOUT THE AUTHOR~

National bestselling author, Heather Long, likes long walks in the park, science fiction, superheroes, Marines, and men who aren't douche bags. Her books are filled with heroes and heroines tangled in romance as hot as Texas summertime. From paranormal historical westerns to contemporary military romance, Heather might switch genres, but one thing is true in all of her stories—her characters drive the books. When she's not wrangling her menagerie of animals, she devotes her time to family and friends she considers family. She believes if you like your heroes so

real you could lick the grit off their chest, and your heroines so likable, you're sure you've been friends with women just like them, you'll enjoy her worlds as much as she does.

You can visit Heather at:

<http://www.heatherlong.net>

The Always a Marine Series

Always a Marine
Series so Far (in order by release)

Once Her Man, Always Her Man
Luke & Rebecca

Retreat Hell! She Just Got Here
Logan, Jazz & Zach

Tell It to the Marine
James & Lauren
Introduction of Matt McCall and
Damon Sinclair

*Features an appearance of Logan
Cavanaugh*

*Proud to Serve Her
Damon & Helena*

*Matt, James, Lauren, Luke and
Rebecca mentioned*

*Her Marine
Brody & Shannon*

*No Regrets, No Surrender
Logan, Jazz & Zach
James featured*

*The Marine Cowboy
A.J. & Sheri
Phone call from Luke*

The Two and the Proud

Rowdy & Kim

A Marine and a Gentleman

Brenden & Liam

Appearances of James, Logan, Jazz,

Shannon, Rebecca, Lauren

Combat Barbie

Kyle & Mary

Jazz makes an appearance via phone

Whiskey Tango Foxtrot

Joe & Melody

James makes an appearance

What Part of Marine Don't You

Understand?

Matt & Naomi

*Appearances by James and Logan,
Damon is mentioned*

A Marine Affair

Eli & Rick

Marine Ever After

Paul & Lillianna

*Multiple appearances at Luke &
Rebecca's wedding*

Marine in the Wind

Greg & Georgia

Appearances by A.J. & Sheri

Marine with Benefits

Derek & Kara
Appearance by Logan

A Marine of Plenty
Charlie & Jana
Appearance by Naomi

A Candle for a Marine
Isaac & Zehava
Appearances by Zach & Shannon

Marine Under the Mistletoe
Kaiden & Rowan

Have Yourself a Marine Christmas
Rebel and Noel
Appearances by Derek, Kara, Luke and
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