



MARINE

Ever After



ALWAYS A MARINE
BOOK 14

HEATHER LONG



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Marine Ever After

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*Once Her Man, Always her Man
Retreat Hell! She Just Got Here*

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Her Marine

No Regrets, No Surrender

The Marine Cowboy

The Two and the Proud

A Marine and A Gentleman

Whiskey Tango Foxtrot

Combat Barbie

*What Part of Marine Don't You
Understand*

A Marine Affair

~Dedication~

*For Nan, because she taught me to
never give up.*

Marine Ever After
Always a Marine - Book 14

By
Heather Long

Chapter One

What was it about formal dresses that they always itched? Lillianna tugged the bodice and tried not to squirm. Of course, it might not be the dress. She'd purchased a bra on her way to the ceremony. She meant to get a nicer one, but didn't own that many strapless bras and two hours before she needed to get dressed didn't leave her enough time to track one down with the perfect fit, so she deserved the discomfort. Had it really been a year since Rebecca asked her to be a bridesmaid? A year of planning this wedding gave her plenty of time, but she still found it hard to

believe Rebecca was getting married.

The bride in question swept into the room—the picture of a fairy princess in her cascading tulle ball gown. *Did I expect anything else?* Shame slithered through Lillianna. She could have been a better friend over the last few months and helped with the planning, but instead she let her personal grudges get in the way.

A half-dozen bridesmaids ooh'd and aah'd over the dress, from the sweetheart neckline accented with ornate lace appliques on the bodice, to the tiara fastening her veil in place.

“Lily!” Rebecca’s eyes lit up when their gazes met, and she let out a laugh.

Ignoring their dresses, the bride-to-be wrapped her arms around her in a fierce hug. “I worried you wouldn’t make it.”

“I wouldn’t miss your wedding for anything in the world.” Not even after three straight nights on call.

“You weren’t happy about Luke.” Rebecca’s voice dropped, but wicked teasing glinted in her eyes.

“Hey, I’m just glad he got his head out of his ass where you were concerned.”

Admittedly, Lillianna found it hard to be happy for her—at first. She and Rebecca met during their freshman years in college and spent the next four as roommates. She’d heard all about Luke Dexter and watched his lack of response crush the vivacious woman over and

over again.

“He loves me.” Rebecca held her hands tightly. “And I’m *happy*.”

“Okay. Then that’s all that matters to me. You’re a beautiful, beautiful bride.” Lillianna stepped back and held her arms wide so she could take in the full picture.

Taking her cue, Rebecca turned a full circle. “I feel beautiful in this.”

“Good.” Lillianna appreciated the strapless midnight blue evening gown she wore as one of the bridesmaids. The maid of honor joined them—the fabulous Lauren Kincaid looked so glamorous, Lillianna didn’t have to worry about anyone staring at her.

“Hi, I need to steal Rebecca for a second. Luke sent me with a present for her.” The actress beamed and Lillianna waved her off. The church wedding had turned into a huge affair, including a half-dozen bridesmaids, a maid of honor, three flower girls, the same number of groomsmen, and promised to be a full house. Apparently, as many of Luke’s unit as were able had also shown up.

Which meant she would be swimming in Marines. *Joy and rapture*. Lillianna checked her makeup one more time in the mirror. She’d gone with silver accents in her eye shadow, and it added just the right amount of sparkle to her

dark cocoa skin. Rebecca had chosen fantastic dresses. They flattered every single bridesmaid. The dark blue of their gowns would complement the groomsmen in their formal blues. A shiver of apprehension rippled through her belly. She always loved the way Marines looked in uniform, but she didn't envy the life one had to live. A military brat, Lillianna didn't bother romanticizing military life.

“Hey.” A brunette passed her a glass of champagne. “We’re toasting our bride one last time before we report for the wedding.”

She hadn't met all the bridesmaids, but if she had to peg one for military, this one would be. “Thank you. Lillianna

Hansen.”

“Jasmine Cavanaugh, but call me Jazz.” They exchanged a quick handshake. “I’m starting to enjoy the fact that we went really small with our wedding.”

“No kidding—are there really four hundred guests?” She followed Jazz over to the circle forming around Rebecca.

“And a thousand more probably, at the reception. These two are really popular.” Her easy grin drooped faintly on one side, an echo of trauma—stroke seemed the most likely culprit, but maybe a battlefield injury.

“Ladies.” Lauren led the toast, raising

her glass and waiting until the rest of the women did the same. “I’d like to just take a moment to wish Rebecca all the best in her marriage to Luke. It’s been my distinct pleasure to get to know her over the last several months. We’ve worked together on so many projects that I can’t help but think the best thing our men ever did was introduce us to each other.”

Rebecca laughed. “Hear, hear.”

Glasses clinked together and after a sip, Rebecca cleared her throat. “I wanted to say thank you—I know there probably won’t be a lot of time later—especially if the party goes the way I planned it.” More laughter met her statement. “But thank you, all of you, for

being here with me today. From Lillianna, my college roommate, who listened to me cry myself to sleep and didn't mind holding my hair back after one particularly bad spring break of drinking, and still wants to be my friend. To Lauren and Jazz who've become such a fundamental part of the life Luke and I are building. To Tina and Janey, who believed in Intimate Introductions before I even did, and to Delilah even though she couldn't be here—" She coughed, blinking furiously.

"No crying," Lauren ordered.

"Thank you for being here tonight, for the fittings, the planning, the dozens of emails, and for not hating me for wanting

it all to be so perfect. Tonight is a dream come true for me and as sappy romantic as it sounds, a night I've planned since I was fifteen-years-old."

"And how!" Tina echoed the sentiment. They clinked their glasses together for the second toast and then sipped.

Rebecca glowed with happiness. Lillianna didn't try to contain her smile, and it was time to let go of her misgivings.

A clock chimed and Jazz collected the glasses. "It's time to get moving. We need to have Rebecca ready in fifteen minutes, ladies!" They rushed to double-check faces, hair and to fluff the bride's skirt, but ten minutes later, Lillianna

trailed behind Jazz down the long aisle decked out in roses, patriotic ribbons and candlelight.

The service was standing room only. Lillianna couldn't get over how fine the men in their uniforms looked, arrayed alongside the captain marrying his bride. Few dry eyes were in the house during their heartfelt vows and the cheer that erupted with their kiss sounded a lot like 'oorah!'

The wedded couple led the way back up the aisle with a uniformed groomsman for every bridesmaid offering his arm as escort. Drunk on the abundant love during the ceremony had to be the only explanation for the quiver

in Lillianna's stomach when her escort extended his arm and she slid a gloved hand through to rest on his forearm.

It had nothing at all to do with his crisp and pressed appearance, powerful bearing, or saucy little wink.

Not a damn thing.

Paul eyed the bridesmaid from the moment she'd made her entrance through the double doors. As the fourth groomsman, he'd get to escort her out. *Thank you, Jesus.* Gorgeous was the only word that would do. Not that the other bridesmaids weren't good-looking. Jazz looked damn fine and if he stared too long, one of her two husbands might be inclined to take his head off. All in

good fun, at least on Zach's part, but Logan stood right next to Paul.

Better to keep his eyes on the more attractive prize. From her rich, dark hair piled atop her head, to the deep, natural, rich cocoa of her skin. He hesitated to call it brown, but the white gloves and deep navy of her dress looked so smashing against her skin tone. His training kept his gaze forward as they walked together, so he barely got a glimpse of her eyes. Sadly, the evening wedding meant the sun was already sinking as they exited, and the shadows lessened the chance he could tell what color they were.

Photographs would be next and then a drive to the reception at Mike's Place. If

he played his cards right, they'd be in the same limo. *But we have to dance....* A smile curved his mouth. He would have plenty of opportunity to stare at her eyes and determine their color then.

“Paul Torres,” he murmured.

“I’m sorry, what?” She glanced at him, a distracted smile softening her expression. It hit him like a fist to the gut. He needed to revise his earlier opinion—gorgeous didn’t do her justice.

“I’m Paul Torres, you must be Lillianna.” The only bridesmaid who’d missed the big rehearsal dinner. *Not that I can complain....* He almost missed it, too. His flight landed an hour beforehand and only some skillful driving with

Damon managed to get them both there in time to be in place before the bridesmaids did their obligatory walk.

“Yes, sorry. I can’t get over how happy she looks.” She let go of his arm and offered her gloved hand to shake. “And I’m Lillianna Hansen.” The urge to kiss it was a little too romance-novel for him, so he shook it then held onto it.

“The captain looks pretty happy, too. I think he got the better end of the bargain.” Paul chuckled. Every man from his unit seemed to be settling down in civilian life, marrying or pairing off. He’d served with most of the men in the groom’s party and earned his invitation when the wedding coincided with his leave. Unfortunately, one of Luke’s best

friends—Brody—hadn't been able to make it. The lieutenant remained on active duty in Afghanistan, but promised to visit the happy couple on his next trip through Dallas—probably to see his girl, the artist, as much as to see Luke.

“I hope so. There's a tiny part of me that doesn't like him.” Her announcement surprised him, but the photographer summoned them to join the bride and groom so he swallowed the question.

Five hundred photographs later, the dismissed wedding party made their way to the small fleet of waiting limousines. Jazz and her husbands loaded into one, the freshly marrieds got their own,

James and Lauren claimed the third. Paul drifted back a little, and fortunately Lillianna waited for him as Damon and A.J. helped their bridesmaids into a limo and joined James and Lauren.

Score. We get the last one to ourselves.

“Everything all right?” She eyed him expectantly.

“Fine, I just wanted to check a button.” *Lame, Paul. Lame.* But it was the first excuse to pop into his head. He motioned for the limo and she shook her head and led the way. Beating her to the door, he opened it, handing her inside before slipping off his cover and joining her.

She sat opposite him in the wide area

of the stretch, and on the far side. He considered swapping seats, but he liked looking at her better—even if only in the illumination of passing headlights. “I hope you’re ready for a big party.”

“Me, too.” Lillianna didn’t sound ready. He raised his eyebrows and she moistened her lips.

Damn. Mind out of the gutter. He gave his body the order, but too late to prevent the shock of reaction running riot through his system. If he hadn’t already been curious about her before, he definitely was then. *Out. Of. The. Gutter.*

He cleared his throat. “Worried?”

“No, sorry. I’m tired. It’s been a long

three days and we had some champagne before the ceremony.” She clasped and unclasped her hands as if uncertain what to do with them.

“I hope everything’s okay.” Three days ago, he’d been sweating his ass off in Baghdad counting the minutes until the C130 would depart and he kissed the desert goodbye. He had a handful of days on leave and new orders for Germany. At least the climate would be better.

“Sorry again. I’m a nurse. I work in the ER and we had a lot of staff out with the flu, so I worked some doubles to help cover.”

Yeah, that had to be the suck. “Well, let’s hope tonight we can make up for

your hard work.”

“As long as I can stay awake.” She relaxed and crossed one leg over the other. “Sleeping in an on-call room for three hours here and four hours there does not make for the partying mood.”

No, he would imagine not. “I’ll keep you awake.”

“I’m sure you have better things to do than worry about me.”

“Not at all. In fact, it’s my duty to worry about you, ma’am.” Paul was already feeling better about the night. “I’m your appointed escort.”

“For the wedding but not the reception.” A tiny frown drew her brows together.

Little lies made the world go round, right? “Actually, at the rehearsal last night, Rebecca asked all the groomsmen to be sure to look after the bridesmaids. So I’m afraid you’re stuck with me.”

“Uh huh.” Her mouth twisted, but a smile hinted at the corners. “So you’re in charge?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And you’re going to make sure I have a good time?”

Oh, yes. “Absolutely.”

She licked her lips again and his cock strained against his trousers. If she kept that up, he’d have a zipper imprint soon. “What if—despite your noble and very dedicated attempts—I’m still sleepy?”

“I’ll sneak you out myself and deliver you to the bed of your choice.” If he had to steal a car to make it happen, but no sense in sharing that part since he knew more than enough people who would loan him a ride.

Laughing, she lifted her bare shoulders in a resigned shrug. “Very well, if you insist on showing me a good time.”

Their arrival at Mike’s Place saved him from answering. The bride and groom were already inside, the worst of the formalities over for the evening. He slid out, set his cover in place, and held out his hand.

“You haven’t seen what they did to

the ballroom, have you?” he asked on the way up the walk. It was a warm evening but not too hot. Perfect for a party that would spill out the ballroom doors and into the sculpted gardens offering respite to so many recuperating at the veteran’s center Luke built.

“No. I told Rebecca she should replace me as bridesmaid, I must be the worst in the world. I missed fittings, I only had an hour to be at her bridal shower and then missed the rehearsal.”

Two men in suits opened the main doors for them and they stepped inside the golden-lit room, a cross between a Marine Ball and the waltz scene from some Disney movie. The lights were softer, a full band played at one end and

the dining tables surrounded the dance floor.

Stationed waiters brought drinks and cleared them away, but a buffet from Damon's restaurant occupied one wall, with plenty of room to keep people on the move.

“Wow.” Lillianna stopped and Paul waited for her. “She wasn't kidding.”

“About?” Curious, he tipped his head toward her. The low lighting made her silver eye makeup glitter but kept her eyes hidden, and it annoyed him. With the warm chocolate of her coloring, he half-expected brown eyes, but he wanted to know what shade.

“Rebecca said she'd dreamed about

this night since she was fifteen...and looking at this...yeah....” She cleared her throat and touched a finger to the corner of her eye. “I guess she really has.”

“Nothing wrong with dreams.”

“No, nothing at all,” she agreed. “So where are we sitting?”

“This way.” He secured her hand in the crook of his elbow and led her toward the big table where the other bridesmaids and groomsmen settled in.

“Do you think you could do me a favor?” she murmured.

“Anything.”

“When they pass the champagne, I don’t want any more. I’m likely to pass out on my feet.”

“Then we’ll do water together.”

“You shouldn’t have to do that. You’re here for a good time, too.”

“Oh, I’m having a great time.” *And it’s only going to get better.* He liked her. Fifteen minutes in her company and he wanted more. But first, they had to get through the reception and the couple’s first dance, and then he planned to sweep her onto the dance floor and get to know her better.

Chapter Two

Lillianna loved dancing, more than she cared to admit. Her escort turned out to be a great partner. Paul whirled her around the dance floor, his ability to waltz catching her off guard.

“You do this far better than I’d imagine a grunt would.”

“Thank you, lessons at the Y.” He winked and turned her again. The playful winks were a flirtatious habit, but somehow he made them charming.

“You deflect well, too.” She kept her hand on his exquisitely hard shoulder beneath the uniform, intimately aware of his hand heating her back where it

rested.

The amusement in his eyes belied his frown. “I’m not deflecting. I really did learn to waltz at the Y from Mrs. Carter.”

She raised her eyebrows in silent question, following his sweeping steps as he kept them moving in and around the other couples dancing.

“You want a confession, I see.” His generous mouth spread into a beautiful smile. “Let me buy you a drink?”

“From the very open bar?” She couldn’t resist teasing him.

“Yes, from the very open bar. I will buy you a very large glass of water, and if you’re very nice, I’ll throw in some of

those hot cappuccinos I can smell them serving.” He guided them to the edge of the dance floor and offered his arm.

The man must have been born with manners. He exuded propriety and politeness. A nice change of pace from the ER doctors and interns who often didn't have time for a hello, much less anything else. They were all orders on the go, and silence when they hurried elsewhere.

“Well, it sounds like it pays to be really nice.” Their empty table waited, with much of the bridal party either dancing or chatting with others. She sat gratefully. The silver shoes went beautifully with the jewelry and complemented her dress, but they were

hell on her toes.

“Sit tight. I’ll get you the cappuccino and the water....” He paused mid-step and nodded to her feet. “Take the shoes off, wiggle your toes. The cold floor will ease the ache.”

And he apparently missed nothing. Her face warmed, but she kept a game smile in place. He disappeared in search of the drinks. Taking advantage of the alone time, she slid first one and then the other of her shoes off. The ache in her toes and arches spread as the blood rushed to her feet. She stretched her legs and flattened her feet against the hard tile. The coolness definitely helped and it served to wake her sleepy mind. Good

food, good champagne, good dancing, and God help her, good company relaxed her more than a lullaby.

Uniforms filled the room, but there were easily as many—if not more—civilians. A number of jackets were left to hang on the back of chairs as the dancing increased. The music shifted tempo and the waltz gave way to a far hipper tune that required a lot more bopping than she was up to.

They'd sat just in time to keep her from embarrassing herself.

“You look like you're feeling better.” Paul set a tall, steaming mug of the frothy coffee in front of her.

The combination of his nearness and the sweet scent of the coffee coaxed

another smile. “I do feel better. Good plan about the shoes. I knew cool floors helped cramps, didn’t occur to me that they would help sore feet.” She sipped the coffee and sighed happily. “Okay, so thank you for the suggestion and the cap. Now you were going to tell me a story.”

“Darn, and here I hoped you’d forgotten about that.” The ‘aw shucks’ demeanor didn’t wear well on him, but the amused grin did.

“No such luck.” She propped her chin in her hand and stared at him until he hooked his chair closer. The great thing about Paul was his absolute focus on her despite the huge party playing out all around them.

“I wasn’t always a Marine.” Hell of a place for him to begin his story.

She laughed.

“What?” Mock surprise filled his expression. “This shocks you?”

“No one is born a Marine. But please continue.”

He chuckled and sipped his coffee, skipping alcohol right along with her. In fact, he hadn’t touched more than a couple of sips during the toasts before setting his glass aside. More of his gentlemanly behavior or a dislike of the drink?

Curiousier and curiouser.

“As I was saying, I didn’t grow up Marine. In fact, my father worked in a

bodega for most of his teenage years and met my mother at school. Well, teens being teens, I was one of those babies born before they graduated. But they got married, raised me the best they could and I have three younger brothers, just like me. So they did something right.” Another flash of his easy grin and Lillianna had to look away, smiling until her cheeks ached.

“I don’t know if that’s a good thing or not.”

“No?” He tapped the back of her hand, a fleeting caress that sent her pulse rabbiting.

“No, I don’t know if the world is really ready for four of you.”

“They do okay. I got most of the

handsome and all of the charm.”

The effortless delivery killed her. She covered her mouth with her hand and laughed until tears gathered in the corners of her eyes. “And none of the modesty, I take it?” she managed, her mirth barely under control.

“Modesty? What is this modesty you speak of?” He rubbed his chin and squinted as though truly puzzled.

“Nothing you need to worry about.” Good-looking. Funny as hell. Thoughtful. Good dancer. *I so need to run away now....* But she didn’t move, because she was tired—or at least that’s what she told herself. “So your parents were high school sweethearts.”

“Yeah, they didn’t have much, but not many of the families in our neighborhood did. One of the last urban holdouts where your neighbors knew you and looked after you just like your parents did. Not the postage stamp yard surrounded by white picket fences, but we knew it didn’t matter if *Mami* or *Papi* weren’t there to see us, Mrs. Gutterez or Mr. Martinez, they would whoop us good and then tell *Mami* and *Papi*.” Another easy grin. He obviously enjoyed the childhood memories.

“But you still managed to find trouble.”

“A little here, a little there.” Paul stretched his arm along the back of her

chair, comfortable and intimate. “Nothing that couldn’t be fixed with a lot of hard work and my *papi* glaring at me.” His smile dimmed. “At least ’til I turned sixteen. Started running with a crew that wasn’t anything but trouble. I thought it made me cool. Because, when you’re sixteen....”

“Stupid is cool.” She raised her hand and wiggled her gloved fingers. “Hot-wired my first jeep at sixteen. Would have done it at fifteen, but I accidentally ripped all the wires out instead of stripping them.”

He laughed. “Exactly. Small time stuff, shoplifting a beer because we wanted to drink it, or grabbing some snacks. Started at my dad’s bodega and,

well one thing led to another and I began boosting cars before my senior year. Told myself it was a nest egg, didn't want to be my *papi*, get some girl pregnant and be stuck raising the kids."

Lillianna winced.

"Trust me, I was the punk, not *Papi*. I thought I knew everything. Didn't work out—because stupid doesn't usually pay off. In this case, it failed spectacularly. We were boosting a car, me and my crew, and a guy tried to stop us. A couple of the others panicked and beat him. We were all arrested for assault and I had to sit there in a cell and wait for my *papi* to come and bail me out."

The fun of the evening drifted by and

her heart squeezed for him. Even under the best of circumstances, that couldn't have been pleasant.

“Anyway, *Papi* didn't come that night, he let me stay in jail until my hearing. He did come to see me the next day and told me if I wanted to behave like a man with no respect for the rules, then I needed to learn what it meant to be one. He also brought Mrs. Carter. She worked at our community center and told me she'd made a deal with the judge and I had to do community service. But I was almost eighteen, if I didn't get it together, that cell was my future.”

“And you obviously got it together.”

“I think so. Mrs. Carter brought me lots of options and introduced me and

my crew to a recruiter. He was toughest guy I ever met. I enlisted the day after I graduated. Had to make sure that my record stayed clean and Sergeant Tommy had to vouch for me, but I made it in. And here I am.”

She eyed the chevrons on his rank insignia. “A sergeant yourself—Master Sergeant?”

“Master Sergeant.” He inclined his head. “Good eye. Military brat?”

“Oh, yeah.” Not her favorite subject, but she dialed back her natural reticence. He’d shared something personal and managed to be funny. She didn’t need to let her inner bitch out to play, tired or not. “Army.”

“Dad, right?”

“Right again. Am I that obvious?”

“No.” He twisted the cappuccino cup around on the table, turning it in circles. “You don’t seem that comfortable with the uniform and you’re second-guessing yourself. My *papi* can still do that to me even if I’m standing in front of him in full dress blues.”

She appreciated that. Lifting her cup, she eyed his. “To stern father figures and the impressions they leave behind.”

“I’ll drink to that.” He clinked his coffee cup to hers. The music changed again, the fun and bubbly taking over the dance floor. “You up for another spin?”

She glanced at her shoes with a

grimace.

Paul pushed his chair back and nudged her shoes under the table. “Leave them. You don’t need them and you’ll have more fun.”

He held out his hand and she drained her coffee and put it aside, before letting him help her rise. The respite worked, she had a second—or maybe her twenty-second wind. “I love that you love to dance.” *I’m not falling for him, we’re just having fun.*

“Well, I definitely love dancing with you.” He tugged her with him and she laughed at his hip-shaking motion to the beat. It didn’t occur to her until he said that but he hadn’t danced with anyone else.

Not even the bride and there was still a line of Marines taking turns dancing with Rebecca.

Paul spun and caught her around the waist, pulling her close until they were swaying together.

Do not fall for him. Do not fall for him. Do not fall for him.

“Congrats, Captain,” Paul gave Luke a firm handshake and clapped him on his shoulder. “Brody sent his regards, said he was sorry as hell to miss you letting the past catch you.” The lieutenant demanded Paul memorize the message when he got word that the Master

Sergeant would make the wedding.

Luke snorted. “All I had to do to let it catch me was stop running. How about you? We haven’t had a lot of time to talk. When do you leave for your next deployment?”

“Three days. Not a hell of a lot of turnaround. But it’s Germany, so a virtual vacation.” Turning around, he leaned against the bar, sipping a second cappuccino. His gaze tracked Lillianna where she and the other bridesmaids clustered around Rebecca. Luke’s blushing bride held onto Lillianna’s hand, chattering animatedly.

“Intelligence training?”

“Something like that. What do you know about Lillianna?” He enjoyed the

hell out of her company, so much so, he itched to liberate her from the girl talk and dance again.

“She was Becca’s roommate in college and she doesn’t like me.” The captain chuckled. “I don’t mind, she’s got the right. I acted like a dick and she holds me responsible for my actions.”

“You tell her that?” Tough. Beautiful. Loving. Lillianna looked better and better.

“I’m thinking accepting her disapproval and not making waves for Becca with her friend is the least I can do. In thirty or forty years, she can forgive me after I prove I’m worth it for Becca.” The man had that rare look on

his face—bliss.

“Fair enough.”

“Captain.” Logan arrived and slung an arm around Luke’s shoulders. Zach appeared, along with their wife—two men, one wife—not Paul’s idea of a marriage, but whatever worked. Next came James, Damon, Matt and about ten others Paul didn’t know on sight.

“We, the married, want to welcome you to the club.” Zach grinned. “We’re also here with your deployment orders.”

Luke’s brows climbed and Paul hid a smile of his own. This particular surprise he did know about. From the squeal of laughter across the room, the bridesmaids had delivered their present to the bride.

“Deployment orders?” Luke set his drink on the bar and eyed his men. Logan held an envelope out.

“Travel arrangements, Captain. Your gear is packed and waiting in the limo. Lauren took care of Mrs. Dexter’s supplies; Zach and I took care of yours. What you have in your hand are airplane tickets and itinerary for three weeks in Cabo. You, your bride, sunshine and sand.” Logan’s wide smile held pride.

“As for the orders,” James interrupted, “No thinking about Mike’s Place, no worrying about meetings, supplies, duty rosters or patient rotations. The seven of us can do that job. You and Rebecca haven’t taken

more than a weekend off together since you found each other again. This is her time—and yours. We appreciate your service....”

Luke didn't say anything for the longest moment, and stared not at his men, but at the envelope. “I have no words.”

“You don't need them, sir.” Matt spoke up. “Of all of us, I think I can say it best. You've given us a place and a welcome, and you've had our backs every step of the way. This is the least we could do.”

Gripping each man's hand in a quick, hard handshake and blinking back what suspiciously appeared to be tears, Luke took Matt's advice to heart and said

nothing. Shaking Paul's hand last, the captain cleared his throat. "All right. Well, try not to burn the place down, and whatever you do, don't rearrange Becca's carefully planned calendar."

"Oh, hell no," Jazz murmured and the rest laughed.

"Now, if you'll excuse me...I need to go kidnap my bride. We have orders." He strode away and they all paused to watch him sweep Rebecca up in his arms and they were off.

"Damn. Did not have to tell him twice." Damon gestured for the bartender to bring refills for everyone.

"No. He wanted to give her a big honeymoon, but they're both wildly

invested here. Hard to plan to be away when it means leaving work unfinished.” James accepted his drink. “One for me, and then I’m going to wrap this up. Damon, you’re in charge of the rest of the reception, make sure cleanup gets handled. Matt, if you and Naomi don’t mind taking care of the band. Logan, you and Jazz will be handling the exit interviews this week for anyone checking out. Zach, you get entrance....” The conversation migrated with the psychologist, but Paul didn’t listen.

With Rebecca’s departure, Lillianna drifted away from the other bridesmaids—heading back to the table they’d shared earlier. She moved with purpose. Abandoning his coffee, he followed.

Over the last few years, he'd gone through women like an alcoholic through a case of schnapps.

Lillianna was single malt scotch.

And damn if he wasn't in the mood for that.

By the time he reached the table, she stared at her shoes with a grimace.

“Need a ride home?” he murmured.

“You don't give up, do you?” Laughter and fatigue twined in her voice, giving her a husky quality. Would she sound that way in bed, well-pleasured and languid? His body tightened at the mental image.

“No, ma'am. I do not.” No sense in denying it. “You're one hell of an

attractive woman, you're funny, you're smart...and you haven't said anything about there being a man in your life. So would I be stepping on any toes?" *Say no.*

"Paul, you're a nice guy, but...."

"No nice guy speeches." He frowned. "They cut a man off at the ego."

Her snort of laughter entertained him. "I think your ego would survive."

"Maybe." He leaned toward her, lowering his voice. "And if you abandon me, it means I don't have a good excuse to leave early." So close, the sweet scent of her perfume tickled his nostrils. She really was lovely, exceptionally lovely, and her eyes were softer brown, with just the hint of gold. Or maybe they

simply reflected the lighting. But between her rich cocoa skin and faintly golden eyes, she looked like an African goddess and he wanted to be her supplicant.

Pursing her lips, she glared at him. “Are you playing me?”

“Not at all. If I wanted to play you, I’d make a lot of excuses to get into your pants.” He raked her form with an appreciative gaze. She really looked spectacular in the dress. “But I’m honest in my intentions. Do I want to take you to bed? Absolutely. Am I planning to push my luck or trick you into my bed? Not a chance. When you ask me—and yes, you’re going to ask me—you’ll want it

as much as I do.” This close, he enjoyed the way her pupils dilated and her swift inhalation.

“Bold.”

“It doesn’t always pay to be subtle.” Tempted beyond reason to kiss her, he reached down to retrieve her shoes. “So what’s it going to be, Cinderella? Do you want to turn into a pumpkin or would you let me sweep you off your feet?”

Hesitation seemed to roll off her in waves. *Tempting, aren't I?* He edged a little closer, imagining the invisible barrier around her evaporating. “Do you have to work tomorrow?”

“No.” She shook her head slowly.

“Do you want to go home right now?”

“I really should....” She bit her lip.

“Run away from everything with me? A night of make believe, no strings, no problems, lots of fun?” Pushing her wasn’t his style. *But fuck, I’ve got three days and then I’m on a plane. If I let her get away—*

“You’re all about the carpe diem, aren’t you?” She leaned against the chair, arms folded, but she didn’t look ready to escape and he still held her shoes.

“Life is too short not to go after what you want.” It was a motto. He worked hard. He played hard. He lived for the moment, particularly when tomorrow began halfway around the world. *Or at*

least three tomorrows from now...

“Does it occur to you that maybe I’m not interested?” But the curve of her lips belied the comment.

“Oh, that wounds.” He pressed a hand over his heart. “Your words cut me.”

Lillianna laughed. “You’re terrible.”

“Nah. I’m cute. You’re just a little overwhelmed by all this hotness.” He winked, and then laid off the hard push. “How about a quiet cup of coffee? We can slide out of here, I’ll give you a lift home after, and we can relax—quiet, no pressure, no demands.”

She stepped toward him, and traced a finger down the buttons of his coat. “I’m sorry, what part of no pressure and no demands is *carpe diem*?”

“The part that is a gentleman. But we can skip that—if you insist.” A pulse of pure want beat from his head to his cock and back again.

“Tempting. So coffee...and then what?” She trailed her hand up to his neck, her face mere inches from his.

“Whatever we want.” The urge to kiss her grew harder to ignore. “Do you want coffee?”

She sighed, her expression settling into some decision. “No.”

Disappointment bled through him. “Okay.”

“But I will take the *carpe diem*.”

Chapter Three

Had she really just said she'd take the *carpe diem*? Paul wasted no time getting them out of the reception. Fortunately, Luke and Rebecca's exit made amidst laughter and fanfare allowed most of the party to focus on their partners or friends. No one even gave Paul and Lillianna a second glance as they walked out the door. The evening air was humid and warm, the late day heat lingering long after the sun went down—but it was still cooler than Lillianna's blood.

He paused outside the door and frowned at the concrete and then at her feet. Before she said anything, he

mirrored the groom's he-man tactic earlier and swept her into his arms. A whoosh of air escaped and her pulse double-timed it. There was nothing soft about Marine Master Sergeant Torres, and cradled to his uniformed chest, she couldn't stop thinking about peeling away the dress blues to investigate it for herself.

Good lord, woman, it's basic anatomy—calm down. But her body paid absolutely no attention to her mind. Despite holding her, Paul didn't start walking right away. The drawn-out silence pulled her gaze to meet his eyes. He studied her with a mixture of curiosity and amusement.

“What?” She didn’t quite squirm under his regard.

“Waiting to see if you changed your mind.”

Had she? Running her hand over his shoulder, she teased herself with the possibilities. “Not as far as I can tell. Thanks for the lift, by the way.”

His full mouth spread into a heart-stopping grin. *God, the charm in him doesn’t quit.* “No problem. I didn’t want you to hurt your feet.” He started walking but didn’t head for the parking lot.

Little jolts of electricity skittered along her nerves. “Where are you going?”

Paul paused. “The apartment I’m staying in.” He nodded toward the oblong buildings visible on the other side of the tree-lined greenbelt.

“Oh.” Another shiver of excitement collided with the first. She thought they’d at least have the drive to stretch out the moment.

“Still good?” He waited patiently.

“You look like you’re waiting for me to change my mind.”

“Do I?” The low lighting hid his expression, but his actions bespoke a certainty that she might very well flip-flop on her decision.

“Well, that’s twice you’ve asked. Do you want me to?” It seemed a fair

question, particularly since a tiny voice in the back of her mind gulped every time she assured him she hadn't.

“Hmm.” He canted his head to the side as though considering his response.

Disappointment fluttered in her breast, the barest beat of a butterfly's wings. Did he really want her to reconsider? He closed the distance and took possession of her mouth, darting his tongue inside for a full-on sensual assault. She forgot to think.

Hell, she forgot to breathe.

The world around her vanished, leaving only the sensation of his lips massaging hers, teasing her with his tongue until she groaned. By the time he lifted his head, they were both breathing

heavily. Her haphazard thoughts shut down and she forgot how to speak. Which was a good thing, because she didn't remember what they'd been discussing.

Apparently, Paul didn't share her dilemma. "I definitely don't want you to change your mind."

"Okay," she managed. It wasn't much of a response, but if she hadn't heard the huskier desire in his voice, she might have been embarrassed. Her mouth still tingled from the kiss and she leaned into him, tucking her head against his neck. He didn't seem remotely bothered by carrying her, but when he started walking again, he increased the pace.

She giggled and he murmured a low, “hmmm?”

“I was wondering what people would think if they saw us.” She kept her voice to a whisper. Yes, they were outside. Yes, they walked from the larger buildings toward the quieter apartments. Yes, even the lighting on the path seemed dim and private. But all of those factors didn’t mean they were alone.

Yet.

Another quiver of excitement raced through her. Anticipation ping-ponged from her breasts to her sex and back again. He’d barely touched her, and given her only that one pulse-pounding kiss, and all she could think about was in

a few short minutes, they'd be naked.

Together.

“They'd think ‘damn, he's lucky. Did you see her? She's gorgeous.’” Amusement threaded beneath the need in his voice and she forgot to think again. He called her gorgeous.

An eternity passed before they reached the door to the apartment and he slowly lowered her to the ground. When she would have stepped away, his arm snaked around her waist and pulled her close. She liked his height and strength.

Rising up on her tiptoes, she met his second, hot, thoroughly arousing kiss. She wrapped a hand around his neck, and ached with the want for him. Somewhere between her hesitation and

that first kiss on the sidewalk, she'd committed to the night.

He trailed a path of kisses from her mouth to her ear and when his tongue glided along the lobe, her knees buckled. "We need to go inside...." Teasing colored the words.

Oh hell...look at me hanging all over him and ready to go at it right here against the door. Hadn't she just been worried about who might see them?

Dragging herself back a step, she adjusted the front of her dress, the cooler air leaving goose bumps across her feverish skin. Paul slipped his cover off. The harsh sound of his breathing promised her he was just as affected as

she.

Still time to change your mind....

The creeping voice of doubt slunk back in, but she ignored it. Maybe she would regret tonight in the morning, maybe. If she left right then, she'd definitely regret it.

Fight the battles you know how to win....

She didn't have to regret not being with him. Especially if the night was all they had. He unlocked the door and opened it, then held out his hand. A muscle in his jaw twitched, and the line of his mouth went taut. The control he exerted to not ask her if she changed her mind impressed her.

Again.

Placing her hand in his, she let him tug her inside. Tonight wasn't about the past or personal hang-ups.

“Lillianna—”

She pressed a finger to his lips, silencing whatever he might have been about to say. “You're wearing too many clothes, Master Sergeant.”

He kissed her gloved fingertip and stepped back, one by one loosening the buttons on his uniform jacket and began to strip out of his clothes. Unlike most men, he didn't drop them on the floor, but hung them over the back of a chair. Neat. Precise.

Orderly.

And by the time he reached his belt,

frustration screamed through her. Heat hit her, everything in her body responding to his—and he hadn't touched her since he'd started stripping. She hadn't reacted that way to any of the guys she hooked up with—not in college, not since.

Because in my vast experience, all three guys were funny and interesting and seemed attractive.... But not in a gut-wrenching, panty-wetting, fuck-me-walking way—no that seemed to be her response to Paul and him alone. Of course, Paul was all hard muscle, and tanned skin. And then there were his eyes, a rich shade of green that served as a brilliant counterpoint to his Latin name, the sex god looks, and utterly

captivating, open smile. Her sex clenched as if imagining him already easing his cock into her.

Naked save for a very dark pair of briefs, he stepped in and kissed her, drowning the other needs colliding in her with one light brush of his lips.

“Ready for duty, ma’am...would you like some help with your clothes?”

“Oh. Yeah.” Two syllables. They were all she managed to wrap her tongue around.

Paul waited patiently, even though every urge said reach out and take what he wanted. He’d learned a lot about Lillianna over the last few hours. A contained woman, she kept her emotions

closeted away from the rest of the world. Her compassionate nature reflected in her manners and choice of professions. She took the time to chat with him even though his uniform made her uncomfortable. Her words told him she didn't approve of Luke and harbored ill will toward him for his past treatment of Rebecca, but her genuine affection and cheer toward the bride spoke volumes about her willingness to see her friend happy.

Layers upon layers, carefully shielding the woman beneath—from what, he wasn't certain—but damned if he didn't want to find out. In a few short hours, he recognized a certain kindred spirit. Becoming obsessed with her

wouldn't be hard. Getting involved, especially when he had to leave in less than sixty hours, was a mistake.

“Lily?” He read the hesitation in her eyes. If she changed her mind, he would accept it. Stuffing his desire down, he ignored the raging need tightening his balls.

“What did you call me?” She set her clutch purse on a side table and drifted closer to him.

“Lily,” he repeated. “It’s affectionate. You don’t like it?”

“No, it’s fine.” Her hand hovered close to his chest and he held his breath. Would she actually touch him? Maybe she hadn’t changed her mind? Hope

rose, along with a lick of anticipation. With a feather-light touch, she traced her fingers across his chest and some of the tension in his spine eased.

If he hadn't enjoyed it so much, he might have called himself pathetic. All of his training dissolved when compared to this woman and it defied all rational thought to want her so much.

"You're still dressed," he reminded, uncertain of how much longer he would hold out without stripping off her clothes and taking her right there on the floor. Not really the way one should treat a lady—but the idea of taking her against the wall, on the table...with her gorgeous dark legs wrapped around his hips and her nails digging into his back

as he drove them both over the edge appealed.

A tremble shook her. “I don’t do this.”

Reality crashed into his mental fantasy and he sucked it up, covering her hand on his chest with his. “No problem, I’ll get dressed and get you that coffee. Or take you back to your car....”

“No.” She caught his hand with her other one and stepped in, her body colliding gently with his. “I just meant I don’t usually do this. The last time I picked up a guy at a party was in college. And...sad as it is to say, it has been a while. A long while. I’m nervous as hell.”

The words spilled out of her in a

torrent. Wrapping an arm around her, Paul did the only thing that came to mind—he silenced her with a kiss. She opened to him on a sigh. Twining his tongue with hers, he concentrated on only kissing her while keeping his hands still and steady. If he started caressing her, well—the dress was history.

She nipped his tongue, a careful grazing of her teeth, and moaned low in her throat. Her responsiveness drove him wild, like an adrenaline junkie riding one wave of need to the next.

“Then we go slow,” he murmured, nuzzling her mouth. *Even if it kills me.* “And you let me do everything.”

“Everything?” Challenge rose in her voice.

“Everything. You give me control.” He rubbed her back lightly, tracing the line of her spine. Her soft skin above the dress and the warmth hidden by the fabric teased him. The damn piece of clothing had to go.

Uncertainty wavered in her expression, but he waited.

“Like...Dominance and submission games?”

Pressing a kiss to her forehead, he indulged his need to touch her—especially if they were going to have a conversation about it. “Just like that. Only it’s not a game.”

“I’m not into spanking.” But she knew how to draw a line clearly.

“No, not spanking...control. This isn't bondage or sadism or masochism. Just surrender and pleasure.” He caught the lobe of her ear and gave it a gentle tug. Another shudder rippled over her and she let go of his hand to clutch his shoulder. “It's about letting go of your inhibitions, and your worry. You listen to me, do what you're told and I'll give you lots of pleasure, baby.”

From her ear, he licked and nibbled a path to her throat. Her pulse hammered under his lips and he allowed a smile at her excitement. So soft, so responsive and so ready to give in, if only she would let go. Even a little.

“What about a safe word?”

She didn't say 'no' and satisfaction curbed the sharp edge of his desire. He could afford the patience they would need, and when he was done neither of them would be able to walk. "Pick anything you like. If you say it, I'll stop." Paul bit the juncture between her shoulder and her throat, but not hard enough to mark her.

"Oh, God." She dug her nails into his shoulders and he laughed.

"That won't work, because I want to hear you come later." His cock gave an enthusiastic throb of agreement.

Lillianna leaned her head back. "I really can't think when you're doing that."

“No?” He loved the angle and the access it gave to the gentle swell of her breasts above the strapless outfit. He could tease and torment himself with another trail of nibbling caresses to the top of one breast. The musky scent of her was distinctly female and he wanted to slide under that dress, and explore the taste of her arousal.

“No.” She cupped his nape and arched in demand.

He didn't give into it. “Then try. You need a safe word and you need to say ‘yes.’” Steadying her, he withdrew and waited.

She stared at him, her breath coming in short, hard pants. Yeah, she wanted

him. “Turtles.”

Biting back a laugh, he nodded. “Turtles. If you say ‘turtles’, then I stop.”

“Yes.” Eagerly she approached him again, but stopped when he held up his hand. “What?”

“Take the dress off.” He leaned on the wall and folded his arms. She agreed to play and he wanted their mutual pleasure to last.

Hesitation flickered in her gaze, but she reached for the zipper on the side of the dress and gave it a tug. The creation fell to the floor with one motion, leaving her clad in a white strapless bra, panties and, God help him, stockings—real ones right down to the garter belt. The

paleness contrasted decadently with her chocolate skin. She turned the simple, ordinary pieces of lingerie into something far more provocative.

Licking her lips, she stepped out of the dress. He swallowed the groan trying to escape. The idea of touching her interfered with his ability to think straight.

“Turtles?” He double-checked before his brain went completely offline.

“Turtles,” she confirmed.

Not wasting time on any more conversation, he caught her hand and guided her to the bedroom. He'd barely been in the borrowed apartment for longer than to sleep or shower since he

arrived. But it had a very generous-sized bed and plenty of privacy. All the way down the hall, he put together his plan of action.

She may have called it play, but it was far from a game. He was a Dom. He liked to be in charge—particularly in the bedroom. Some of the guys were into kinkier shit, they got off on sadomasochism with very compliant and willing partners. Not him.

He liked his partners willing and obedient, but preferred to draw out the pleasure—controlling a woman's reactions and building her anticipation until he allowed her release. It would be the pinnacle of their gratification, but by no means all of it.

In the bedroom, he turned on the light and drew her toward the bed. “I have three rules. You will obey them.”

“And they are?” She threw out the verbal gauntlet without hesitation.

He allowed it. She didn’t know the rules.

Yet.

“First: no speaking unless I ask you a question, and your safe word if you need it.” Her eyes widened. Expecting another outburst, he gave her a moment to absorb the information. “Do you understand?”

She licked her lips again, and he focused unerringly on the erotic action. His cock gave another throb of need.

Yes, he wanted to feel her fasten those plump lips around him and suck for all she was worth. As attractive as the thought was, he had to push it aside.

She gratified him with a single nod in answer to the question. She understood.

“Excellent.” He relaxed. “Second rule. You do what you’re told to do when I tell you. You don’t argue. You can always say your safe word, but I promise you, I won’t do anything you don’t want. Everything we’re going to do is about our pleasure—yours and mine.” He emphasized *yours*, because hers would be first. “Do you understand?”

“Yes.” She said the word with a hint of a smile.

“The third rule is, you can’t come until I let you.” The last was the hardest rule and if she was unused to that kind of play, it might be impossible for her to obey. But then her only punishment would be to come again at his desire. He wanted to feel her coming around him with his cock buried balls deep in her pussy. Her gaze drifted down to his crotch and he didn’t smile. His erection stood out profoundly against the tight briefs. She had nothing to worry about in the was-he-attracted-to-her department. “Do you understand?”

Another nod, although slower and marred by a consternated frown.

Intrigued, he sat on the edge of the bed

and studied her. “Do you have a question?”

“Yes.”

“You may ask your question.” She was perfect. Absolutely perfect. Maybe she didn’t recognize her submissive nature, but fire burned in his blood at her receptiveness to the role.

“How do I not orgasm unless you tell me to? I mean if you’re doing your job right...won’t I orgasm whether I stop myself or not?”

“You can. You just have to trust me with your pleasure. Now turn around for me, Lily.”

Another hesitation, but she pivoted obediently. Paul let out a breath. Her ass was finer in the white silky bikini briefs

than in her dress. Round and sweet. He liked a woman with curves.

“Take off your bra.” He itched to get his hands on her, but pacing was important.

She started to turn toward him, and reached to unclasp the strapless number.

“I didn’t tell you to turn,” he reminded, and she paused. Peeling away one layer of her protection at a time. He wanted the woman beneath the shield. The one who peeked at him whenever she turned sassy.

The bra slipped away and he nodded with approval, not that she would see. “Now the panties.”

Another moment of hesitation and she

unclipped the garter belt. He sucked in a deep breath, but the oxygen didn't help when she slid her thumbs into the waistband and pushed her panties down with erotic slowness. His cock pulsed as her bare ass came into view.

Yes, tonight will likely kill me. But damn, what a way to go....

Chapter Four

Lillianna's body sizzled with anticipation. *I can't believe I agreed to this.* She faced down strung-out addicts, cut up felons, upset family members, and arrogant doctors on a daily basis, but none of them turned her inside out the way Paul did. He had her strip off her panties, and since he hadn't said anything about the garter, she clipped them back in place. Heart hammering, she stared at the wall, naked save for her thigh-high hose.

Cool air brushed against her too-hot skin. She wanted to turn around, but he hadn't given her permission yet.

Permission? I didn't ask for permission? Mouth dry, she tried to slow the hard pants of breath. How long would he make her stand there?

A shudder rocketed along her spine. She had to get her reactions under control. The man hadn't even touched her yet. Wetness pooled between her thighs and her sex clenched as though he already thrust into her. It took considerable effort to keep standing, to not turn and glance over her shoulder.

What is he doing?

“You're beautiful.” His sexy voice came from right next to her, startling her from the thoughts chasing themselves around in circles. He stood so close, the

warmth of him like a physical caress.
“Do you like to be touched?”

Holy crap. Two sentences dissolved her into a puddle. Forgetting how to speak for a moment, she wanted to wrap around him like he was a stripper pole.

“Lillianna.” His voice deepened with command.

Oh hell, I'm supposed to answer. It took her a moment to remember the question. “Yes.” *Yes, I like to be touched. Please stop making me stand here before I embarrass myself.*

He nuzzled her neck. The feather-light brush of his lips teased her flesh with soft, puffs of air. Wildfire raced in her blood. Her nipples hardened further, almost painfully and her breath clogged

in her throat. She tumbled right over the cliff from anticipation into pure lust.

Paul gathered her hair up, lifting it away from her neck and trailing a path of more feathery, torturous kisses from one side to the other. Every moment his mouth spent on her skin seemed to wind up the desire in her belly. Sensual, irresistible and she ached to touch him.

Raising her hand, she gave in to the urge and whimpered when he stopped kissing her neck.

“No. I didn’t give you permission to do that.”

Frustration fisted in her chest. Dropping her arm, she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. What was it

about him that turned her inside out? If she hadn't agreed to play obediently, they'd already be naked on the bed—she'd have what she wanted. Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes, but she blinked them back.

“Oh, baby, it's okay.” He rubbed her back. The light friction created a whole new wave of awareness. “It's hard, takes time to adjust and I understand. Do you need a moment?”

A moment? She almost growled. What...to stand there and not have him touching her? Oh, hell no. “No.” She was proud of the fact that her voice didn't quiver or shake.

Releasing her hair, he began running his hands up and down her arms. He

leaned into her, the soft hair on his chest tickling her bare skin, his erection pressing against her ass. She didn't care that the cotton of his briefs separated them. The hot length betrayed his arousal and increased her own. Her knees threatened to buckle.

Dear God, if this is my reaction, what happens when he lets me turn around....

The constant massage of his palms on her flesh relaxed the fresh wave of tension so much it startled her when he stopped. He wrapped his arms around her, flattening his palms on her stomach and drew her back until his erection rubbed between her ass cheeks. Heat

flushed her. Soaking wet need throbbed in her core.

“Feel a little better?” Why was that so sexy? She wiggled her hips and he exhaled a hard sigh. “No moving.”

Crap. She hadn't meant to break the rules.

But instead of taking his touch away, he slid a hand between her thighs, one finger drifting along the seam of her sex. “Answer.”

Leaning her head back on his shoulder, she stole a look at him from the corner of her eye. The firm, sensual line of his mouth curved ever so slightly. His jaw flexed as though he were fighting to maintain his own control. A giddy sense of power buoyed her.

He might be in charge, but he was hardly unaffected.

“Lillianna.” He said her name like a caress. “Feeling a little better?” He punctuated the question by gliding a finger right around her clit. Heat rushed upward, blooming like a mushroom cloud set off by a nuclear detonation.

“Yes,” she moaned. A single teasing brush was all he gave her, and she wanted to cry out at the loss. She must have made some sound, because he rubbed her stomach in slow circles.

How could it make her hotter and soothe her at the same time? Hardly able to keep her legs beneath her, she needed his support to stay on her feet. He

pressed a kiss to her jaw, and trailed his tongue along the line of her face to her ear, a light, almost intangible brush, before he sucked her earlobe and set off another series of quakes shocking her sensitive system.

“I’m going to let you go in a minute,” he murmured, low and husky. “And you’re going to walk over and lay on the bed.”

No, dammit. She didn’t want him to let her go. Every caress seemed to rev her up and then he’d retreat. Unbearable tension stretched through her. Closing her eyes, she inhaled a deep breath and tried to bring her raging hormones under control. Paul shifted against her back and swept his hand from her stomach to

her breast, cupping it and destroying the fragile will she'd managed to gather together.

Another moan broke free before she could bite down on it.

“Shhh,” he murmured again, catching her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. The barest amount of pressure sent shudder after shudder rippling over her. “I like to hear your pleasure. You can moan or cry out all you want.”

Oh, thank God.

He massaged both breasts, alternating between the whisper-light caresses and squeezing her nipples. She couldn't find the rhythm of his actions, every touch a

pure assault on her senses.

He let her go and she stood, dazed.

“Go to the bed, Lillianna,” he ordered. She complied, not proud of the near stagger in her step. At the bed, she hesitated. Did he want her to lie on her back? On her stomach? Sit?

Helpless, she looked at him and he smiled. The wild heat inside of her turned up another few degrees and her heart squeezed.

“On your back, baby. Sit down and slide back until you’re comfortable.”

Staring at him scrambled her brains. Nothing spare on the man, he moved with purpose. So gorgeous, as well as funny, intelligent, and self-deprecating. Lust wound a blazing path in her

bloodstream. Instead of following her, he watched with hooded eyes as she arranged herself on the bed.

She needed to be touched, held, and discover the pleasure he promised her with every brush of his skin on hers—hell, even the way his gaze roved over her. Settling on the pillows, she tried not to shiver at the cool friction of the comforter on her skin.

Sliding one knee up, she braced her foot flat against the bed and left the other leg out—a wanton position that displayed her assets for him. But she wanted him to see—wanted him to know what he did to her.

“Comfortable?” he asked in the slow,

patient way he used.

“Yes,” she breathed. She couldn’t wait to see what he did next.

Paul drank in the sight of her, taking time to gather his fraying control back in place. Discipline and a desire to make the experience amazing for her was all that kept his cock in his briefs. She’d splayed herself on the bed perfectly; sweet, sinful perfection. Her uncertainty and the hesitation were both gone. He’d found the woman he caught glimpses of throughout dinner and dancing—the woman who peeked out from behind the carefully placed shields segregating her from danger and disaster—physical or emotional.

Beautiful. Canting his head to the side, he studied her and waited. He didn't want her confidence to waver, but he also didn't want to rush the moment. It was a careful balance to strike and she had every reason to feel confident in her sexuality. Arousal brightened her eyes and in the low light of the bedroom, they looked like liquid gold.

The urge to possess her roused a sleeping bear within him. He enjoyed his part of the lifestyle, but he rarely found a submissive who enjoyed surrender without toys or pain. He understood the need and desire for such experiences; he'd dabbled in them, but found only real satisfaction in the exchange of

power, in the absolute control when a woman surrendered.

He'd never found the perfect woman before, though.

Uncertainty flickered in her eyes and he approached slowly, stripping his briefs off in one, swift motion. Circling the bed, he checked the nightstand—condoms. It paid to be prepared. Not that he'd planned for the exquisite opportunity she gave him. He hadn't even known Lily seven hours ago.

“Would you like me to tell you what I want to do?” He enjoyed the way her emotions played across her face. She didn't hide anything from him, wore no carefully constructed professional or congenial mask. Hesitation gave way to

relief, and when her attention dropped to his cock, it stroked him as intimately as if her hand cupped him. His right eyelid twitched.

A smile curved her sensuous mouth and satisfaction warmed his chest. She liked what she saw. *Good.*

“Yes.” She didn’t whisper and there was nothing docile in her gaze when she looked up at him.

He sat only when certain he wouldn’t roll over and explore her damp depths he’d only fingered before. The urge to trail his mouth across her for a taste, to swirl her clit with his tongue and draw it hard until she screamed with the need for release pounded in his brain. *Not*

yet.

“I want to begin here.” He drifted a caress along her upright thigh, just a fleeting caress, a tease for him as much as for her. She shivered and goose bumps rose in the wake of his touch. “I want to touch every inch of your skin. I want to know what you like, what you don’t. I want to see need play across your face, I want to hear your breath catch.”

With two fingers, he traced over her knee, feathering lighter strokes to the inside of her leg. “I will explore everything. And then we’ll move up....” Mirroring his words with his touch, he deliberately pressed his palm to her sex, flattening the heel of his hand above her

clit. “Except here. We play here last.”

The words came out hoarser than he intended, the urge to thrust a finger into her, to test how ready she was—would be surrendering to her. No, she wanted that and he saw it in her face, in the way her mouth formed an O, and the not-so-subtle arch of her hips.

“Bad Lily,” he chided, bottling his amusement. He could hardly be upset at her eagerness when a similar level of excitement pushed him to move faster. Defiance flared in her eyes and the tilt of her chin. “Keep it up and I won’t put my tongue right here.” He grazed her clit with his thumb, enjoying her throaty sigh and shudder. “Understand?” He brushed

her clit twice more

“Magnificent.” If only he could draw their play out, and wondered if it were possible to keep them both in the constant state of arousal for hours, or if his brain would pop from the pressure. Moving on, he explored a path over her abdomen and eased farther onto the bed until he captured each of her breasts, shaping them and teasing the swollen, dusky nipples. She sucked in a breath each time he flicked the hard tips. Some women found the tap as erotic as a roll or a pinch.

“You definitely like this.” His Lily seemed to enjoy both. Her squirming became harder for him to contain and she fisted the covers in her hands.

She groaned. “Yes.” It hadn’t been a question, but she answered it anyway.

Taking pity on her or maybe himself, he licked a nipple, careful to watch her face. She closed her eyes and arched, offering the breast to him. Taking the tip into his mouth, he sucked gently, then with a harder tug. They stiffened further.

So fucking responsive....

Her skin was like velvet, tasted like peaches and the rich rosy musk of her arousal filled his nostrils. His control wavered and he wanted to cross his eyes with the bliss of wanting her. Leaving the first nipple, he treated the second to similar attention and slid his hand over her hip. Cupping her sex, he wanted to

moan.

She'd been damp before, but she soaked his palm and gave a little jump as he pressed in with one finger. So much virgin territory to explore with her, and he was as randy as a floater on his first liberty after a hella-long cruise.

Fuck it.... He thrust his fingers in gentle rhythm, paying attention to the moments when she gasped and when her hips stiffened, or her stomach tensed. As the pauses between pants shortened, he abandoned her breasts altogether and positioned himself between her legs.

“Lift this foot, baby,” he instructed. She gave him a dazed look, pleasure dilating her pupils, and obeyed. Spreading her thighs wider, he bent his

head and gave her a long lick from her entrance to her clit.

Her long, low moan echoed in his ears and he repeated the gesture. One taste and he craved a second and a third. Squeezing her ass, he held her still as his lust overrode his control. He loved the excitement in her rising moans and gasps. Every sound drove him further.

“Come for me, baby,” he murmured and locked his mouth around her clit, sucking it hard. She squirmed, her body bowing, her thighs moving against him, her hips bucking even as he fought to keep her still. He pulled back, easing off the pressure. She trembled and her sweet, dragging ‘no’ begged him for

permission. Vibrating his tongue to her clit, he shoved her over the edge until her scream echoed off the walls.

He kissed the mound above her sex and then along her thighs, nibbling the soft flesh at the juncture between her leg and her sex. He enjoyed the taste of her passion. Kissing a path up her body, he lavished her breasts and crawled higher to look into her pleasure-drenched face. She reached for him and he kissed her hard. Wrapping her arms around him, she clasped her legs around his hips.

The heat of her sex rubbed his cock and he groaned into her mouth. With a little shift and twist, he'd be inside her. He flattened a hand on the bed and shoved up, breaking the kiss. Her

drowsy expression was delectable. Heart thudding out of control, he reached for the condoms on the nightstand.

Ripping the foil, he never let go of her gaze. “Do you want to talk?” Yeah, his need for control warred with his need to hear her.

“No.” She smiled, and nodded to the condom.

“Ahh. You need this.” He sheathed his cock and braced himself. He didn’t want to come as soon as he slid inside of her. But holy hell, he wanted in her now. Settling back into position, he entered with one, swift thrust. Her inner muscles clamped him like a vise as he pulled out and pushed back in.

“Hang onto me, sweet Lily.” He teetered on the edge of his orgasm and he wanted her to have another before he came. She had to have another. Rocking in and out of her, he didn’t know how he managed the rhythm. “Look at me.”

Their gazes locked and he slid a hand between them, stroking her clit. She writhed beneath him and dug her nails into his shoulders. Her mouth opened in a cry, and it wasn’t yes, or no.

It was his name.

She convulsed, her orgasm dragging him deeper into her, and pulling him with her. His orgasm stormed through him, ripping him apart as he came with blazing torrent of molten heat, the flames

burning him up from the inside. Collapsing on top of her, he buried his face in the curve of her neck.

He didn't know which one of them shook—maybe both. Lifting his head, he studied her beautiful expression. Rapt joy filled her glorious smile.

“You're amazing,” he whispered. And she was. The most amazing, submissive, sweet woman he'd ever held in his arms.

“No.” She denied it with a slow shake of her head. “You are. That was...I don't have the words for that.” Another series of quakes clamped her sex around his softening cock and he choked on the overload of sensation.

He never wanted to let her go.

Chapter Five

She woke slowly, cocooned in warmth, her body aching in every right way. Stretching her arm out from the covers, she shifted with care. A heavy weight rested on her waist. Glancing down, she studied the arm wrapped around her. It surprised her and didn't in the same moment.

Blaming alcohol for sexual escapades had never been a concept she embraced. Hell, even if she wanted to blame drinking, she couldn't. She'd had exactly one sip of champagne during the toast, and stuck to water and coffee for the rest of the night.

No, she lay naked in bed with a man because that's exactly where she wanted to be—last night. The sun peeking through the blinds reminded her of the time. She needed to go. Time to box the wildly sexy Paul Torres into the smallest mental compartment she could find and shut the door. Easing forward, she slid out from under his arm. He tossed restlessly and rolled over. Freezing, she stole a glance over her shoulder and waited until he settled, before slipping out from beneath the covers and off the bed.

Finding her bra and panties took a bit of work. The first sat on the dresser, but the other turned out to be under the bed.

She felt a bit ridiculous, her hose was still on, but she'd apparently ripped one sometime between stripping for him and his delicious assault on her senses. Shivering with desire, she sighed.

Crawling back into bed and waking him up sounded so good.

Bad idea. Get your clothes and go. No muss. No fuss. No awkward morning-after conversations. The sensible thing to do, particularly when their one night was just that. A one-night stand—an erotic, sensual, fantastic one-night stand she would remember with a smile. Wedding fever—it happened to everyone.

Okay, it's never happened to me, but I've certainly seen these hook-ups

enough to put it into perspective. Dragging her gaze away from the man candy in the bed, she found her dress and scanned the room. Her purse and shoes were by the front door. She climbed into her dress and zipped it in the living room. Finger combing her hair would suffice, especially while fighting the craving to dive back into the bed and explore. Again.

It was just after eight in the morning. Her chances of running into other people rose with every passing minute. Unclipping her garters, and stripping off her hose, she stuffed them into her purse, grabbed her shoes and hesitated at the door.

Should she leave him a note? In college, one-night stands ended with one or both darting out for class. There really wasn't time for social protocol. Did that change in adulthood?

How sad is it that I have no idea? Guilt nibbled at her. It didn't seem right to leave without a word, but if she did say or write something, wouldn't that imply she wanted him to stay in touch? Or some kind of expectancy? She tossed the idea back and forth.

“Screw it,” she muttered and glanced around his living room. It was pretty barren of personal objects, but then he mentioned being on leave and borrowing the apartment for the duration of his stay.

How personal could he make it? And unless she wanted to open drawers and be nosy, she didn't see anything resembling a pen and a pad of paper.

Text message. That would be the simplest solution. She fished her phone out of her purse and scowled. She didn't have his number. His uniform lay neatly on the back of a chair where he'd set it after stripping. Poking through his pockets was not an option. *Okay, no easy way to leave a note, so...gotta go.*

She let herself out of the apartment and glanced around to get her bearings. He'd carried her all the way in the dark. Heading right, she followed the path toward the greenbelt. They'd come right through one from the reception hall. Sure

enough, she found the parking lot and grimaced at the rough pavement under her bare feet.

Her car, parked by its lonesome, stuck out like a sore thumb. She'd left it there prior to riding to the ceremony with the other bridesmaids because she needed a way to get home. Fortunately, no one witnessed her quick escape and she was on the road minutes later.

First stop, Starbucks. Second stop, her apartment and a much-needed shower and change of clothes. Her phone rang while she waited in the drive-thru and she glanced down at the screen.

The hospital.

Lillianna groaned. Ignoring the

temptation not to answer, she answered the cell. “Hansen.”

“Lillianna, it’s Jodi.” The clinical nurse specialist in charge of ER scheduling. “I know I promised I wouldn’t call and you had the wedding....”

“It’s okay.” Not really, but she wouldn’t snap at Jodi. Lillianna had all of fifteen hours off shift, it wasn’t the other nurse’s fault that she got less sleep than planned or spent the night having wild monkey sex with the talented and way-too-attractive Marine. “What’s up?”

“We’ve got three more nurses down with the flu.” Jodi sighed, exhaustion dragging on each word. She’d been at

the hospital when Lillianna left, which meant she probably hadn't gotten any sleep either.

"I can be there in an hour. I'm at a Starbucks right now, but it's still a drive to get there."

"God loves you and thank you. I wouldn't ask, but...."

"I know you wouldn't. I'll see you in an hour." She rang off and opened the window to give her order to the speaker. She would need double or triple shots before the day was over. Pulling forward, she waited her turn to pay for her drink and fished around in the back seat. Encountering the plastic-wrapped, freshly laundered scrubs, she let out a

sigh of relief.

Driving straight to the hospital and showering there would save her time. She had a flattening iron in her locker, but worst case, she'd pin her hair back. It was a good thing she hadn't woken Paul—another twinge of guilt struck her. Of course, if she had, she wouldn't have heard her phone.

Let it go, girl. Gotta go to work.

Paul scowled at his phone. Of all the stupid, boneheaded, ignorant-ass choices he made in his life—he never asked for her phone number. It never occurred to him while they danced, chatted, or

played. Even when he got her back to the apartment....

And why would I? We were getting naked, not swapping contact data. Bad enough that he woke to find her gone... that *irked* him and he planned to have a very long conversation about that... except he couldn't, because he didn't have her damn phone number. His options were limited, he didn't know the other bridesmaids, and the bride was long gone on a well-deserved honeymoon with the Captain.

Yeah, if I call him, the chances of his answering are slim to none. The chances of him answering to find out I need the number of the bridesmaid I banged—yeah, not going there. Still

pissed at himself, Paul grabbed a shower, changed into comfortable clothes and put his uniform back in order. He had to be on a plane the next day if he wanted to report for duty on time.

Packed, save for the uniform he'd wear on the flight, he grabbed the keys to his rental and headed out. He'd been meaning to stop by Damon's restaurant since he got into town, the restaurant wasn't that far, and even at ten in the morning, now was as good a time as any.

He parked on the nearly empty side street and stared at the shuttered windows of Lagniappes. Damon had always enjoyed cooking, and opening a

New Orleans-style restaurant near Mike's Place married two of his greatest loves—although from what Paul saw at the wedding, Damon had added a third to that list by way of an attorney he'd met.

The window sign declared the location didn't open until eleven. Leaning his head back against the seat, he closed his eyes. It didn't take much for his mind to turn back to Lily. Her name conjured the memory of her scent, the soft sounds and hard gasps as he explored her body. Sweet, sassy, bold, and shy—the fusion of wild contradictions made her all the more desirable.

Damon opened the front door of the

restaurant and waved him inside. Relieved to not have to chase his own failure around in his head, Paul climbed out of the car, locked it and followed his friend.

“Hungry?”

“Starved.” The food at the reception had been great, but that had been hours ago. “Hey, you know the bridesmaid I was paired with? Lillianna?”

“The nurse?” Damon pointed him toward a table in the kitchen and started putting together a plate of food. He didn’t ask Paul what he wanted and Paul didn’t complain.

As in everything, beggars couldn’t be choosers.

“Yeah.”

“Not really, saw her a couple of times at the earlier get-togethers and the engagement party. But she kept mostly to herself or talked to Rebecca.” He set a bowl of gumbo and a plate of ribs on the table. Crossing the kitchen, he returned with a serving of red beans and rice, and a basket of bread. “Why? And thirsty? We’ve got water and water. Liquor license doesn’t allow for alcohol ’til we’re open.”

Paul chuckled. “Water’s fine. And no reason, really. Just hoped.”

The chef checked on his people and came back over to sit opposite him. “No reason to ask me about a woman in a

bridal party that must have included a half dozen people we don't know and a reception with a hell of a lot more."

"The gumbo's good." Paul ignored his curiosity and stirred a breadstick into the rich, meaty fish stew.

"I know it's good. We don't serve bad." But he beamed at the compliment nonetheless.

"Don't suppose your girl might know her?" It was a lame attempt at fishing and he was a lot better at gathering data, but he knew exactly four things about her. Her first and last names, she went to college with Rebecca, worked in an ER, and she'd grown up military—Army. Not a lot to go on.

"I have no idea." Damon raised his

brows. “Would you like me to call her and ask?”

He wanted to say no, keep it cool, but twenty-four hours ticked away at him. “If you wouldn’t mind.”

“You slept with her, didn’t you?” Damon laughed and pulled out his phone.

“Does it matter?”

“No. But you screwed her and didn’t get her number. Good job.” But he had the phone to his ear, amusement bright in his expression. Paul wouldn’t hear the end of it, but if Damon scored him the number that would be worth it. “Hey, babe. Hey, yeah, I know you’re going to court this afternoon, but can you do me a

favor real quick?” He waited, listening.

Paul demolished the gumbo and the bread and moved on to the ribs. Hungrier than he thought, he barely tasted the food. It was a shame to waste good cooking on him. He waited as patiently as he could while Damon nodded.

“Got it. I’ll make sure a table is set aside for the whole family. Now my turn.” Damon laughed again. “Yes, but if we were keeping score, you’d be a lot further in debt.”

The easygoing expression and warmth in the chef’s voice filled Paul with envy. So many of the guys had found a good woman, paired off, and settled into civilian life. He never thought he would

be much interested in that. The last couple of years though—they'd been hard ones. He liked the idea of having someone just for him, someone he shared that easy warmth with.

“Yeah, okay, we'll discuss repayment terms later. For now, my buddy Paul is here and he hooked up with one of the bridesmaids....”

Paul scowled, but Damon's smirk didn't waver.

“Yeah, Rebecca's roommate.” He paused. “Any chance you have her number?” Shaking his head, he said, “Okay, thanks for checking, babe. I'll see you tonight. Knock 'em dead in court.”

Paul exhaled and opened the top on the water bottle. “She doesn’t have it.”

“Nope. Said she wasn’t at most of the bridal planning because of her schedule and even did her fittings with Rebecca without the others. Sorry, man, you’ll have to wait until she and Cap are back from the honeymoon.”

“My own fault.” He found the perfect woman, and let her go. Scratching the back of his head, he sighed. He needed a haircut. “So, how’s it going with...” Hell, he didn’t remember the lawyer’s name.

“Helena.” Damon elongated her name, giving it sweet emphasis. Damn, the man was completely gone on her. “She’s

good. We're good."

"She going to marry you yet?" Paul heard the stories from a half-dozen of the others. Damon proposed. Helena said no. He'd done four different ones so far, from the romantic to the utterly serious. Paul's favorite involved Damon sending an attorney to her office to broach contract terms for a permanent merger. The man was a lunatic. Good-hearted, generous, and bat crap crazy.

"Yep." And he didn't lack in confidence, either.

"Does she know?" He couldn't resist tweaking him.

"No, she's convinced she'll remain single to the end of time. But I'm wearing her down. Took her a whole

week to say no last time.” He grinned.

“That’s an improvement?”

“Oh yeah, she said no thirty seconds after I made the first proposal and then didn’t talk to me for a week. Took her almost fifteen minutes the second time and a day the third.”

“At that rate, by the time you get to your tenth proposal, it’ll be a year before she says no.”

‘Exactly. All I do then is get her to a justice of the peace before the year is up and then it won’t matter. But enough about me. When do you report?’

“Day after tomorrow. Flight leaves tomorrow morning, I’ll be in Germany the day after and thus goes the rest of my

year.” Teaching was a hell of a lot better than chasing intel in hotspots, but he was good at the latter. He hadn’t done the teaching gig before.

“Looking forward to it?”

Paul shrugged and finished the last of the food. He was stuffed. “Should be interesting. Do you miss it?”

“Yes and no.” Damon rose and stacked the plates. “I like being home. I like the life we have here. Miss the guys. Miss the action. Don’t miss the heat or the food.”

Paul laughed. “Yeah, I wouldn’t miss the food either.”

“You hanging or heading out?” He passed the plates off to another of the workers.

“Out. I need a haircut. Have to call my parents, and promised James I’d swing by and pick up some of the materials to take back with me.”

“And so he can make sure your head’s on tight.” Damon guessed.

Nodding, Paul rose and stretched. “Yeah, probably. Doc’s a good one though, so no complaints. See you around.” He held out his hand and Damon caught it in a firm shake before pulling him into a hard, easy hug.

“Don’t get dead, Master Sergeant.”

“Do my best.”

The chef let him out of the restaurant and Paul scanned the area. Maybe he’d check the local hospitals—how many

did Dallas have? If he called, they might tell him if a Nurse Hansen worked on staff.

'Cause stalking her at work would be the way to show her you care. He grimaced. I can wait. Captain can get me the number. I'll apologize when I call her. Chicks like that.

Still, he couldn't get the aching sensation of disappointment out of his gut.

It would have been damn nice to see her again *before* he left.

Chapter Six

Eleven Weeks Later

Lillianna sat and put her head between her knees. Deep breathing quieted the gurgles in her stomach.

“Oh, come on, not you, too.” Jodi’s voice came from somewhere behind her. But Lillianna didn’t dare sit up and look at her boss. “Go home, Lil. Get some rest. I’ll find someone to cover your shift.”

“I’ll be fine.” Lillianna exhaled a hard breath and straightened. A hard swallow kept the bile down and she managed a small smile. “We’ve been dramatically

understaffed and you don't have anyone who's been off in the last twenty-four hours."

"I know I don't. I also know you've covered more than your share of shifts three months ago and in the last two weeks." Jodi squeezed her shoulder. "Go home. Forty-eight hours. Stay there. I'm taking you off the call rotation. Get some sleep, puke your guts up, do what you need to do. Take a saline bag or three home, too. Make sure you stay hydrated."

She left before Lillianna protested. Jodi was good people. Her stomach swam on another wave of nausea and she had to stuff her fist to her mouth and race for the stalls on the far side. When

she didn't think she would lose any more of the contents of her stomach, she leaned on the cool siding. Jodi was right, no matter how hard Lillianna tried to avoid the reality—she hadn't managed to avoid the viral gastroenteritis. It took out most of Peds and then made its round of the surgical nurses. Apparently it was the ER's turn.

Exiting the stall, she rinsed out her mouth at the sink and washed her hands fastidiously. Praying for luck, she grabbed her purse and the duffel with her change of clothes from the locker. She would make do with the scrubs. She stopped by to grab the recommended bags of saline on her way to the car.

Thankfully, she didn't seem to have the fever and misery everyone else had suffered from—or maybe she had that to look forward to when she got home.

Joy and rapture. The humid August air slapped her in the face as soon as she cleared the doors. The Texas heat soared into the upper 90s if they were lucky and beyond three digits when they weren't. She couldn't really tell what the day's temperature was stuck at, but hurried to her car anyway. Pulling open the door, a blast of congealed humidity struck her.

Her stomach revolted at the overabundance of heat—cars turned into convection ovens in the Texas summer. Leaning in, she started the engine and

dialed the A/C to its coldest setting and opened all the windows to let out the suffocating air. Maybe she should have put the saline bag in and laid down in an on-call room.

She positively melted. Finally, the nausea subsided and she climbed in. Driving with the windows open wasn't pleasant, but as soon as cold air filtered out of the vents, she closed them and sighed. Bless the coolness.

Lillianna hated to be sick. Whether it was a naturally strong constitution or the fact her father's Army assignments dragged her around the world and exposing her to so many places growing up, she didn't get sick often. The cold air

seemed to do wonders for the nausea, but she didn't look the gift horse in the mouth and headed straight back to her apartment. Forty-eight hours of sleep sounded good.

She hadn't been that tired after seventy-hours straight in the hospital, a wedding, and back to it for another three days while her co-workers battled the raging respiratory symptoms of the last flu to blow through the staff. Regular as clockwork, every three months, and summer always seemed to be worse than winter.

Three months.

Eleven weeks. Almost three months. Lillianna slammed her foot on the brake, nearly hitting the car in front of her. Her

stomach swam. Sucking in a noisy breath between her teeth, she signaled and cut over three lanes. Drugstores sat on nearly every other corner. Ignoring her gut's complaints, she parked and threw herself out of the car and into the store.

It wasn't possible. But...eleven weeks and she hadn't had a period since before the first flu outbreak. She hadn't been paying attention, not with her schedule and switching from days to nights so Jodi could go on vacation, then back to days again. Hell, half the time she didn't know whether she was coming or going.

Standing in front of the over-the-counter pregnancy test shelf, she scanned

the brand names. The hospital used one particular type, but she wanted two or three—false positives were possible. False positives on three different brands? Far less likely.

It's viral gastroenteritis—this is just an overreaction. But even her mental voice lacked the conviction to make her believe the sentiment. Condoms failed all the time. Nothing was one hundred percent foolproof, even when used correctly.

And they'd used it correctly. Despite the sick misery coating her insides, a shiver of desire raced over her skin. She'd woken more than once in the last few weeks, remembering that night and wishing it had lasted longer than one

night. But only for as long as it took her to wake all the way up. Then the cold, harsh reality that Paul was military reminded her she was better off with the memory for comfort.

Choosing the three best tests, she grabbed a bottle of Pepto and some antacids, a case of Gatorade, and added a box of saltines to the stack. She drove home with her purchases, sipping the pink, chalky liquid straight from the bottle to avoid another session of vomiting. Her nerves aggravated her already upset stomach.

She left her duffle in the car and grabbed the plastic bag and her purse. In her apartment, she traded her scrubs for

a tank top and shorts. More of a rip-the-Band-Aid-off kind of girl, she went ahead and peed on all the sticks and lined them next to each other on the counter. Peeling off her surgical gloves, she tossed them into the trash and cracked open a bottle of Gatorade to drink.

Sitting on the floor of her bathroom was acceptable. She kept it virtually spotless—too many years of her father's inspections and her mother's habits were ingrained in her. Closing her eyes, she leaned her head back against the wall. The tests would be negative. Clearly she was ill and her condition exacerbated by exhaustion. Sleep. She needed sleep and it would all be better when she woke up.

The ringing cell phone jarred her awake. Sitting forward, she grimaced at her dry mouth and stared around the bathroom befuddled. Why was she sleeping in there? The ringer split the silence again and she dragged herself up, to find her abandoned cell lying on the dresser.

Her mother's face flashed on the caller ID. Coughing once, she answered with a quick, "Hey, Mom." Sinking down on the bed, she fought to keep her eyes open. Stopping at the drugstore had been a mistake—momentary panic—the illness messed with her head.

"You sound terrible, sweetie." Trust her mom to call it like it was, always

keeping the faith.

“I’ve been better. How are you?” She grinned at the bad joke.

“We’re fine. We’re in Belgium. Your father has meetings at NATO.” Pride filled her voice and why shouldn’t it? At an age where he should have retired, her father instead wanted to be considered for a job with the medical staff and advisor at Allied Command Operations.

“Cool.” It was the best she could manage.

“Have you considered our offer to have you fly over for a vacation?”

Get on a plane? Ugh. Her stomach flip-flopped at the idea. “I really can’t, Mom. I don’t have the accrued vacation time and we’ve been strapped for staff. I

should be there right now but Jodi sent me home.”

“Oh, baby. You should rest then. I can call you later.” It didn’t take much to arouse her maternal instincts.

“I am. I have fluids and everything.” Sitting on the bed didn’t stave off her exhaustion. Rising, she headed to the bathroom. Maybe some cold water on her face would do wonders. Phone in one hand, she concentrated on not walking like a drunken sailor on her way home from a binge. “How long will you be in Belgium?”

“Just a month, then we’ll be back stateside. Your father is scheduled to teach a semester at West Point. If he

earns the job here, we'll be back in Belgium in the spring.”

“So then there's plenty of time for me to visit, see the countryside, and play tourist with you.” The last thing she wanted to do was play tourist or travel. She was sick to damn death of traveling and not even a dozen years settled in Texas got her past the idea. She turned the faucet on. The cool water felt great on her wrists.

“Well, I'll hold you to that. We should know by Thanksgiving.”

“What do you do if he doesn't get it?”

“Oh, honey, pray he gets it. Your father does not want to retire. And frankly I'm not sure I want him to. You remember what it was like to PCS with

him when his duty station didn't need him immediately.”

The grimace in her mother's voice almost made her laugh. Almost. PCS—permanent change of station orders arrived and turned her life upside down more times than she cared to admit. When the military said move, the family moved. Her father was a workaholic, proud to the bone, and dedicated to his country. He didn't handle idleness well.

“I will, Mom. I promise. Look I need to—” She swallowed the next words and stared at the three home pregnancy tests on the back of the toilet.

Two blue lines.

A plus sign.

And a big, fat pregnant stared back at her.

“Lillianna? Did I lose you?”

Oh. My. God.

“I’m going to be sick, Mom—I’ve got to go.” Disconnecting the call, she dropped the phone on the counter and ignored the clatter in her race to flip the toilet lid up.

She tried not to fidget. She’d never experienced so much dread in her life as she did waiting for her OB to come into the room. Patricia Carter opened the door and her expression confirmed Lillianna’s fear. “I am pregnant.”

“Yup.” The doctor sat down on a stool and studied her. “Nearly three months, your HCG levels are pretty high, you’ve got symptoms....”

“Yeah, I know exactly when it happened.” *Happy Anniversary, Becca. I got pregnant at your wedding. Sorry, I only meant to catch the bouquet.*

“Well, the time to talk about options is right now.” Patricia didn’t sugar coat facts or ease into subjects, she took them by storm.

“I know my options.” It was all she’d thought about for the last four days since the three tests came back positive. She’d made an appointment with her OB and came in for blood work. Then waited for

the results. In the meanwhile, she worked. It was what she had. Work.

Thirty years old and pregnant.

She chewed the thought of what it could mean over and over in her head.

“Okay, well, let’s talk pros—you’re healthy, you’re young, you’re physically in good shape, you have no major health concerns to worry about.” Sunny-side up really wasn’t the doc’s style, but Lillianna gave her points for effort.

“The cons, I’m single. I work terrible hours. I love my job. And this wasn’t planned by any stretch of the imagination.” Clasp ing her hands together, she studied her nails. They were blunt, clean of polish and rounded from regular filing. She didn’t have time

for manicures and pedicures. Hell, half the time she didn't bother to shave her legs. If it hadn't been for the wedding, she wouldn't even have put on cosmetics all those weeks ago, or a dress, or ended the evening in bed sexing it up with a hot guy in a uniform.

Of course, without the wedding she wouldn't have met him either.

“Lillianna? This is a lot to absorb. Maybe you should go home and talk it over and see what you want to do....”

“No, it's okay. Because I'll go home and chew it all over again and come to the same set of conclusions—unplanned doesn't mean unwanted. I don't think I could ever have a baby and give him or

her up. Yeah, not me.” Biting her lower lip, she shook her head. Nothing about the situation was ideal. Nothing.

She’d reached for the phone a dozen times to call her mother and stopped. They wouldn’t be disappointed or judgmental. But they would want her to contact the father. *The father.*

“Okay, well, abortion is one option....”

“I can’t have an abortion, Trish. I know it’s an option and I had one before. No, I won’t do that....”

“That’s not in your medical records?” Trish frowned and slid her glasses on to check the chart on the computer.

“I listed it, but I used a clinic near my college campus. It was a long time ago. I

got drunk at some frat party and one thing led to another. I got pregnant, knew I couldn't have it and—well it's different now.” Lillianna scrubbed her palms against her face. “Okay, let's break this down. It'll be twelve weeks in four days, so—I need prenatal vitamins and what else?”

How the hell do I call a one-night stand and say, 'hey, remember me? By the way, the condom broke and in about six months we're going to have a kid...'

She barely listened to Trish as she outlined the prenatal care. A lot of things would have to change...she needed a support structure. The hospital had a

daycare, but she wouldn't want a newborn there, and then there was the delivery and the time off right after the baby came.

“Also, if you have the father's medical records....”

“I don't.” *I can get them, maybe. But then...ugh. One bridge at a time. I have time.*

“Okay, it's fine. We're going to work this out.” Trish wrote a prescription. “And I want to see you next month. We'll schedule your appointments. We can do your first sonogram right now and make sure everything looks good with the baby, the uterus and make sure all our dates line up. Let you hear the baby's heartbeat and get a good look at

everything.”

“Thanks, Trish.” She had no question about the dates. None whatsoever.

The doctor rose and put a hand on Lillianna’s shoulder. “Congratulations, Mom. You’re having a baby.”

I’m having a baby. Tears sparked in her eyes and she let out a watery little laugh. “I’m having a baby.”

“How can you not tell him?” Jodi stared at her. “He’s the father.”

“He’s a guy I hooked up with for one night. He’s career military. The last thing he needs is a call from some chick he met at a wedding letting him know

that life as he knows it is over.”

Lillianna wasn't sure whom she sought to convince. Herself or her boss. But Jodi was a lot more than a boss, the fifty-year-old woman had been a mentor and a best friend.

Salt and pepper sprinkled her close-cropped hair. Deep lines softened the corners of her eyes and peeked out from the corners of her mouth, which was currently turned down in disapproval. “Honey, that is about the stupidest thing I've ever heard you say. For a smart girl, that's just dumb. So you two had sex, does that mean you have to do all the work? And a man has a right to know—and the chance to stand up.”

“Don't look at me like that. Telling

him makes it even more real than it is. And it's not a conversation to have on the phone—or in an email. I don't even really know him, do I want to be tied to him for the rest of my life?"

Jodi gave her a very indelicate and unsympathetic snort. "Love him or hate him, you are tied to him—especially if you're having his baby."

"Wow, way to be on my side in this." The older nurse's disapproval stung. She was the first person besides her OB who even knew Lillianna was pregnant. She lacked the courage to tell her parents yet. She tried to excuse it that they were settling in to West Point after a fairly encouraging visit to Belgium and that she

would tell them later. Certainly before the baby came.

But she had five months for that.

Telling Jodi proved the more practical option. She needed to shorten her shifts a little. Her exhaustion levels never improved. The doctor teased her that she might be carrying a boy—they burned more calories and took a lot more energy. Or at least so she claimed.

They would be doing a sonogram in a few days. At least the nausea seemed done, which helped because Lillianna ate everything in sight. Hunger pinched her spine and she bounced up from the bench to grab an apple out of her locker.

“Of course I’m on your side.” The senior nurse’s voice gentled. “You’re

one of my best ER nurses, practical, grounded, and dependable. This—is not you, and that’s not fair because you’re allowed to have a life. Life is messy.”

“Everywhere except the ER.” It was their mantra, a code to live by. Messes came to them. They cleaned it up. Life might be messy, but not in the ER. “I’d say I’m sorry, but I’m not.”

It took a few days after the news sank in and the morning sickness passed for her to realize she wasn’t upset. Shocked? Absolutely. A little embarrassed. Definitely. But excitement threaded her nerves each time she touched her tummy or noticed some subtle change.

And they were all subtle changes at the moment. Except for her boobs, which hurt.

“You have nothing to be sorry for. I wanted to start training you for a supervisor position, groom you as it were. We’re going to cut back your hours on the floor as much as I can within reason. You can run labs, regulate patient flow, process charts, and handle the rotation of the student nurses.”

Lillianna lifted her brows. “You know that suspiciously sounds like a heck of a lot more work.”

“Yes and you can do a lot of it sitting down. It’s less hours on your feet.” Jodi rose and gave her a quick hug. “But the

student nurses are a pain in the ass and that's your punishment.”

She couldn't help it, she burst out laughing and squeezed her in return. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome. Eat, and get back to work. I've got stuff to do. Keep me in the loop, okay? We can get through this.” She didn't wait for any response, hustling out of the locker room.

Glad for the reprieve, Lillianna wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes. Her mother used to tell her everything happened for a reason. Believing the thought helped.

The buzzing of her phone dragged her back to the present. Pulling it out, she stared at the screen. Rebecca's name

popped up with a simple message. *We have to do lunch. Get some time off or I'm coming to find you.*

Her good mood evaporated. Could she see Becca and not tell her? *No.* If she told her, wouldn't she tell Luke who would tell Paul? She'd put off telling him for four weeks.

Do I really have the right not to tell him? Guilt nibbled at her. She looked at the message again and typed. *Lunch Saturday? I have to talk. Private.*

She didn't have to wait long for Rebecca's response. *Where and when?*

“A baby? Oh, my God.” Rebecca

stared at her, wide-eyed and smiling. And then she behaved like a proper friend, leaping up and squealing. She threw her arms around Lillianna and hugged her. “I’m happy for you...” She pulled back abruptly. “I am happy for you, right?”

“Yes, you’re happy for me.” She didn’t even try to contain her own grin. They collapsed together in another long hug. “Thank you for being happy for me.” It was the first time she got to squeal about it.

Reclaiming her seat, Rebecca leaned forward and grabbed her hands. “Okay, tell me everything. Who is he? When do I get to meet him? When are you due?”

“Um...” *Tackling the hard stuff right*

away. “You know him.”

“I do?” Her former roommate blinked.
“Who?”

“Paul Torres, I met him at your wedding.” She braced for her response.

“Torres.” Rebecca frowned, as though trying to place him. “He must have been one of the Marines who came in for the wedding. I don’t know all of them, I mean I met them, but...” she made a face. “I didn’t really have a chance to talk to everyone that much. But I saw you dancing with your escort, one of Luke’s groomsmen.”

“Guilty.”

“That’s wonderful. Urk.” Rebecca made the leap and if it weren’t so

serious, Lillianna would have laughed at the instant expression of ‘urk’ on her face. “Was it a four weddings and a funeral kind of hookup? Lots of hot sex and no phone calls after? Oh, I swear, I’ll have Luke kick his ass.”

“No.” Lillianna squeezed her hand. “He didn’t seduce me...well, he did, but it was a pretty mutual seduction, and he didn’t call me because I didn’t give him my number, or a note, or anything else for that matter. I left before he woke up.”

“Was it that bad?”

“No. God, Rebecca. I’m not going to give you the blow-by-blow and before you ask, no.” She pulled her hands free and lifted her glass for a sip of water. They were tucked into a comfortable

corner of a bistro in Frisco. It was a favorite of Lillianna's and quiet during the weekend lunch hour—vital for delivering such news.

“So have you seen him at all since?”

“No, and again not his fault. He had new orders, I think he deployed overseas.” *To Germany if I recall correctly, but then I wasn't focusing on his PCS.*

“Do you want to be in touch with him?”

“That's the ten-thousand-dollar question.” She'd thought about it. Rethought it. Talked herself into and out of it a hundred times. “I knew him for twelve hours and this isn't Terminator,

we didn't love each other enough for a lifetime. We used a condom, I didn't ask him to use one, didn't have to. He was prepared. He was prepared to avoid pregnancy. I'm pregnant. Thank you for our one-night fling, by the way, we're having a baby."

"So? He's still the father. If anything, he can help you out. Financially. Emotionally. Something. You don't have to go through this on your own. If he won't step up, trust me, Luke can do...."

"Becs, please? Let it go. I haven't decided whether or not I'll tell him. I know I have to at some point. But, right now, he's overseas on a duty assignment. He can be redeployed at the whim of the Marine Corps. You forget, I

grew up in this life. His life isn't his own. Telling him simply means he learns about a baby he can't see. I'm not going to move to be there or change my life for him. He shouldn't have to change his life for me." It sounded so rational and utterly cold. Their conversation halted while the waitress delivered their sandwiches and fries.

"Yeah, no one should have to do anything, but maybe he'll want to. Besides, you didn't make a baby by yourself."

"But I'm okay with it. I want this baby." Opening the ketchup bottle, she squeezed out a helping onto the plate. "I really do. I wasn't, I never thought about

being ready or making plans or even dating a guy for longer than fifteen minutes. But now that I am pregnant? I want the baby. I want the fun and the two a.m. feedings and the lack of sleep and the for-the-love-of-God conversations... I want it all.”

“Okay, playing devil’s advocate here. What if he wants the same things? What then?”

“I don’t know. But it’s not a conversation to have from thousands of miles apart. You know, we’re also assuming he even remembers my name.”

“Oh, he remembers it.” Rebecca glanced at her plate, a flush staining her cheeks.

“How do you know? You didn’t even

know who he was.” Lillianna narrowed her eyes, studying her. “What do you know?”

“I know one of Luke’s buddies asked for your phone number. Wouldn’t say why so I wouldn’t give it. Luke said he met you at the wedding and I was going to mention it and then completely forgot about it because of the expansion. So....” Guilt colored her tone. “He did want to get in touch with you. But I think maybe I got in the way.”

“Oh.” Her stomach did another flip-flop. That changed everything. Didn’t it?

“I’m sorry. Right up until this moment I’d forgotten about it and I shouldn’t have.”

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not.” Rebecca shook her head and took a bite of her sandwich. They ate in contemplative silence for several minutes. “Do you want his number?”

Did she? She should. Theoretical rejection seemed easier to deal with than the real thing and nowhere near as terrifying as the possibility that he might want more. Lust kindled heat in her blood, and she squashed the lascivious thoughts. It wasn’t about his body or hers, it was about a baby.

A baby they made.

“Yeah, I do. And Becs? If anyone tells him, it has to be me. Don’t tell Luke or

let Luke tell him.”

“I won’t lie to Luke, but this is your news to tell the father. Luke will understand that. And if he doesn’t... well, I’ll deal with it.”

“Thank you.”

“I love you, Lillianna. You were there for me and I’ll be there for you. In fact, I think I’m going to throw you the biggest, swankiest baby shower in the world.” And she would. Rebecca planned events for a living. “Do you know if it’s a boy or a girl yet?”

Chapter Seven

Paul leaned back in the chair and studied the thrumming crowd in The Wall. Tuesday was the most popular night at the BDSM club—the equivalent of a Friday night in the states. But the weekend didn't lack for creative culture or couples and singles getting their kink on. A public scene played out on the main stage and held some of the audience captive, but many made the rounds of the dance floor, headed upstairs for a quieter, private suite or like Paul, kicked back at a table and soaked up the atmosphere.

Berlin served as home to a large

number of the sexier clubs, unsurprising considering that prior to Hitler's ascension, licentiousness made for common currency among the city's vibrant nightlife. Paul had to wonder how long it took many of these underground clubs to flourish once the wall came down—in fact The Wall club featured an entire section built from the demolished stonework erected when the city was divided.

The historical touch really added to the atmosphere. But most of it seemed lost on him. It was his fourth attempt to go out since arriving in the city, but what used to intrigue him merely left him cold.

“You don’t look like you’re having a good time.” Kate Thompson slid into the chair next to him. A field medic with the Navy, she worked at the instructional center right alongside him. They offered key training to internal and external military on serving in the current hot zones. At five foot ten, curvy and muscled, Kate looked like a beautiful Amazon.

And sadly, not his type.

“I’m fine.” He topped off the statement with a swig of his beer, as if to show that he *was* having fun.

“Uh huh.” Kate leaned on the table, chin propped on her hand. “I don’t believe you.”

Sliding a sideways look at her, he sighed. She wore a plunging neckline black dress. It hugged every curve and did nothing to disguise the aroused state of her nipples. She toyed with her glass, tracing her finger around the rim. Suggestive, demure, with just a hint of submission—dammit, she was supposed to be his type. Four months with no word should be enough for his body to get over its interest in one woman.

But no.

“Not going to happen, Kate. Not tonight.” *Not ever.* But that was too harsh a dismissal. He should have been nicer about it, but in his experience it didn't pay to toy with someone's

emotions. She made a subtle offer; he rejected it. Case closed.

“Okay, but in all seriousness, some of us are worried about you.” She didn’t have to elaborate on who the ‘some of us’ were. Considering their relatively small community on base and at the school, those with a taste for the kink knew each other pretty damn well. His lack of interest or participation had been noticed.

“Nothing to worry about. Seriously.”

“And again, I don’t believe you.” She covered his hand with hers. “Friend to friend, what’s up?” All trace of sexual flirtation abandoned the conversation.

“I met someone on my last leave.”
And I can’t get her out of my head. If

only I could get her on the damn phone.

“Ahh. Okay.” She gave his hand a squeeze. “Understood. Disappointed, but I understand.”

He and Kate never played before, so her reasons for being disappointed must be the missed opportunity. Past her, the sight of another Marine entering caught his attention. *Excellent, David can distract her.* “Looks like you won’t be disappointed for long. Go play with Sparks.”

She grinned and abandoned him to his thoughts without a backward glance. Kate was good people, gorgeous and from what he understood—a very sweet and willing partner. But he hadn’t been

able to scrub the sassy smile or playful wonder out of his mind. One night did not a long-term relationship make, but it definitely gave him an obsession.

If he hadn't already planned to head back to Texas the first chance he got, he would have to. He had to get the woman out of his mind. Particularly if she wasn't interested in pursuing anything further while he served a few thousand miles away.

He called Luke the week before, trying to fish for information, but the captain avoided answering any of his questions save for a cryptic, "Becca said she gave her your phone number." The captain didn't mention when or how long before, but his phone didn't ring and he

had no missed calls.

Maybe I just suck it up and accept that it was a one-night thing for her.

He hung out at the club for another hour, but the knot of tension between his shoulder blades wouldn't relax. Kate and her guy were nowhere to be seen as were most of the regulars he knew on sight. Pausing at the bar to pay his tab, he left just before midnight. Back to his rack, grab some sleep and live to teach another day.

His phone rang the moment he stepped into his apartment. The foreign number included a recognizable area code.

Locking the door, he answered.
“Torres.”

“Hi.” Her voice whispered across the cell like a warm breeze.

“Hey.” He smiled. “I owe you an apology, pretty lady. I wanted to take you out for breakfast and give you my number.”

“I’m the one who left, so why would you be the one to apologize?” The intelligent challenge in her voice rubbed him like a caress.

“True, but I find it wise to never ask a lady to apologize when I didn’t need to sleep so late.” Stripping off his jacket, he sat down on the sofa. “But if you want to apologize, I’ll let you.”

Silence first, and then laughter and he

smiled again. God, it was pathetic how great her voice sounded on the phone. “So have you missed me, Lily?”
Because I missed you.

“I wanted to leave you a note. But I didn’t see any pens or paper and...then I thought I would text myself from your phone, leave you a message that way, but I have a moral objection to going through other peoples’ things.”

“There was a third option.” He leaned back and stretched his legs out. “You should have woken me up.”

She sighed a long breath of air. “Yeah, but I was embracing my walk of shame and well...I had this feeling if I woke you up, I wouldn’t have been

walking anywhere.”

Desire fisted in his gut. “I would have done the right thing—kept you in bed until at least noon.”

“Somehow, I believe you.” Despite the flirt in her voice, there was a subtext he couldn’t quite decipher.

“Lily, what’s wrong?”

Silence.

He listened intently, trying to catch even a shift in her breathing. So many nuances in a conversation were conveyed through body language. The phone disguised those cues, but not her discomfort. She sounded awkward, almost embarrassed.

“Why do you think something’s wrong?” The hesitation before the

question told him he was on the right track.

“You sound like something’s wrong. You’re not upset about having sex with me, are you?” He held his breath, hoping for no hesitation in her response.

“No.” The immediacy of the rejection gratified him. “I mean—no, I was embarrassed that morning. More than a little. I’m not the kind of girl who sleeps around.”

“Good to know.” Meant he didn’t have to chase anyone else off. Wishing, not for the first time she sat right in front of him and that they’d had this conversation the next morning, he said, “And another reason you should have

woken me up. You're beautiful, and you were beautiful that night."

"Tone down the lothario voice; it's hard enough to have this conversation without you giving me the shivers." Her voice quivered despite the stern note and Paul grinned.

"Lothario? Am I seducing you now?"

"You could seduce a rock." But laughter drifted through the words, turning them into a compliment. "And you know it. No one is as charming as you are without having some awareness of it."

He conceded the point. "I have some time off coming and I planned to see my parents, but if I juggle the schedule, what do you think of me coming to Texas for a

couple of days?”

“Here?” Her voice squeaked and unease coiled up his spine.

“Is that a problem?” He focused on listening.

“I—when?” Okay, not the warmest of welcomings, but better than a not-a-chance-in-hell response.

“Closer to the holidays. Lily. Tell me what’s wrong.” Maybe he was tired and reading the situation wrong, but he didn’t think so.

“By holidays, you mean Thanksgiving or Christmas?”

Does it matter? “I meant one or the other, yes, I’m waiting for my leave request to be approved. I asked for ten

days. But I may get more, I may get less. It depends on my CO's mood. Do you have a preference?"

"Paul...."

Here it comes. The rejection. He half-expected it, but he braced for it nonetheless. One night did not a relationship make, even if he wanted to drown in the sweet scent of her skin or longed to hear the soft sound of her cries again. And a rejection by phone was easier in some ways—it gave him a place to start when he went back for her.

The thought coalesced fully formed. He wanted to pursue a relationship with her. *Hell....* "Look, Lily—it's just a visit. A chance to spend some time together, I want to see you again." More

silence and Paul pulled the phone away to make sure it still showed they were connected. “Lily? Still there?”

The pause dragged out and took his patience along with it. “I’m here,” she said, finally. “And I’m pregnant.”

September bled into October and blurred together. He spoke to Lily twice since she’d dropped the bombshell on him. He couldn’t quite wrap his mind around the idea of her pregnancy. He used a condom, he always did. The idea she made it up plagued him for all of two minutes, but he dismissed it. He didn’t imagine the unease in her voice or the cold start it gave him when she admitted the pregnancy.

Five months and counting—and if that didn't make it real, the picture from the sonogram did. They hadn't been able to see girl or boy parts, the baby didn't seem to be cooperating in that department. He'd avoided telling his parents so far. They would be thrilled at the news of their first grandchild—less thrilled that he hadn't already offered to marry the mother-to-be.

I did. First words out of my mouth and she shut me down so hard, I could feel the slap of that rejection as if she'd slammed the door in my face. Not that her rebuff diminished his resolve. His baby, his responsibility.

But it wasn't obligation that drove him.

It was desire.

For the first time in over a decade, he wished like hell he possessed a job that would allow him to drop everything and go home. He needed to see her. More than that, she needed to see him. But the instructional term didn't wrap until the first of December. The earliest he'd get leave was the second week of December and his CO hadn't confirmed the orders yet.

Two months seemed like an eternity, particularly when Lily worked long hours at the hospital. With sleep at a premium and factoring in the time difference, their conversations were limited to days she had off. He stared at

the numbers on his laptop, and sighed. If he juggled the finances, he could arrange a portion of his paycheck to go to her. He reported the pregnancy to his CO, who gave him congratulations and apologies—his current task rated critical. The Marines he trained needed the intel for the jobs they would be doing and he was the best man to teach it.

Poor comfort in his current circumstance. He canted his head back and stared at the clock. She had a Saturday shift, and it would be after four Central time before she got home. It was nearly eleven in the evening in Germany. If her shift went as planned, she would be leaving the hospital and driving home. By his calculations, she had an

eighteen-minute drive.

So at least another thirty minutes before he could call. Shoving up from the sofa, he paced across the room. His commanding officer understood why he put in the request, he just couldn't grant it. But three awkward conversations punctuated by stilted facts and no real answers were enough to make him crazy.

Marrying her was the right thing to do. Every fiber in his being demanded he find a way to make it happen. But was it right because it was the right thing to do, or right because that's what his parents did? Or right because he really wanted to marry her?

His phone rang and he grabbed it,

scowling at the number on the screen. It wasn't Lily.

“Captain.” He said in lieu of hello.

“Hey, how you doing?”

“Going a little stir-crazy.” Which put it mildly. Luke knew about the pregnancy. If Paul were a betting man, he'd say Luke knew before he had. But Paul wouldn't give him a hard time about it. Loyalty to his wife had to come first.

“I can imagine. Look—I saw Lily last night with Becca. I wanted you to know she looks healthy, happy, and huge.”

Relief flowed through him, easing a fist of tension wrapped around his guts. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. According to what she told

Becca, she's carrying all in the front. I have no idea what that actually means outside it looks like someone shoved a basketball up there." His wry tone provided a hint of humor. "But she looks okay. I think she was pretty tired. She had a long shift. Her boss is supposed to be giving her easier hours off her feet, but the shifts are still long and she wears out easier."

"She can quit. I could send her money." He wanted to send her money. Had tried to send her money. So far she hadn't cashed a single one of his checks.

"Yeah, I think you and I both know that's not going to happen and I don't know her very well. But she and Becca

have been friends for years. Becca said she wouldn't quit her job, she worked too hard to become a nurse and she loves what she does." A hint of reprimand colored the words.

"Be easier if I knew her better, sir." A lot of things would be.

"I imagine. When do you get leave?"

"Not until the term is up here. Second week of December. My CO said he would try to find a replacement for me in January, but if he can't...." Well, if not, then Paul would be back in Germany when his child was born. Two weeks didn't give him near enough time to settle matters with Lillianna.

"You want me to make some calls?"

"No, sir. I'll cope. I appreciate the

offer. Just...keep looking after her? I don't know what she needs, but if she needs anything....”

“Hey, buck up, Marine. We got this. Becca will tell me when she needs anything, and we'll get on it. She's independent and feisty, and still doesn't like me much.” The fact seemed to amuse Luke. “But we got this until you can get here.”

“Thank you. Seriously. This was not how I planned to do this.”

“Yeah, well, we deal with facts and the situation in front of us. This is the situation. This is what we deal with.” Practical to the bone, it wasn't that Luke didn't understand—it was that they

couldn't change the situation from what existed. No matter how much Paul wished otherwise.

His phone buzzed and Lily's name appeared on call-waiting. "I have to go, Captain. Lily's on the other line." He didn't wait for the acknowledgement and swapped the call over. "Hey, you home?"

"Yeah." Fatigue clung to the solitary word. "Walked in the door five minutes ago, but I think I fell asleep when I sat down."

"Feet hurt?" He guessed.

"Yeah. I'm supposed to see the OB on Monday. Thankfully, I have tomorrow off." A sigh drifted on the words.

"Any way they can scale your

schedule back anymore?” He hated how tired she sounded. Considering she had just been coming off a three-day-straight schedule when he met her and she’d been run down then, he imagined the pregnancy made it worse.

“Not going to ask Jodi to do that. She’s already jumping through hoops for me now. I’m a trauma nurse, but at the moment I’m a glorified paper pusher. The more of those tasks I take on, the less gets done.” Irritation cropped up and he wasn’t sure who it was aimed at.

“On your side, remember?” Reminding her every chance he got, he wanted her to believe it.

“Sorry, I get cranky when I’m tired,

and I'm hungry, and I always seem to be tired and hungry. I'll be as big as a barn at the rate this baby demands food." Her laugh made him feel better. "You know, they used to joke that when you're pregnant you are eating for two, and that if you're pregnant with a boy, you need to eat for three because of the calories burned. What do you think it means that I feel like I'm eating for a family of four?"

"That you're carrying a Marine?" He grinned. "We know how to eat."

Her soft chuckle brought another smile to his face. "That's not improbable. My understanding is that Army brats eat a lot, too."

"No, definitely Marine." A surprising sensation flipped his stomach. Had his

father felt this way about him? Paul hadn't even seen Lillianna since their one night together and he'd never felt his baby's kick and had no idea if it was even a boy or a girl yet—neither of them knew—but he was attached.

Seriously freaking attached.

“Does he kick yet?”

“She does, here and there.”

They did that, flip-flopping the gender. “What does it feel like?”

“Flutters? It's hard to describe. Have you ever had butterflies in your stomach?”

“That's a little to girly for me to admit to.” He didn't try to keep the grin off his face, though. He could almost see her

roll her eyes.

“But you know what I mean?”

“Yeah. I do. Like a rhythmic jittery sensation, one you can’t quite pinpoint.”

“Exactly. He does that. Usually when I’m trying to sleep. If I lay quietly, I imagine she’s trying to get my attention—you know making sure I’m still there.”

Paul considered that. “Not when you’re working?”

“No. Well, not a lot when I’m working. But I talk a lot on the job, so maybe he or she hears me then and doesn’t need to figure that out.” It sounded perfectly plausible to him.

“Is it keeping you awake?” She worked her ass off, she needed to be able to rest.

“Sometimes, but you know my mom says that’s how moms learn to be up with the baby when they get here. Pregnancy trains you to get by on less sleep, physically stresses you out, and makes everything more difficult.”

“So, you told your parents.” The last time he’d talked to her a week before, she hadn’t yet confessed it to them. She’d offered up any number of excuses, but he understood it. Same reason he hadn’t told his. Hard to live down parental disappointment.

“Yeah, they came to see me for a surprise visit.”

His gut clenched for her. “Oh. Hell.”

“Yeah, so I was like—surprise.”

Beneath the thin veil of cheer, sadness crept through.

“How did they take it, Lily?” He should have been there for that. She shouldn’t have had to tell her parents alone. Another strike against him.

“Shocked. I know she tried to cover it, but Mom was really shocked. And I think she was more disappointed that I didn’t tell her when I found out, than she was that I am—you know—pregnant and unmarried. Dad on the other hand....” Silence crackled on the line. “Dad’s harder to read. He wasn’t happy.”

Anger tightened his muscles. “He didn’t say that, did he?”

“No, but you know when you’ve screwed up and your parents don’t have

to tell you. You can feel it. He hasn't been that quiet about something I did since I hot-wired that jeep and stole it from the motor pool. I remember his face when the MPs delivered me home and he had to report to his CO. This was a lot like that." She sighed again. "But don't worry, I didn't tell him your name. I don't want him to make trouble for you."

"You go right ahead and give him my name. Hell, you give him my number. I'd love to talk to him." *And give him a piece of my mind. He did not need to make Lily feel bad.* They didn't do a damn thing wrong, and she carried so much of this burden on her own because Paul wasn't there.

“Hey.” Her voice softened. “I’m okay. You don’t have to defend me. It’s okay. Dad’s old-fashioned. It doesn’t matter that I’m thirty and perfectly capable of taking care of myself. Women with a baby should also have a husband.”

“You can have a husband,” he promised.

“We’ve talked about this before....”

“I know you said no, but that offer is still there. I’m not taking it off the table.”

“You’re in Germany. I’m in Dallas.”

“For now.” The argument didn’t hold water. Yes, he was overseas at the moment. He would come back stateside and he would see her again. If they were married, then it would be easier to bring

her to him. “If we’re married, we could move you here.”

“Yeah, Paul—we’re not getting married just because I’m pregnant.” The finality in the statement wasn’t lost on him. “I don’t want to come to Germany. I have a home and a life here.”

“And when the baby is born? You shouldn’t have to do this on your own.”

“Well, I shouldn’t have to do a lot of things, but getting married is not the answer either. We don’t even know if we like each other.”

“Maybe you don’t. But I enjoy the hell out of talking to you even when you yank the carpet out from underneath my feet. Imagine how much more fun we can have getting to know each other—

learning all the little things that make us tick.” Who was he trying to convince? “You’re forgetting, I wanted to see you again. I *want* to see you. I *want* to spend time with you.”

“What about what I want?”

The question stopped him and he concentrated on counting back from ten. Twice. “What do you want, Lily?”

“I want the baby. I know that. I also know that means we’ll be tied together in some fashion. But I want romance, I want to love the man I marry, and I want to want him for him—not just because he’s the guy I was with when the condom broke.” Hard. Blunt. Reality.

Paul nodded. “I’m still coming to see

you. It will be after Thanksgiving, probably closer to Christmas. And I don't know how long I'll have there, but I'm going to try for a couple of weeks and then to get leave again when the baby is due."

"It's okay." She let him off the hook just like that and he shook his head. It was not okay. "It means a lot that you do care. I'm supposed to have another sonogram on Monday...maybe we can see what our shy and retiring one is. Do you want a copy? They can give me a digital one. I can email it."

"Yes." No question. "Absolutely. Did you get the records I had sent over?"

"I did, thank you for that."

She really needed to get over thanking

him for caring. But he could show her that when he was there...in front of her.

“You’re welcome. You sound tired, maybe you should take a nap.” Not that he wanted off the phone.

“I would, but the kicker is awake and the fluttering is going crazy. If I lay down it will get worse.”

“I have an idea.” He stood and walked into his bedroom and stretched out on the bed, still dressed. “Go get in bed.”

“I am in bed—well on it, anyway.” She laughed and he smiled.

“Put the phone on your stomach and go to sleep. I’ll talk to him. Teach him to let his mother nap when she wants to.”

“What if she doesn’t listen to you?” Amusement warmed her voice.

“Don’t worry. She might be stubborn like her mother, but I’m a very patient man. I know how to get what I want.” *And I want both of you in my life.*

“This feels silly....”

“Maybe it is, but I can talk to baby. You can sleep. Let me do this.” It wasn’t a request.

“All right.” She acquiesced and he knew she was a great deal more tired than she let on. “I’ll talk to you Monday, after the doctor’s appointment?”

“I’ll be here. You call me. Doesn’t matter what time.” He would wake up for her. “Now put the phone on your

belly and go to sleep. It's Daddy time."

She chuckled. "Good night, Paul."

"Good night, Lily, sleep well." He waited for the faint muffling sound of fabric across the phone. "Hello there," he murmured. "This is your father calling. Mom needs you to settle in so she can nap and I think we should talk about how we're going to convince her that I mean business...."

Chapter Eight

“Today is a holiday, ladies, as you know we’ll be overwhelmed by the violent results of drunken stupidity, the annual Mud and Zombie run and of course, our personal favorite—the College Dash for Cash highway games.” Jodi eyed all the nurses. “Some of you haven’t spent Halloween with us before, so be prepared. It’s bloody, it’s messy, it’s loud, and there will be no breaks.”

Lillianna nodded her head. She’d done her best to get plenty of sleep over the last two days because the next twenty-four hours would be insane.

“This means, don’t come tell me

you're tired. Don't tell me you need a nap or your shift is over...your shift ends when the ER empties and not a moment before then. Surgical nurses will take over once patients are transported from the ER, so do not get attached to your patients, you're not staying with them. We're also going to be crawling in interns tonight and our residents and attendings will likely be busy for hours on the most severe cases. Lillianna... what does that mean?"

“That means we triage and we triage fast. We identify the most critical patients and get those to the residents. General stitches, labs and tests to the interns. The interns are new, most of

them started at the beginning of summer and this will be their first time jumping in the deep end. Our job is to make sure they have a life vest and don't kill our patients.”

Halloween, next to Thanksgiving and Christmas, was one of their bloodiest times of the year.

“All right. Everyone get to work and eat when you can, rest when you can, but if there are patients coming in those doors....” Jodi didn't have to finish the statement, the nurses were dispersing and heading out to take on their duties. She waved to Lillianna, asking her to wait until the locker room cleared out. “Now, you will park it at the desk. I want you in charge of updating every

patient status, checking them in, handling families if need be.”

Opening her mouth to object, she swallowed the words at Jodi’s hard look. “Fine.”

“Yeah, it is fine. You’re going to end up on the floor to help and we both know it. Conserve your energy and keep the traffic flowing. This isn’t a feel-sorry-for-you job. This is an I-need-you-to-do-this job...you’re also a good judge of when you need to be out there. Take one of the student nurses, park her right next to you. Make her learn everything you’re doing. If you have to turn the desk over, make sure you have someone with experience in place and have your

student nurse stay there and follow up. Got it? Good.” Jodi didn’t give her a chance to respond and moved out at a brisk clip.

Desk duty it was. Personally, Lillianna hated riding the desk. But Jodi was also right. Halloween meant chokes, burns, and allergies would merely be the start the day. She’d followed two screaming ambulances in at the start of her shift. The day blurred into fast forward. She checked in two anaphylaxis patients, and assigned them to nurses and interns. The board shuffled through the patients, and her student nurse ran her ass off.

A frantic mother arrived after receiving a phone call that her son had

been rushed to the hospital. Fifteen minutes of calming and two phone calls later, Lillianna sent the mother to the correct hospital. More patients needed checking in, a minor school bus incident loaded with upset five and six year-olds. They only generated a portion of the noise. The tidal wave of parents coming in brought even more. Most of the children checked out clean and didn't require admission to the hospital. It was late afternoon when the first real traumas, a pair of high school students covered in blood, stumbled through the door. Lillianna checked them both in then turned them over to the interns and fresh nurses returning to the floor.

“What the hell happened to them?” Jodi paused at the desk, turning in charts for the patient they were admitting. The charts had to be updated and sent with the patients to the surgical floor.

“It’s not real blood. Costumes for their murder party tonight. But apparently she’s allergic to it.” She initialed the last chart after scanning that the data matched the computer and passed them back.

“Ugh. We’re going to get more.” Jodi called over her shoulder.

“We always do.” Lillianna rolled the chair around and came face to face with Zane, one of the trauma attendings.

“We always do what, darlin’?” He

might as well have been a cowboy for the way he rolled his words, but instead of boots and jeans, he wore deep green scrubs and a white lab coat.

“Get more crazies. You have patients in beds seven and twelve. Seven is more critical, but twelve may have a pelvic fracture. One of the interns is getting films for you right now.” She handed him the charts.

Zane scanned them. “Page Ortho and turn twelve over to Webb or Phillips. I’ll grab seven right now...what is that?” He pulled the X-ray sheet out and held it up to the light.

“A pin. At least as far as the radiologist could determine. He swallowed it because someone else

gave it to his girlfriend and he didn't want her to wear it. It's perforating part of his esophagus. You'd think there are better ways to prove your affection." She took the chart back for twelve and paged the Ortho on call.

The doctor shook his head. "His parents here?"

"Mom's there with him, Dad went to get coffee and walk off his mad."

"Got it. See you soon." And Zane was off to deal with his patient.

She managed to grab some soup and a sandwich, courtesy of one of the nurses who ran across the street. Although Lillianna would kill for the espresso making the rounds—she'd been cut off

for months. After six, a fresh wave of arrival ambulances delivered their first fatality of the day. A head-on collision and then the night went downhill.

All the beds were full and she turned the desk over to a night nurse and left the student to process papers as she triaged the incoming. A young man in a uniform arrived with a gash across his head.

“I’m fine,” he mumbled. “Just let me get back out there.”

“Sir, can you tell me your name?” She used a penlight to test his pupil response. Concussion and blood loss were the initial concerns, but the lack of pupil reactivity in his right eye suggested deeper issues.

An intern slid to a halt next to her, she

filled him in on the vitals, and he started issuing commands. The younger doctor started his day out cocky, but the series of traumas wore away the edge. She stepped aside to allow them to wheel the gurney on, and the patient lashed out and grabbed her arm.

“Ease up there, guy, it’s okay.” The intern braced his arm, ready to help.

“It’s okay.” Lillianna smiled down at him. “I know this is scary, just breathe. We’re going to help you. Can you tell me your name?”

“Justin,” he slurred. But she could detect no obvious scent of alcohol. “Jush-stin Monroe.”

“Okay, Mr. Monroe. My name is

Lillianna, and this is Dr. Preston. He's going to take care of you. Do you know a number I can call?" But his eyes were closing.

"We need to move, Hansen," the intern snapped.

She extricated her arm and noticed the chain around the patient's neck. Extracting it, she scanned the dog tags and wrote down the social security number. "Go, I'll track the family."

Fortunately, a military background helped. It took her ten minutes of calls, but she got in touch with the young man's CO and he promised to reach out to the family. Back aching, she glanced at the clock.

It's going to be a long night.

It was nearly four in the morning by the time she arrived at her apartment. Her body was one long, ache. And she didn't think she'd ever been so tired. Several packages sat on the floor of her entry hall. A sticky note on top said her neighbor put them inside before the trick-or-treating started. Each package had been addressed to her, but said, *do not open 'til Christmas.*

Too tired to care about that. She paused in the kitchen for a peanut butter sandwich and a cup of tea. She'd showered and changed before leaving the hospital, but food was critical. She

probably should have slept at the hospital, too. But she hated the narrow beds in the on-call room, her rapidly expanding stomach made sleep uncomfortable enough.

Still nursing the hot tea, she headed to her bedroom, stripped and climbed between the cool sheets. The beauty of a hellish Halloween shift was the freedom of three days off ahead of her. She could sleep for as long as she needed. Grabbing her phone, she tried to calculate the time difference...it had to be the middle of the day in Germany.

Is Paul teaching? She frowned. He didn't care when she called, in fact, he insisted that she call him because he didn't want to wake her up. Apparently

it was okay if she woke him, but not the other way around. Frankly, she didn't even remember what day of the week it was.

Her eyes drifted closed and she fought the sleep swamping her. She promised to call him after the Halloween shift. He'd been worried about her and as terrifically sweet as it was, she told him she could handle it and she had. Unlocking her phone, she hit his number. As often as they talked, she'd added it to her favorites.

He answered on the second ring. "Are you okay? Did you forget to call?" Edgy concern frayed the words.

Barely able to contain her yawn, she

sank back against the pillows. “No, I am calling. I just got home. I didn’t want to interrupt class.”

“They’re fine.” Irritation echoed under his words though. “Didn’t you go on shift at like eight yesterday morning?”

“Uh huh. Long day, longer night. But I have the next three days off and I plan to sleep and watch television and eat ice cream until I’m sick of it.” Another yawn punctuated the words. “But I promised I’d call. So I’m home. Safe and sound.”

“You’re killing me.” His tone softened. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Just really tired. Exhausted to my bones and planning to sleep for as long as I can—the shy and retiring one is zonked at the moment.” She dragged the

covers up and turned off the light, snuggling down with the phone still at her ear. “How’s your day going?”

“Same shit, different day. Can you call me later after you’ve had some sleep?” The man had a delicious voice, even all tinny and distorted by the cell phone. She liked the way he sounded, how he caressed her with words, and while she didn’t want to admit it...turn her on from several thousand miles away. Their phone calls were her favorite part of the week. They alleviated her loneliness.

“I’d like that. Don’t work too hard.”

“You let me worry about that. Want me to talk to the bump for a bit?”

“Nah, he...she...it is quiet.” She yawned again, already drifting. “Night, Paul...talk soon.”

“Night, sweetheart. Sweet dreams.”

By the time Thanksgiving rolled around, the weather turned frigid with biting, winds slicing out of the north. Lillianna didn't mind the cold; the baby kept her pretty damn toasty, even if the wind nipped at her ears and froze her nose. She was supposed to take the Thanksgiving shift, because Paul would be there for Christmas. But the nurses got together and four of them were taking her holiday shifts and donating their pay

to her.

She would have planned a visit with her parents in New York, but she didn't find out about the surprise 'work-in' until the day before. One trip to the grocery store later, she settled in with a small turkey in the oven, stuffed with homemade breading, and diced zucchini for grilling when everything else was ready. She'd be eating turkey sandwiches for a week. She navigated around the rapidly growing pile of boxes, more came each day it seemed. Every single one said don't open 'til Christmas. Curiosity plagued her, but she did her best to keep them all closed.

While the food cooked, she did her nails, paid her bills and watched several

of her DVR'd shows. Oddly, pregnancy gave her more time at home and after seven years of working every holiday, left her with very little idea of what she should be doing. The oven dinged and she sent a text to Paul. Maybe he didn't have anything to do on Thanksgiving, either.

Whatcha doing?

He texted back immediately.
*Watching football with the guys.
Thought you were working.*

Taking the turkey out first, she set it on a cutting board and got the zucchini started before retrieving her cell phone.
Nope. Girls gave me the day off with pay for my present. I'm making a

dinner and about to sit down and eat it while I watch a movie.

The scent of the fresh roasted meat aroused her appetite and her stomach growled with enthusiasm. She stirred the zucchini, lightly browning it and spoiled herself with a bottle of sparkling cider. No wine, no coffee, and only a little bit of chocolate here and there. Add celibacy and swollen feet to the package and she was a basket of fun.

Her phone chirped. *What movie?*

Something action. Probably a Bourne flick. She'd missed the most recent release and she liked Jeremy Renner.

Give me fifteen. Her phone buzzed. She stared at the phone and frowned and

typed *okay*. Fixing her plate, she had to heat some rolls in the microwave and she was ready. After putting up the extras, she carried her plate, glass and bottle of cider out to the living room. In addition to Bourne, she'd rented a half dozen other movies ranging from musicals, to romantic comedies, to action films. Flipping through her options, she nibbled on a piece of turkey.

Her phone buzzed. *Turn on your computer and open Skype.*

Curious, she fetched her laptop from the bedroom desk and carried it back into the living room. Flipping it open, she turned it on and nibbled another

piece of turkey. After starting the program, she connected to the Internet and waited. A phone ring filled the silence and she double-clicked to answer it.

Paul's face filled the screen. "Happy Thanksgiving, sweetheart."

"Hey," she laughed. It never occurred to her to Skype him. They always talked on the phone. "How did you know my Skype address?"

"It's not that hard to figure out. And I asked Rebecca." He grinned. "It was supposed to be a surprise for your birthday next week. But since you're home today...."

He looked so good. Tears flooded her eyes and she blinked rapidly. "That's—"

wow...you look great.”

“Hey, are you okay?” He frowned and leaned closer, as though trying to get a better look at her.

“I’m fine...pregnancy makes me really hormonal.” She sniffled. She’d enjoyed her day off, shopping and catching up on her personal stuff, even the food was fun, but lonely.

“You are just as beautiful as I remember.” His smile was just as sexy as she remembered.

She rolled her eyes. “I’m a mess. I’m dressed for comfort. Like how I’m rocking the PJs here?” Shifting, she showed off the black and white zebra print flannels. Most of her clothes were

too tight and she divided her time between scrubs and stretching pants, but even they were going to have to be let out.

“You’re gorgeous...shift the camera and let me see the belly and then back to that beautiful face of yours.” Funny how he made an order sound like a caress, but she obeyed. She sucked her stomach in even if it had no visible effect and then settled back, angling the screen so the internal camera focused on her again.

Balancing her plate on a knee, she pulled her hair back into a loose ponytail at her nape. She hadn’t straightened it or done much of anything that day. At some point, she needed to make an appointment and get it trimmed

and styled, but since she wore it up most of the time, no one would notice except her.

“So how does one celebrate Thanksgiving in Germany?” Her voice went husky. She didn’t really care how they celebrated the holiday; too busy drinking in the sight of him.

He looked...stronger somehow, even better-looking than when she’d met him. His tan had faded some, and there was a shadow of stubble on his chin and cheeks. “One of the officer’s wives hosted a dinner for all the singles, we ate around noon and then we watched a game someone recorded. Not one of the Bowls, but it’s like a slice of home. I

skipped out when you texted though, I'd rather spend it with you."

"Yeah?"

"Hell, yeah. So, what movie are we watching?"

"Well, I was thinking Bourne...but you can't see the screen there." She ate another bite and watched his grin grow.

"No, but I have a screen and I'll just buy the movie and we can start at the same time and watch it. What did you fix?"

"Turkey, some stuffing and zucchini and...." she reached over and held up her wine glass. "Sparkling cider for the maternal order."

He laughed. "Mind waiting a sec while I get beer and popcorn?"

“Hmm.” She mock scowled. “That’s mean. You get alcohol and I don’t.”

“Fair enough. I’ll get water and popcorn. Since Mama can’t have it.”

She laughed. He was easy. “I’ll be here.”

“Good.” He vanished off the screen for a minute and she ate, a silly smile playing around the corners of her mouth, all traces of loneliness fleeing her soul. Setting her plate aside, she put the DVD in the player and cued to the beginning of the movie before settling back on the sofa and angling the computer so she could see him and screen. She might need to get the power cord...with a groan, she rose and fetched it from the

dining room where she usually charged the laptop and carried it over. A little bit of struggling and stretching, she plugged it in and sat back down.

Damn belly got in the way of everything. She laughed at the direction of her thoughts and then giggled harder when she saw Paul peering at her. “What were you doing that required all that grunting?”

“Plugging the laptop in. I didn’t want to lose you while we watched the movie.”

“You can’t lose me,” he promised. Anyone else might have made that sound like a line, but a shiver raced over her. “Okay, popcorn. Check. Water.” He showed her the bottle. “Check. You

good to go there?”

“Yep, but I apologize in advance for the frequent potty breaks.”

“Duly accepted and forgiven. Go.”
They hit play at the same time, but if anyone asked her later, she wouldn't have been able to tell them what happened in the movie.

She spent most of it watching Paul.
And God help her, missing him.

Chapter Nine

“Master Sergeant?” The corporal saluted from the doorway and waited for Paul to nod to him. “Sir, we’ve concluded with all classes for this term?”

“Yes, Corporal Barnes. We have. Those of you who received acceptable scores will graduate to the next level of training.” Special Intelligence assignments required men from all levels and pay grades. They did work in and out of uniform and had to be prepared to blend into a region if the mission required it.

“Sir, may I ask if I received that

grade?”

Barnes excelled in the class, but suffered from arrogance. He expected to do well, and didn't always put forth the effort. If he learned to temper his pride, he'd go far. “You can ask Corporal, but you'll find out when the scores are posted and you receive your orders.”

The man's mouth flattened. He didn't like the answer. Paul didn't look at him directly, but watched him from the corner of his eye. He knew he appeared to be studying the reports in front of him. It chewed on Barnes that he refused his request. The young man would benefit from a lesson in patience.

But he didn't lack in discipline. “Yes,

“sir. Thank you, sir.” He saluted again and waited.

“Have a good holiday, Marine. You’ll be plenty busy when you get back after the first of the year.” It was a small reward, but the flicker of a smile around the corners of the Corporal’s mouth said he received the message loud and clear. “Dismissed.”

Alone again, Paul finished scanning the last report and signed it. It had been a good class. He passed twenty-one percent. The others would be reassigned or reassessed. But it was the high number for insertion special operations and tactical assessment training. Only eight percent of Paul’s class had graduated with him.

“Master Sergeant.” His commander’s voice sent Paul to his feet and his back ramrod straight.

“Colonel.” He saluted.

“At ease, Master Sergeant.”

Paul obeyed the order, relaxing, but he didn’t sit. Facing the older man, he nodded to him. Colonel William Sanderson spearheaded the intelligence operation for over two decades. Rumor held that he’d turned down a CIA post three times. He was that good. He’d also been Paul’s induction instructor a year out of basic.

“Assessments complete?”

“My portion, sir. Yes, sir.”

The colonel walked over and lifted

the top sheet, scanning the numbers and the grades. “Good showing. I knew you were the right man for this job.”

“Thank you, sir.” He’d never imagined a gift for teaching. As honored as he’d been by the approach, Paul thought it was just another pit stop on the way to a better assignment in the field.

“Anything left to do?”

“No, sir. Most who have leave will begin it in the next forty-eight hours or begin transition interviews and PCS within seventy-two.” At least four of his students were bound for Afghanistan, another three would return stateside for a different set of training. The rest were yet to be decided or returning to the training facility after the first of the year.

“Excellent.” Colonel Sanderson paged through the report. It was unusual for him to review the information directly in front of a subordinate, but Paul kept his opinion to himself. “You need to go, Master Sergeant.”

“Sir?” He eyed the Colonel.

“You have a flight in ninety minutes. A seat opened up on the Secretary of State’s plane, it’ll get you as far as Andrews. You can take a commercial flight from there to Dallas.”

“Yes, sir.” He didn’t have leave for another week. He didn’t have the time accrued.

“Oh, while you’re Washington, I have some mail that I’d like delivered and if

you review some video footage on the flight back and draft some training options, I'd be interested in your opinion." The colonel set a thumb drive on the desk. "Everything you need is on there." He headed for the door and paused. "Oh, and Master Sergeant? I expect the amount of work on there would take an average of a week to complete. A skilled hand could see to that."

"Yes, sir." Paul didn't smile or express the fist pump flexing in his soul. "I'll make sure it's done, sir."

"I know you will, Marine. Happy holidays and dismissed." The colonel left him with that gift and strode out the door. Paul grabbed the thumb drive and

his case with the laptop in it and strode out the door. His go bag was already packed and waiting. He just had to change into his Class As for the flight. A seat on the Secretary of State's plane was a gift. Thirty minutes later, he checked through security and boarded the plane.

Christmas was in ten days, Lily didn't expect him for another week. He curbed the temptation to call her, but it was still early in Dallas and she likely already left for work. He would be on the ground in Washington before her shift ended.

He arrived at Andrews by evening of

the same day he left Germany and took care of the colonel's letter deliveries—all two of them—before departing the airbase. He changed out of Class As and into some fatigues that were a heck a lot more comfortable for traveling.

A cab ride later, he checked on the flights departing National for DFW. Most were full, but he scored a standby spot on a flight departing in thirty minutes. His military ID and information got him through the TSA line swiftly. The gate area was packed, but a plane was parked at the end of the jetway. A good sign.

An airline employee called out names and Paul listened for his while checking his texts. Lillianna sent one telling him

her shift ran late, and she didn't expect to be home for another few hours so she wouldn't be able to call until he was in class. He grinned and sent back *No problem. Get some sleep.*

Another three names were called and he watched passengers hurry up to the desk. Standby was a bitch of a way to fly. He sent a message to Damon and asked if he'd be available for an airport run that night or put him in touch with someone who could pick him up. If necessary he'd rent a car, but the car rental places didn't tend to stay open late at some airports. If he scored a ride on the standby flight, it would be landing near midnight Texas time.

Another two names and then the attendant announced that all standby boarding seats had been filled. Any passengers waiting on a standby for Dallas-Fort Worth would have to check in for the next flight, which wouldn't be leaving until five a.m. the next morning.

Paul sighed. *Dammit*. There might be time for him to check into another airline and see if they had any flights.

Damon texted back to say just hit him with arrival and gate info and he'd be there. Sighing, Paul turned to look for a flight monitor when a hand tapped his shoulder.

“Excuse me, Master Sergeant?” A middle-aged man and woman stood

about a foot behind Paul and looked at him expectantly.

“Yes, sir?” The man was older than he and stood at a familiar posture.

“If you don’t mind my asking, were you waiting on a standby for this flight?” He gestured to the plane that had already begun boarding.

“Yes, sir. But they filled up. I’m going to check for other flights and see if I can move my standby to one of those.”

“We’ll swap for you, Master Sergeant. You look like a man on his way home. Maria and I can stay at a hotel tonight and take a flight tomorrow. Just give me a moment to let them know.” The man strode off before Paul stopped him.

He frowned, but the woman touched his arm. “Please, let us do this. Our son was a Marine. He died in Afghanistan. So, we don’t have to hurry home. It’s important to Daniel, he wants to do this for you.”

A fist tightened in Paul’s chest. “Thank you, ma’am. And to your husband.”

“Thank you. He saw your uniform and he perked up for the first time this season. Christmas is hard on us all, but David really misses Chad.”

Paul hadn’t even met his child, yet he couldn’t imagine the loss. “I appreciate it.”

Her husband, David, waved them

over and Paul motioned for the wife to go in front of him then followed. At the desk, Daniel explained his plan to the attendant and she nodded. “Thank you sir, I’m going to make sure we give you a complimentary upgrade on tomorrow morning’s flight. Master Sergeant, if I could see your ticket and identification?”

Paul handed them over and turned to the older man, holding his hand out. “Paul Torres, sir. Thank you. Merry Christmas.”

“Daniel Bryant. Thank you, Master Sergeant, Merry Christmas. God bless you and keep you safe.”

They shook hands and Mrs. Bryant gave his arm an affectionate pat. The

couple left without anything else to say and Paul sighed. He'd heard of stories like that, but it was the first time it ever happened to him. It made his heart hurt and elated him at the same time.

“You have it bad,” Damon commented after parking the truck outside Lily's apartment.

Paul shrugged. It was nearly eleven at night and he'd been traveling for more than a day and still had hours of work to do. “You still haven't convinced that woman to marry you, have you?”

He went to the bed of the truck and untied the Christmas pine they'd stopped

to buy. Damon opened the back and extracted the plastic Walmart bags filled with a random assortment of Christmas lights, garland and multi-colored decorative balls. Paul told him to go for every shade on the shelf.

“I’m working on it. She’s stubborn. She thinks being in her thirties is too old to get married.”

Damon grunted and grabbed Paul’s duffel. “So why are we doing this again?”

“Lily’s been working a lot of extra hours because she took some vacation time for my leave. She hasn’t had time to shop, and carrying a big tree isn’t something she should be doing anyway. Did you get the keys from Rebecca?”

Paul hoisted the tree up.

“Yep. Her apartment’s this way.” Damon had actually looked it up and did a map on the GPS. Neither man had been there before. For the first time since the colonel sent him on the flight, cool awareness that he was about to see Lily again for the first time in months—a very pregnant Lily—hit him square in the chest.

Focus on the task, Marine. Prep the field of battle.

If Damon noticed his distraction, his friend didn’t let on. He juggled the bags and unlocked the door. It took them a few minutes to get the tree in and set up. Unwilling to share his first few minutes

in Lily's private space with his fellow Marine, he thanked him for the ride and sent him home. Lily hadn't texted since the message he received at National, but she wasn't home either.

Not letting exploring her place distract him, he decorated the tree with lights, garland and Christmas balls. He didn't know what she preferred for a tree-topper so he'd let her pick it out. The boxes he'd shipped over the last few weeks were all stacked neatly... unopened...in her dining area. Pleased that she obeyed the notice not to open 'til Christmas, he hummed while he worked.

It was nearly two a.m. when the door locks turned. Unwilling to scare the hell out of her, he stood in full view of the

front door when it opened.

She stepped into the apartment and stared at him, mouth open. She looked like a million bucks. Pregnancy softened her face, gave her a fuller, more generous figure, and he couldn't keep the grin off his face.

“Surprise, sweetheart.”

“You're here.” Disbelief etched the whisper in her voice.

“Yeah, I'm here.” He wanted to go to her and sweep her into his arms, but he'd already staged his invasion, set up shop with the Christmas tree and surprised her. So he held open his arms and waited. “Miss me?”

“I have....” She dropped her bag on

the table and closed the door, moving slower than he cared to see. Tiredness seemed to shimmer off her in waves, like heat rising from sun-baked pavement. “I really have.”

Disappointed that she didn't run flying into his arms, he braced his patience. He'd kind of invited the attitude by dropping in unannounced. And to be fair, she was extremely pregnant. She probably didn't race anywhere. She crossed the room and stopped just within arm's reach.

“And I'd like to make one thing perfectly clear.”

“Okay.” Man enough to take whatever she dished out.

“What I'm about to do in no way let's

you off the hook for surprising the hell out of me...are we clear?"

He nodded. "Yes, ma'am. Crystal." She hadn't thrown him out yet, that had to be a good sign.

She cupped his face in her hands and he sighed, his whole body relaxing at the simple touch. She stretched up on her tiptoes and brushed a kiss to his lips, and he closed his arms around her.

"You did miss me." He grinned.

"Yeah, what took you so damn long?"

Chapter Ten

She hadn't even realized she slept until her eyes opened and a morning yawn stretched her jaw. Warmth snuggled to her side and she found Paul staring down at her. Tiredness lingered around his eyes, but his grin made her pulse leap. "Good morning."

"You're still here." Heat warmed her face, and not for the first time, she was glad her darker skin hid a blush so well. As if to prove he wasn't a hallucination, she brushed a caress along his cheek. Stubble rasped against her palm.

"Nowhere else I'd rather be. You fell asleep on the sofa, and I carried you in

here.” He settled a proprietary hand on her belly and a fresh wave of heat kindled inside.

“I’m sorry about that.” Finding him in her apartment still seemed like a bit of a fanciful dream.

“It’s okay, it was late and you were tired. And I got to watch you sleep....” He rubbed his hand over her stomach. The slow, easy massage sent electric ripples of awareness along every nerve ending and erased the lingering traces of sleep.

“You realize that sounds distinctly creepy, right?” She’d worried how it would go, when she allowed herself to dwell on the possibilities of his visit. In

Germany, he'd been too far away to be anything more than a chance meeting. A chance that left her pregnant, sure—but too far away to be anything more than a voice on the phone, an intangible.

But the man in the bed with her right then—he was very tangible. And more, he was the guy she'd gotten used to talking to—enjoyed teasing a couple of times a week at the oddest hours. They talked—really talked—about big matters and small. As unnatural as it seemed, it felt completely right that to have him with her even if seeing him in her apartment bowled her over. Emotions swamped her and although she teased him about being angry—it was the last thing she experienced.

Hope.

Relief.

Thrill.

They tumbled over each other like wrestling puppies and filled her with the strangest sense of euphoria.

“It’s not creepy, it’s a lot like pinching yourself to make sure you’re awake.” He defended his words, and she enjoyed stroking his cheek. He turned his head and caught her finger in a sweet whisper of a kiss. “Not to mention I wanted be awake to stall any chance of a disappearing act.”

Guilt flooded through her. “I did try to leave you a note.”

“I know. But it’s way too much fun to

give you a hard time about it to let it go completely.” Contrition softened his expression and he went from hard man to earnest boy and back in the blink of an eye. “That said, never again. You’re stuck with me.”

Dragging her hand away from his face before she started exploring elsewhere on his body, she stretched. Her gaze landed on the clock and she blinked. “Holy crap.”

Paul laughed and pressed a kiss to her ear. “I told you, you were tired.” His voice tickled her skin and she shivered.

“But twelve hours?” The question came out somewhere between a throaty whisper and ended on a squeak. It was almost mid-afternoon. Had Paul been in

bed with her the whole time?

“Hmm. Hungry?” He continued his light massage against her belly, teasing upward occasionally and her nipples tightened in anticipation. Her very naked nipples. She had no clothes on.

Stealing a glance back at him, she grinned. “Please tell me I’m not the only naked one here.”

“Since you asked so nicely....” He took her hand and pressed it below the sheets and she wrapped her fingers around his very stiff, very hot cock. Excitement raced in her blood and her sex clenched. She went from feeling like a beached whale to horny in one caress.

He traced the ridges of her ear with

his tongue and she closed her eyes. Stroking his cock from base to tip was an indulgence he'd not allowed her the last time. Their only time. He rubbed her belly and glided up to cup her breast and she contained a groan. Her breasts were almost too sensitive. When he brushed his thumb over her nipple, she bit her lip not to cry out, but liquid heat pooled between her thighs.

“How does this feel so right and so—odd at the same time?” Odd wasn't the correct word, but confusion filtered through the desire filling her. She wanted to explore his body, and tracing her thumb around the head of his cock, she wanted him inside of her. The explosive needs were a point,

counterpoint.

“We didn’t know each other last time.” His words soothed and teased as he kissed a path from her ear to her throat. Her pulse rabbited and the lazy pleasure unfurling within her ballooned. “Virtual strangers passing in an exquisite way.” Shifting against her, the wet heat of his mouth blazed across her skin to the breast he teased.

“Do we know each other any better now?”

His mouth latched on her nipple and he gave it a tug, teeth grazing ever so lightly, and she forgot to breathe. She squeezed his cock and he caught her wrist, tugging her hand away.

She barely recognized the low mewl coming from her throat. He laved the nipple, pulling all the pleasure up to focus on that point. Maybe he did know her better than she thought. He lifted his head, his gaze locking with hers as he blew a breath. The cool air stiffened her nipple and increased the tension stretching her taut.

“I think we do,” he said, softly. He set her hands on the pillow. “Keep them there.”

Amusement curved beneath the desire and the anticipation fluttering. “You still think you’re the boss of me?”

“No. I don’t think that.” He hovered over her, all coiled strength and raw

masculinity. His gaze raked over her, a physical caress that sent another flush of warmth to her sex. “I know I am.”

Confidence on a man was about the sexiest thing ever and she bit back her retort. “Yes, sir.”

His expression softened and he captured her mouth in a kiss that robbed her thoughts of their coherence. All that hard, lean muscle and hot skin pressed against her. He held himself above her, one hand braced on either side. They touched nowhere save for their mouths moving together and the twining of their tongues.

Primitive arousal soaked through her and filled her with yearning. She wanted to lift her hands from the pillow and

drag him down, but she didn't dare. He'd ordered her to leave them there, so she settled for arching her back. Her belly bumped him and he growled, so low and visceral it only heightened her need.

"I want to be patient with you," he murmured between long drugging kisses. His ragged breathing added to her thrill. "Is it safe?"

Belatedly she realized the meaning behind the question. Dazed, she looked up at him and smiled. "Yes. We can have all the sex we want."

He kissed her again, and sparks chased across her vision. He caressed a path, leaving wanton need everywhere

he touched. She squirmed, wanting his hand everywhere, but he took his time and plundered her mouth in the most erotic kiss. Abandoning her lips, he kissed his way down her body, particularly at her breasts where he drove her mad with teasing licks, but pausing at her belly.

“Sweetheart, do you have any idea how beautiful you are?” The way his voice deepened sent primal thrill zinging from her sex to her breasts and back again. When he dipped below to kiss her thighs, she closed her eyes and fisted the pillow.

Soaking wet, and so ready for him, she thought she might die if he played with her anymore. When his fingers

found her throbbing clit, she cried out and came hard, disobedient as hell and she didn't care.

Floating on that wild cloud of euphoria, she wasn't prepared for his mouth replacing his fingers and the dark need that erupted spiraling her higher on a fresh rising tide of need. His tongue vibrated against her clit, ratcheting up her tension to an almost unbearable level. But the earnest attention and hard strokes of his mouth tumbled her over the edge. The shocks ripped through her and she cried out.

He gave her no time to recover, pulling away and rising above her. Dazed, she stared at him as he angled his

cock and pressed into her. It was one, slow, unrelenting thrust and her inner muscles convulsed around him. She tried to arch her hips to meet him, the need hurtling her right back to the edge.

Seated deep within her, he stilled and checked her with a look. “Still okay?”

“Yes.” The whispered word came out a plea and he smiled, a heart-stopping, brilliant grin, and began to thrust in and out of her.

“Come again, baby.” He stroked her clit, never ceasing his rhythm, and she came again and again, sobbing his name, one orgasm crashing into another. His hips pistoned, and thrust harder, but he seemed ever aware of her, stroking her, teasing her, heightening her pleasure and

when he found his release in hot jet of heat, he called her name against her mouth and kissed her.

I love him so much.... The thought tumbled in her mind, riding the whirlpool of pleasure. *So much....*

Loving her was easier from several thousand miles away. There, he didn't have to witness her simmering irritation when he came in from a run carrying a cup of coffee. There, he didn't know how often she woke in the middle of the night, or that spooning wasn't her favorite way to sleep. But there he also didn't get to indulge himself in the

softness of her body or give her foot rubs when she came in after a particularly long shift. He couldn't deliver food to her or get to know her co-workers.

So maybe loving her from afar seemed easier, but it was nowhere near as satisfying. She loved the tree. And he even managed to coax her into buying some decorations for it—including one photo frame that boasted a miniaturized likeness of their sonogram. Baby bump still didn't have any interest in sharing his or her gender. The baby played shy with his or her legs always closed or turned away. Paul enjoyed the anticipation, Lillianna not so much.

She was a planner.

“So what do you think of Michael?” He fixed dinner—well, he’d grabbed carryout from Damon’s restaurant. His idea of cooking consisted of anything made on a grill or take-out.

“I dated a Michael. No.” She didn’t eat properly, picking at her food and pushing it around on the plate rather than eating it. “Jackson?”

“Jackson Torres.” He tried the name.

“Hansen.” She corrected.

And there they went again. “Torres,” he repeated patiently. “I like Danniella, for a girl.”

“Then someone would call her Dani. I’m not a big fan of nicknames.” She shifted in the chair and he recognized the

pinch of her eyebrows.

“You don’t mind when I call you Lily. Back hurt?” He rose and fetched the pillow off the sofa and eased it between her back and the hard chair.

“A little.” But her grimace betrayed the lie. He paused and gave her a hard stare, and she relented. “Okay, a lot. I’m not really hungry, maybe I’m just tired. And I like when you call me Lily.”

“Maybe, but you should still eat something. I can get you something else if you don’t like the fish.” Maybe he should have run the meal plan past her first.

“No, the fish is fine. In fact, I’m sure it tastes great. But it was a long day....”

“And your last one, right? You’re on

leave now?” She had enough vacation time accrued to take off through the first of the year. The policy at her hospital allowed her a pre-maternity and a post-delivery leave. Which meant even though the baby wasn’t due for another six weeks, she had time off.

“Yes, I’m on leave. Signed the last papers today, I’m off work until April.”

“April.” He frowned. “That’s not a lot of recovery time.”

“Six weeks is more than enough and you’re presuming this kid is going to stay on some kind of predictable schedule. Babies tend to do whatever they want.” She grimaced again and glared at her stomach. “And kicking me isn’t helping

your case.”

Paul laid his hand against her belly immediately. Since arriving, the baby had been pretty quiet. He'd only noticed some movement when she slept, and he was eager for the experience. When the little one thumped his hand through the belly, he grinned. “Hello there. Nice high five.”

Lily laughed. “I think that was his foot.” But the tension knitting her brows together relaxed.

“Okay, then maybe he can be a kicker for the football team.”

“Or she can be a prima ballerina.”

He'd miss talking to her—playing with her. The sobering thought kicked him square in the gut. He didn't want to

miss it. If she'd just agree with him—it would solve so much. Glancing up, he locked gazes with her. “Marry me.” It wasn't a question.

“We've talked about this.” She glanced away.

“No, you've talked about it. You've given me a lot of excuses, but no real reasons. I know you're life is here, but that doesn't mean it's set in cement.”

“No, it doesn't. But I bounced around my entire childhood. I never knew where we would go next. We didn't have any control of Dad's assignments. I didn't grow up in a neighborhood where everyone knew my name, I grew up in an Army where everyone moved when they

were told, went to states and bases and countries they may never have heard of, and we had no say in the matter. No one took into account who my friends were or what I liked to do—if the Army said go, we went.” Tears filled her eyes. “I love my dad, I love that he loves his country, and I have always been proud of him. But Paul, I hated that. I hated not having a place to call mine, a place I could settle in and establish roots.”

Still kneeling, he covered her hands with his. “I get that. But if you stay here and I go, we’re apart. How is that fair?”

She bit her lip and gone was the sassy, tough nurse who handled everything and all that remained was the vulnerable mom-to-be. His heart fisted

in his chest. “I don’t know. I don’t like it.”

Well, that was something. “You know kids don’t get to choose their families. They’re born into them. I know you didn’t like all the moving, and I can’t promise you that we won’t have to. I’m in Germany right now. I was in Afghanistan a year ago, Iraq before that. I’ve been assigned all over the world. I go where they need me. It’s who I am. But I want to be your husband, too.”

Sighing, Lily touched his face and he leaned his cheek into her gentle fingers. “Paul, we’re having a baby...I love having you here. I look forward to talking to you. But is that enough to make

a marriage? Won't you eventually resent me?" She swallowed hard. "Or worse, what if I end up resenting you?"

Discomfort rippled across her face and he touched her belly again. The baby seemed to be kicking more. "I can't say it won't happen. Because I can't see the future. No one can promise you that. Happily ever after isn't something that happens, it's something you work for—together." He believed that. He was raised with two parents who argued, loudly, and made up just as fiercely. They weren't perfect, they made mistakes, they adjusted, and they grew together. He wanted that for himself.

He wanted Lily.

"But you're tired." It wasn't a

question. The baby's size made her more uncomfortable by the day and he'd been there a week and already saw it. "So—let's do this. We're going to get you comfortable, you pick the movie and I'll clean and then give you a foot rub."

Her smile softened and she shook her head. "I don't deserve you."

"Wrong answer." He leaned in and kissed her hard. "I don't deserve you. That's why you're making me work so hard." Rising, he helped her out of the chair and gave her bottom a light smack. "Go. Get comfy and figure out what you want to watch."

And let me figure out how to convince you that we're right

together.... His time ran short. Two weeks was nowhere near enough time to make his case. Deal with the situation in front of you, like Luke says. This is the situation. This is what I do.

Christmas morning turned magical. She'd noticed and watched curiously as the boxes waiting in her dining room vanished and mysteriously reappeared as wrapped presents under the tree. And there were a lot of them. Curiosity nibbled on her, but she focused her attention on Paul and not the presents. The last two weeks had been a small miracle.

The man was invested in every part of her life. They went to a Christmas party together at Mike's Place. Surrounded by his friends and fellow Marines, she thought she'd be out of place—but no one allowed her that. They welcomed her like she belonged there.

Paul apparently conspired with Rebecca for her baby shower, too. He delivered her to the location and picked her up, packing in all the presents. They had a crib, a decorated room for the baby, and everything she would need for the first few months.

The night he put it all together, she'd never laughed so hard in her life. But he wasn't perfect. Mentally, she'd ticked

off the list—he snored. He used all the hot water in the shower. He loved to cuddle. He never let her do anything if he got to it first.

Yeah, his flaws are the suck....

But at his core, he remained a Marine. The clock ticking down on their time together thudded with every beat of her heart. It didn't matter how much fun they were having, he had to leave right after the first to report to his duty station in Germany. He would leave.

And she would be there alone, with the baby still due.

And that's what I want to do. But it wasn't. No matter how much she couldn't reconcile herself to the nomadic lifestyle again, her stationary home held

even less appeal...because Paul wouldn't be in it.

Nothing made that plainer than waking alone on Christmas morning and seeing a stocking propped on the nightstand next to the bed. A beautiful rose poked out of the top of it and with an eagerness she hadn't experienced since she was a baby, she pulled the stocking over and peeked inside.

The rose had a bracelet wrapped around it. Beneath that were two novels she'd mentioned liking, a copy of the Bourne movie they'd watched on Skype, and a homemade Dummies Guide to Loving a Marine.

Setting aside all the others, she

flipped open the cover on the notebook and read the inscription.

Apparently there's a project going on at Mike's Place where all the spouses and significant others have been swapping stories. Rebecca asked them to put this together for you, so you'd know exactly what you're getting into. Apparently being a military brat is different from being a military wife. I want you to have all the facts.

Your Marine, Paul

A tear splashed the back of her hand. Each page included a note or a letter from a Marine's significant other. Some were just lists, others went deeper. Some had been military brats, and some like Rebecca were made widows before

they were wives, abandoned by the love of their life for duty and country. But Rebecca added some key details to the story that Lillianna knew so well.

I get that this isn't the life for everyone. But Luke didn't give me a choice in it. I would trade every empty year without him for deployments, homecomings, and the worry in between. The choice of being there for someone you love is as important as the job they do being there for our country. It's not the easiest road, but it's far from the loneliest.

She didn't know how long she sat reading, every story gripping her. The artist who waited for her boyfriend, the

attorney who wasn't sure if she could commit to a life that might involve having to say goodbye, the best friend who would take on anything if it meant staying with the man he loved, and the retired Marine husbands who were in similar positions. The status of being a spouse came with its own unique challenges and benefits, but they didn't believe they were alone—ever. Because they kept the home fires burning together—a private club where they understood the trials and the tasks and helped the new arrivals ease into that life.

Climbing out of bed, she carried the book into the living room. Paul sat next to the tree, staring at it with the most thoughtful of expressions. She padded

across the room and slid onto his lap and he adjusted immediately, helping her find a comfortable spot and wrapping his arm around her.

“Merry Christmas,” he murmured.

“I love you.”

He smiled slowly. “I love you.”

Her heart pinged in her chest. “Do you really think we can do this?” She held up the book. The look on his face melted her.

He nodded. “I know we can. I know I don’t want to go back without you.”

“I thought we were just a wedding fling.” That’s what she’d told herself when it got too hard.

“You were never a one-night stand for

me, or any kind of fling. I spent four months trying to figure out how to see you again when you called and told me you were pregnant. I haven't touched another woman since you and I don't want to. You're my girl." He rubbed her lower back. "Marry me."

"You never give up." A quiet sense of awe filled her. His confidence and charm were the facets that attracted her in the first place, but they filled her with an inexplicable comfort and sense of security.

"Nope. You see, good things come to those who know to go and damn well get them. You're the best thing to happen to me since the Marines. So, I'm telling you. You're going to marry me. It's just

a matter of when.”

“Well, when you put it like that... what do you think of New Year’s Eve?” She couldn’t stop her lips from twitching.

Paul whooped. “Sold.” He kissed her and she melted into him, holding on for dear life because she was throwing her hat into the deep end. Pressing his forehead to hers, he murmured. “I love you, Lillianna Hansen-soon-to-be-Torres, forever and ever. Marry me.”

She knew an order when she heard one. And this time, she wouldn’t break the rules. “Yes.”

Epilogue

“You can do this.” Paul held fast to his wife’s hand. They’d had her take the wedding ring off when they checked into the hospital, and it hung on a chain around his neck with his dog tags.

Lillianna leaned forward, her face straining as she howled her way through another contraction. “I hate you,” she murmured and sagged back, panting.

“Me, too,” he agreed cheerfully. “Ready? It’s time for another one?” Her water broke as he’d walked in the door from class, and he applauded their child’s effort to wait for him to get there. He’d never moved so fast in his life to

get her to a hospital. They'd been in Germany just five weeks. They also had to promise their respective parents a bigger wedding sometime later in the year, but the justice of the peace who married them on New Year's Eve was fine by him.

“Ow!” She sat forward and strained, pushing. Her fingers locked on his, digging into his hand and he took it. If he could ride the pain out for her, he would. She'd skipped the epidural, citing too many studies of potential stroke, and she wanted to remember every minute of the experience.

He'd imagined she would change her mind, but not his wife. *God, I love the*

sound of it...wife. Somewhere between a night of flagrant passion and the delivery room, he'd fallen in love with her. Head over heels via phone calls, text messages, and Skype. He treasured every single moment of their time together, especially the birth of their child.

Even if she was close to breaking his hand.

“Here we go.” The doctor looked up from his position between Lily’s legs. “Another hard push.”

“You can do this.” Paul held her gaze, pouring all of his encouragement into the look they shared. Her face strained and twisted, the doctor said something, and then a baby’s loud wails filled the room.

The doctor laid the baby against her belly and Lily sagged.

“Congratulations, folks...it’s a boy.”

Paul grinned. “It’s a boy. I win.”

Lily laughed and he kissed her damp forehead.

“You did fantastic, sweetheart.” He kept a close eye on the doctors as they clipped the cord and cleaned his son.

“Lucas,” Lily murmured and he glanced down at her.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. He might have been a jerk. But he married one of my best friends and introduced me to the love of my life. I can forgive him long enough to name our boy Lucas.”

Pride bloomed in Paul's chest. "Lucas Jorge Torres." Named for his captain and his father. It didn't get better than that.

At least he didn't think so, until they put his son in his arms. Glancing from the baby's deep brown face to his wife's, he grinned wider.

It did get better.

"I love you."

"Yes," she whispered, eyes shining. "I don't need happily ever after. I just need you."

~ABOUT THE AUTHOR~

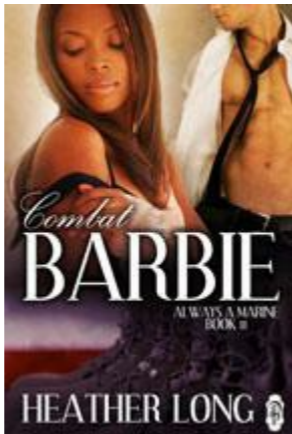
Heather Long lives in Texas with her family and their menagerie of animals. As a child, Heather skipped picture books and enjoyed the Harlequin romance novels by Penny Jordan and Nora Roberts that her grandmother read to her. Heather believes that laughter is as important to life as breathing and that the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy and Santa Claus are very real. In the meanwhile, she is hard at work on her next novel.

You can visit Heather at:
www.heatherlong.net

Combat Barbie

Beauty queen turned marine, Mary Phillips is tired of hearing "you could have been so much more." But running into Kyle Stewart reminds her that not everyone judges by appearance.

Seeing Mary again encourages Kyle to face his one regret, and the millionaire dares to reach for happiness.



Combat
BARBIE

ALWAYS A MARINE
BOOK II

HEATHER LONG 

Whiskey Tango Foxtrot

*Have you ever woken up every day
afraid of everything?*

For single mom and widow Melody Carter, six months passed since an IED ripped her life apart. Everyone is sympathetic and offers platitudes of comfort and support. Everyone thinks they know why she's grieving, but Melody isn't mourning her broken heart. She's ashamed to be grateful her abusive husband won't hurt her anymore and scared for her child. Born with a mild heart defect, her daughter needs

lifesaving surgery and with her funds tight and her emotional scars tighter, she's running out of options. When she receives an offer for assistance from Mike's Place, can Melody put her faith in the men her husband called friend?

*Have you ever woken up, day after day,
to discover your body's betrayal?*

Marine Captain, Joe Anderson Cooper, received the Silver Star for Valor when he led his unit through heavy fire to rescue fellow Marines. Despite numerous injuries, the Captain refused medical aid, insisting that the medics attend others. A broken back and shattered bones put Captain Cooper in a wheelchair and every day is a battle to

keep his recovery on track and his sanity intact. When a single mom moves in to the apartment next door to his and he recognizes kindred—damaged—soul, can he overcome her fear and be the man she's always needed?

Can these two lonely souls rise to the challenge or will their scars trap them forever?



ALWAYS A MAN IN
BOOK 10

WHISKEY
TANGO

Foxtrot

THE CHALLENGE SERIES

HEATHER
LONG

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