



*Marine*  
IN THE **WIND**



ALWAYS A MARINE  
BOOK 15

HEATHER LONG



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## **Marine in the Wind**

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## ~DEDICATION~

For my readers who never fail to make me push myself harder to tell the stories they want to read, and for my critique partners who never fail to support me even when I make them cry.

# Marine in the Wind

A 1Night Stand/Western Escape  
Always a Marine - Book 15

By  
Heather Long

# Chapter One

Greg stepped down off the Greyhound bus into the cool air of a Wyoming morning. Mountains surrounded him and the sun shone down like a golden kiss. No one waited to board, so he swung his duffel over a shoulder and moved away from the bus so it could pull on down the highway. Apparently the small town of Freewill didn't rate a stop inside the town itself.

The bus pulled away and revealed A.J. leaning against a red, 1951 Ford classic truck on the

opposite side of the two-lane blacktop. "Oorah, Marine."

Chuckling, Greg walked across the street and shook his outstretched hand. "Retired. Hello will do."

"I thought the other guys were coming up with you." A.J. patted the vehicle. "Stow your bag."

Tossing it in, Greg circled around and climbed in the passenger side. "Miller and Jones had to catch a different flight. Miller's post-op fever spiked and the doctors restricted him. Jones didn't want to leave him there alone, so I'm on my own." Which he

preferred, truth be told, and when the other two Marines insisted he head out, Greg was more than ready to leave Mike's Place in the rearview mirror.

"Thanks for coming. I can use the assist."

Maybe he could, but like Greg, A.J. craved the silence and respite of a slower life, defined by hard work, because a ranch couldn't be otherwise. He'd turned down a billet at the facility in Allen, Texas, when offered. Instead, he'd returned to Freewill, and the changes in his easy smile and relaxed bearing were an

endorsement for its restorative properties.

Firing the engine, A.J. drove them through town. A sleepy place, with storefronts right out of a fifties television show, colorful window displays, decorated stores with doors wide open to let in the fresh air, and people waving as they drove past, all invited a person to stop in for spell. A.J. touched a hand to the brim of his hat for each and every one.

The kind of town where everyone knew everyone else. No strangers lasted long before they were woven into the fabric of

small-town life. He earned his fair share of curious looks, easy to discern at a twenty-mile-an-hour crawl, per the posted speed limit. He didn't mind. He wouldn't be in town much, since A.J.'s ranch lay outside of Freewill on several acres of pristine land with horses, forests, grasslands and mountains.

Greg wouldn't need the town.

"I have a date tonight," A.J. said. "But there's plenty to eat at the house, and I'm almost done re-roofing the bunkhouse. You can stay in a guest room 'til it's finished. After that, you can move out if you like. Or not, your choice.



Plenty of room, lots of work. You can start tomorrow, once you settle in."

"Today is fine." He'd been idle long enough and alone with the emptiness in his soul even longer. Honest work and back-sweating labor appealed to him. "Just hand me some tools and point me at what needs doing."

A.J. gave him a long look before he nodded. "All right. I've been putting off work on the barn. The stalls in there need to be torn out, rebuilt, and structured so we've got twelve box stalls for foaling and another dozen for stabling on

an as-needed basis."

"Sounds good."

Freewill faded behind them and A.J. picked up speed. The breeze carried a hint of moisture along with sweet grass and woods. Greg leaned his head toward the scents and let the wind wash over his face. He drummed his fingers against the door. The coolness carried the taste of a cleaner world, a world before desert, fire, bullets, and hate stripped him raw. His time overseas worked him over and spit him out on the other side...but as what, he hadn't quite determined.

"Greg?" A.J. dragged him back to the present.

"Yeah?"

"You get tired, you take breaks. You need to walk it off, you walk it off. Understood?"

Concern underscored the orders, so Greg nodded. He hadn't realized how much he needed to be there until he arrived. He thought A.J.'s invitation might have been pity—not many men needed their legs rebuilt to replace crushed femurs and shins. Six months of brutal surgeries later and they'd pieced what bone they could back together with

metal rods and steel screws, reattaching torn muscle and sinew.

Many more months passed in intensive physical therapy—relearning to walk, to build his muscle strength—for a total of eighteen months since his life had shattered beneath the bulk of a flipped vehicle on foreign sands.

"Greg?" A.J. tapped his arm.

"I'm here. And, fine, I'll work 'til I'm tired. You have any watering holes or lakes up this way?" The scent of water tickled his nostrils; clean, fresh water without the irritation of chlorine or humid air. Real water. Real land.

"More'n a couple. I'll leave notes on the map at the house. I've got one for the whole spread, so you'll know where you are."

He didn't offer to give him a tour. Greg appreciated it. He wanted to be alone. A man had to be alone if he hoped to ever find himself again.

"Thanks, A.J."

"Anytime, man. Anytime."

They didn't need to say anything after that.

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As promised, A.J. showed him to a room when they arrived, handed

him a map with markers for the land's borders, as well as the local lakes and ponds—three of which were on his land. When Greg headed down to the barn, A.J. waved from his perch, working on the roof of the bunkhouse. He saluted and that was it.

Two hours later, he finished breaking down the wood he'd ripped out of four of the six stalls he selected for his first task. Stripping off his shirt, he worked bare-chested to dry the sweat dripping off his body. His legs ached and his back hurt. He had to pause more often than he liked,

but overdoing it would only put him down longer.

Walking to the edge of the barn, Greg stared out at the vistas. He used to joke that he and the land were one. When he traveled, he courted the land like he courted a girl. Iraq, for example, was a hard maiden. She kept her secrets veiled and preferred no flirting. He thought they'd reached some kind of understanding over time, he and that foreign mistress, but she'd never accepted him—or maybe he never accepted her.

Either way, it never stopped not

being home.

After he returned stateside, his native land felt as unfamiliar as that foreign soil. Canting his head, he stared at the distant mountains. If he could finish the stalls in a couple of days, he'd head that way. Walk through the shadow of the mountain...taste the air there. See what the land had to say.

"You shouldn't wait too long." The voice behind him jerked him around, and Greg stared at the older man shuffle-stepping down the long corridor between the shredded stalls.

Where the hell did he come



from?

"For what, sir?" As the man drew closer, Greg made out a flat forehead and more pronounced nose on a face that time had simply not been kind to. Deep wrinkles spread out from the corners of his eyes and snow white hair fell from a single part to the middle of his back.

He was one of the People, though Greg lacked his grandfather's skill for placing tribe just by looking.

"For you. If you do not look, you can't find." His shoulders curved forward, his bearing hinting at

stooped. Despite the slow walk, he didn't appear frail on closer inspection.

"Tosa'e netao'setsêhe'oh'tse?"

"Sir?" Maybe he's lost. A.J. hadn't mentioned any other residents on the ranch.

"I asked where were you going, son. Maybe I should have asked, where have you been?"

Hard to be irritated with an old man—particularly when the man reminded him of his grandfather and great-grandfather: two men he'd been privileged to know throughout his youth. They'd taken the place of a father who died,

marrying his ancient culture with modern sensibilities, and a nation they supported even though they did not feel a part of it.

"I'm just building some stalls today, sir." He held out his hand. "Greg Rainwater."

The elder regarded him with something akin to curiosity but shook his hand. "They call me Crane. I'm going for a walk." He pointed past Greg. "To the mountains. I want to listen to the wind."

And he shuffled past, leaving Greg to stare after him, uncertain of whether he should follow or

not. He glanced at the stack of discarded wood. A.J. told him to take breaks when he needed them. Crane had nearly reached the edge of the tree line. Damn spry for an older man.

Hanging the hammer on the edge of a stall, Greg hurried after him. Forced to stretch his legs to catch up, he winced at the cramps threatening his muscles. Running wasn't an option.

Not yet.

He paced himself, never quite closing the gap to Crane. Somehow the old codger managed to stay ahead. Greg found, after a while,

he didn't need to catch up. Sunshine warmed his skin and a breeze, carrying the scent of pine and cedar, kept him cool.

The land beckoned. They walked for nearly an hour before the old man stopped and Greg slowed—the man didn't hold his attention anymore, the great vista beyond did.

"It's beautiful," he whispered.

"Shh." Crane motioned him closer. "Listen."

Greg frowned. He scanned the horizon, not hearing anything, save for the rustle of the trees and the faint sound of water

trickling over rocks.

"Listen to the wind," Crane advised, head tilted back and eyes closed.

Nodding slowly, Greg moved next to him, and he closed his eyes, too. His heart thudded, almost too loud, but breath-by-breath, it calmed until the rustling in the trees drowned out its thump. The water bubbling in its path echoed over the breeze brushing through the leaves.

The unease in his center settled. For the first time, since medics carried his broken body off a plane, his shattered legs held

together with long screws protruding through his skin, his soul quieted and he listened to the wind.

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Georgia scowled at the front door of her grandfather's house. She'd gone to the grocery store along with running errands, dealing with any of a half-a-dozen minor details from paying the yearly taxes on his house to making sure all of the utilities were paid. Logically, she could have logged into a computer and handled all of the accounting online, but her

grandfather didn't believe that was neighborly. A man paid his bills in person.

He preferred to shake the hand of his banker when he turned in his mortgage, exchange pleasantries with the coordinators of his utilities and get to know the man who collected property taxes. Society forgot about people, putting everything at arm's length, and made them faceless behind computer screens, plain white envelopes, and account numbers.

Ezekiel Minninnawah Crane grew up in Freewill. He knew every person who lived there, whether



born within the small community or migrated into it—as so many had. He knew the land, met his wife there. Married her. Raised a family and buried her. One by one, his children fled the confines of the sedate pace of life for bigger cities and faster careers.

All except Georgia. While she wasn't his daughter, she'd reversed the migration trend and fled the confines of the city to settle in her grandparents' home. Once upon a time, she'd loved Freewill. She loved to spend her summers with her favorite set of grandparents, embracing their

traditional values and soaking up the fun. She couldn't put her finger on when the joy turned into obligation, or when obligation became a chokehold on her future, but there she was.

And her grandfather had snuck out. Again.

Tossing her keys on the side table, she walked through the house and checked each room. She wouldn't find him, but better to be systematic in case he merely napped.

Not that the seventy-five-year-old cardiac arrest survivor would nap even if good for him. He'd

spent three months in the hospital following two bypass surgeries for his ailing heart. His surgeon cautioned him to take it easy in the months following his scare.

But does he listen? Not that she could tell. She'd turned down several lucrative job offers in the last year because he needed someone close at hand to look after him. He disagreed with the three home nurses hired to look after him, disappearing on them regularly. Georgia fired them for incompetence, but she had to wonder—if she turned her back for five minutes, her grandfather

wandered off.

Letting herself out of the house, she checked the street. She couldn't see him, but that didn't mean he hadn't gone down to have a cup of coffee with Widow Jones or to play cards with Pete Simpson, the retired social studies teacher who'd relocated to Freewill a couple of years ago. The two men became fast friends during the Native American Heritage Festival and often engaged in enthusiastic arguments about how the oral tradition her grandfather maintained differed from American textbooks.

Resigned to a search pattern, she pulled out her cell phone and scrolled through the contacts. She could knock on doors and call at the same time. Her grandfather had to be somewhere. She checked her watch. He was due for his medication so she had a little over an hour to find him. Pivoting on her heel, she jogged up the steps and through the front door, grabbed his extra bottle of pills.

An hour later, her already bad mood soured further. He wasn't at the Sunrise Café or the Watering Hole. No one at Jensen's Grocery

or Hometown Bakery had seen him and the livestock store owner mentioned he'd been by a lot earlier in the day, but—sorry ma'am—no one had seen him since.

Her feet hurt and her temper unraveled a little more each time someone suggested she call his cell phone. Her grandfather didn't have a cell phone. Didn't believe in collars, leashes, or fences. He called cell phones fences, a fact he pointed out regularly whenever hers rang.

Which admittedly had been less and less as she fell out of touch with friends in Jackson Hole, and

farther away in Seattle. She'd had a promising career in Seattle. The heel on her shoe snapped as she crossed the street, and she nearly ended up on her ass in the gutter. If not for A.J. Turner and his girlfriend, Sheri, crossing the street at the same time, she might have.

A.J. caught her arm and kept her upright. Her face warmed and she tried to straighten before humiliation overwhelmed her, but her ankle twisted and she did go down.

"Hang on." A.J. didn't let her go, and Sheri intervened to remove

the offending shoe. They steadied her and Georgia sighed.

"Thank you. Sorry. I didn't mean to crash into you." She'd known A.J. growing up through a very circuitous route. He'd dated her sister in high school. Despite returning from the Marines a few months before, he didn't spend much time in town anywhere—except the library.

"That sucks." Sheri grimaced at the state of her shoes. Another big city transplant, the brunette didn't ask why the heck Georgia bothered with heels in a place where boots, sneakers and sandals



were commonplace.

"Why the hell are you wearing stilts, Cricket?" A.J. wasn't opposed to commenting on them.

Sliding off her remaining shoe, Georgia stooped to pick them up and sighed. "No one calls me that anymore, A.J., and I'd prefer if we let dead nicknames stay dead."

"Good to know, Cricket." His slow smile completely dismissed her irritation.

Sheri thumped his arm. "Be nice. She's having a bad day." Looping her arm through Georgia's, the librarian drew her over to the sidewalk. Good ol' boy A.J.

followed along like a silent sentinel. "What's wrong?"

"I'm trying to track down my grandfather. He's wandered off without his meds." Her humiliation was complete. She'd broken her heels, lost her grandfather, and now had to rely on an outsider for help.

"Can't you just call him on his cell phone?" Like every other normal person, Sheri's first idea was call him.

"Nope." A.J. drawled. "Old Man Crane doesn't believe in cell phones."

"Oh." Sheri scrunched her nose

and stuck her tongue out at A.J..  
"A lot like you, then."

"Hey, I have a cell phone."

"You just never turn it on." The warm, natural and relaxed banter between them sent a stab of envy right through Georgia's breast. She wanted a relationship like theirs, but who the hell would she ever meet in Freewill? Especially when the sleepy little town was the last place she wanted to settle.

"That part's true." A.J. grinned, his entire focus on Sheri, and Georgia felt as faded as the sidewalk pavement. "As for your granddad, Cricket, he's at the

ranch—or he was a couple of hours ago. He was out walking.”

Her blood boiled all over again. A.J.'s ranch sat a good ten miles outside of Freewill. Her grandfather didn't drive. He'd managed to get around most of his life on two legs and didn't see the point keeping a car after he retired from full-time work—which meant he'd walked those ten miles.

He must have left right after she went out to run errands.

“Did he look okay?” She was going to kill him. The batty old fool took too many risks with his

health.

"Looked fine to me. Feel free to head out there, if you like." A.J. frowned. "Unless you think something's really wrong and I can go right now."

"No." If she sent A.J. Turner to fetch her grandfather, one of two things was certain to happen. The old man would be fine, but furious at her, and he'd give A.J. an earful about her overprotective vapors. Or he'd convince A.J. to never tell her if he showed up out there again. Neither was an acceptable outcome.

"Thank you, but I can go. I'll just

run back and get my car." And change my shoes, maybe take some aspirin. "You really sure you don't mind if I drive out there?"

"Not at all. We're going to the movies and a proper dinner. Sheri has a cell, if you need us." They paused long enough to give her the number and Georgia waved them on. The last thing she needed to do was spoil anyone else's day just because hers had been ruined.

She might be overprotective and her grandfather didn't like it when she fussed, but his first surgery happened after it had taken over two hours for someone

to find him after his heart attack. He could have died. Time was muscle during a cardiac episode.

The doctor's words repeated in her head over and over. Time is muscle. The longer it took for someone to find him, the greater his chances of not surviving. Her bare feet were sore after she jogged home and changed into a pair of loose sneakers. The drive to A.J.'s took forever, and she scanned the fields and woods on either side of the road on the off chance her grandfather had already headed home.

By the time she arrived at the

ranch, her foul temper took a backseat to genuine worry. She checked the house, the barn, and walked in circles around the paddocks. He wasn't there.

Her heart in her throat, she checked her phone—maybe someone had called or texted to say he went home, but the cell remained silent and blank. She turned around when she heard a faint sound and stared as her grandfather walked toward her, a bronze-red god at his side.

The men spoke to each other and didn't seem aware of her at all.



Grandfather is fine.

Relief hit first and staggered her. Squaring her shoulders, she marched toward them, her temper resurrected. She didn't know his new friend, or why they were together, but she planned to give them both a piece of her mind.

Her grandfather's companion glanced up, noticed her, and for the second time that day the world wobbled—only it wasn't a broken heel, but the potential to break her heart that rocked her world.

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The beautiful woman marched straight for them and all the blood in Greg's body shot south. He'd spent most of his time on the ranch or at Mike's Place. The women he knew were therapists, Marines, sailors—or A.J.'s girlfriend. This lady, with her mane of midnight black hair, sun-kissed skin, and soft pink lips, reminded him of all he'd been missing, a sprite of nature given living, breathing form.

"I'm sorry, son," Crane muttered and picked up his pace. "Georgia...."

"Don't you 'Georgia' me." The beautiful sprite turned into a fire-breathing dragon, right down to the heat flaming in her eyes. "You're supposed to be taking it easy, Grandpa. This—?" She waved her arms toward the ranch and included Greg in her sweep. "Is the complete opposite of taking it easy."

"I'm fine. Georgia, this is—"

"I don't care who this is." She exhaled a hard breath and looked at Greg. "No offense. I'm sure you're very nice. I know you served, and we're grateful. But this is my grandfather you're

dragging all over hell and beyond, not one of your Marines."

"Georgia Crane." Icy astonishment froze the older man's tone and he scowled.

"No. You're an hour late. You didn't tell me where you were going. You didn't leave a note. I've looked for you everywhere. If I hadn't run into A.J., I wouldn't know where you were now." She held up a bottle and shook it. "You're supposed to take this, on schedule, three times a day. You can't skip."

Anger tightened the lines around her eyes and her mouth

had a hard, pinched look. Greg hadn't encouraged the older man to take a long walk, but he hadn't discouraged him either.

"It was good to meet you, Greg." Crane turned away from his granddaughter pointedly and offered his hand. Greg shook it. "Don't forget to keep listening."

"I won't. You two all right to get back to town?" He didn't doubt for an instant the little firecracker could handle it, but in her current frame of mind, they might need a mediator.

"We're fine." The older man didn't seem hurried. "Georgia, this

is Greg Rainwater."

"Mr. Rainwater." So tightly wound up, she said his name like a dismissal.

"Miss Crane," he replied, echoing her prim tone.

"Grandpa, come on. You need your meds and probably something to eat with them. We can pick up sandwiches on the way." She may as well have acted like Greg didn't exist, but since the pair seemed likely to engage in an argument at any moment, he left it alone.

After loading her grandfather in the car and walking around to the passenger side, she set her

fierce gaze on him again. It raked him from head to toe before she gave him a grudging nod, although her expression didn't ease one iota.

Greg stared a long time after the car disappeared into the distance. And he listened.

If only he could be certain what he listened for.

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The slam of a truck door jerked him out of sleep. His chest burned with every breath he took and sweat soaked his sheets. It didn't matter how many months passed;

the nightmares hadn't stopped. His legs hurt. Rubbing his thigh, he pushed a thumb into the top of a hard knot. Cramps seized his overtired muscles and added to his agony.

Teeth clenched, he refused to scream. Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, he flattened his bare feet to the cool wood floor. It helped, but only a little. He'd undergone months of physical therapy after the surgeons deemed him fit enough, but muscle atrophy was a bitch.

Force of will got him to his feet, and he staggered toward the



bathroom, using the wall and dresser for support. He had pain meds the doctors prescribed, but he'd tired of living under their fog. Back and forth he paced until his rebellious muscles calmed.

If only the wind could help with the pain.

## Chapter Two

Greg braced the post for A.J. He'd finished most of the interior on the barn, but they decided to add a new run-in to one of the larger pastures for horses not in the breeding stock. A.J. explained his reasons, but Greg knew motorcycles and cars, not animals. Sink a post? That he could do. A week in Wyoming and the foggy haze separating him from the world dissipated some.

"Sheri's coming out tonight."  
A.J. grunted as he packed the

hole. They'd sunk the post three feet deep and used a bare amount of cement to hold it in place. The rest would be done naturally.

"I'll get lost." Greg didn't need a map drawn out for him. The bunkhouse had another two to three days of work on it, but the weather outdoors was nice enough. He didn't mind grabbing a sleeping bag and camping out. Even the cooler nights were a welcome respite.

"You don't have to get lost, just...give us a few hours." The man grinned and surveyed their work. "Okay, let it go."

Greg released the post and retreated a step. They both waited to see if it would lean. Even the slightest tilt and they'd have to repack it. They needed all four posts to be rock steady when they added the roof or it would prove an exercise in futility.

"Oorah." They exhaled in unison when the post remained ramrod straight.

"One down, three to go." A.J. glanced at his watch. "We can call it after that. Probably be time for Old Man Crane to show up."

"Sounds good." They worked well together, but that came from

years of service in the field. It helped that neither felt the urge to fill in the silence with empty chatter. They only spoke when they had something to say. "I may work on the bunkhouse later." If he were busy, then he wouldn't feel compelled to follow the old man on his wanderings as he had every single day for a week.

It always started out the same. The old Indian would appear behind Greg wherever he worked, as though an illusion conjured from the air itself. He'd offer an enigmatic greeting and clap Greg's shoulder before beginning his

hike. He didn't plan to follow him, but after meeting his granddaughter—and witnessing the heat of her temper—he appreciated why the old man 'took off' on his little jaunts.

"Save it. We get these posts set today. We can finish the bunkhouse tomorrow. We'll get rain this weekend. Save the interior stuff for that." They worked at opposite corners, using posthole diggers to clear the way for the next set of posts.

"We'll see." Greg nodded.

"How is Old Man Crane? Georgia was worried about him the other

day." Apparently today A.J. had something to say.

"He's fine." He kept his comments about the harridan of a granddaughter to himself. A woman that beautiful shouldn't be so hostile. But even thinking about Georgia sent a dark thrill through him. She'd be a wildcat in bed, a hellion, and it would take a strong man to tame her—hostility had never seemed so sexy.

"Don't let him overdo it. I know he likes to roam, everyone does, but Georgia worries."

"She could be a little kinder to him. He's a grown man, not an

irresponsible child." It came out a lot harsher than he intended, but her dismissal stung. She'd berated her elder as though he were a hooligan out vandalizing property rather than a man out for a walk.

"Sure, but you don't know the whole story." A.J. finished his hole and retrieved a bottle of water from a cooler they kept stocked. He tossed one to Greg and opened the second one to drink. "Old Man Crane had a couple of back-to-back heart attacks last year. The first one wasn't too bad, and they did surgery and corrected the issue. Seemed pretty



straightforward. The second one hit him the day she took him home. They nearly didn't get him to the hospital on time, and he took months to recover."

Greg took a long drink. He understood months in a hospital bed and difficult recovery. It made the older man's choices clearer, more sensible. "He seems to be recovering well."

"He is, but he doesn't follow medical instructions. When Georgia took him home that day, she did it because he'd insisted. He checked himself out against medical advice. She didn't find out

that part until after the second attack." A.J. tossed the empty bottle into the bucket they used to gather their trash while they worked.

The explanation made her over-the-top response to a walk clearer and more sensible. "I'll keep an eye on him." He liked Crane. Like A.J., the man didn't say much, but Greg found value in every nugget he shared.

"I appreciate it. Now give me a hand with this one...."

Conversation over, they spent the next two hours getting the last posts into place. Fortunately, the

next three stood as erect as the first one they'd sunk. A.J. packed away the tools and headed to the house, leaving Greg alone to wait for Crane.

Sure enough, the old man walked up the long drive toward the ranch house. Greg could ask him about his granddaughter and if she knew where he was, or he could leave it be. Crane didn't behave senile.

"You look like you swallowed a toad." The old man leaned on a walking stick and studied Greg.

"Wondering if you told your granddaughter you were off for a walk." And if she'd be coming to

fetch him again. Maybe he could apologize for his contribution to her frustration.

"It's possible." Crane nodded toward the woods. "Shall we go see what the wind has to say today?"

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Georgia glared at the woods. She'd seen her grandfather shuffle off with his new best friend and wondered if she should follow after him or not. When he proved recalcitrant to obey doctor's orders on any level, she'd decided to follow him. Every day

he walked out to the ranch and met up with the gorgeous Greg Rainwater. Sheri had filled her in on A.J.'s addition to the ranch over coffee at the café.

Well, she filled in Bea at the café, and Georgia eavesdropped shamelessly from one table away. Rainwater had been hurt in Afghanistan or Iraq—Sheri hadn't been sure which and didn't want to press A.J. for details—and he'd recovered in Texas for months. When discharged, A.J. offered him a place to stay and to work. Apparently, A.J. planned to bring in a few more retired or

recovering Marines. That got the entire café chattering. Is he going to open a facility like the one Sheri described in Texas? Would he close his ranch? Where would they put them all?

Lots of questions and even more offers to help. Freewill might not be overly fond of strangers or big city folk who wanted to change them, but since one of their golden sons had put forth the idea, they'd already suggested taking it to the Mayor and town council.

Exasperation warred with concern and Georgia adjusted her

hiking boots. At least she'd dressed for walking this time. She hadn't followed them before, not when they went together. Trusting the Marine to make sure her grandfather made it out to the ranch wasn't difficult, but what were they doing out there?

Why every day? What can he talk to this guy about that he can't with me? And why did it have to be such a long and arduous walk for her grandfather? If he asked, she could drive him out there. Or take him for a walk herself.

Shutting the car off and jerking her keys out of the ignition, she

wasn't ready when A.J. thumped the top of her car and peered at her through the open driver's window. "Hey, Cricket."

Her heart slammed against her ribs and she barely swallowed her scream. Closing her eyes, she tried to force slow, steady breaths, but adrenaline fueled her erratic pulse.

"Hey, A.J." The words came out a hell of a lot weaker than she intended.

"Your grandfather went for a walk with Greg. You want some coffee while you wait?"

"No." She shook her head. "I



was...." I'm what? About to follow my grandfather and his friend through the woods to spy on them? Yeah, that sounds mature. "I thought I'd leave a note." Will he buy that feeble lie?

"I'll do it. What did you want to tell him?" All earnest cowboy, he squatted down and tipped his hat back to look at her.

"To give me a call when he's ready to go home. I'll come by, pick him up." Yep. Still came out feeble and weak-minded. She sighed. "A.J., what are they doing?"

He grinned. "They're talking,

Cricket. About...whatever it is that they want to talk about."

"But why does he keep doing this? He knows how sick he's been. He keeps this up and he risks another heart attack, or worse, and your place is hell and gone from the hospital. If he collapses in the woods...."

"Hey." A.J. covered her hand with his. "I get it, but Greg's a solid guy. If anything happens, he'll bring your grandfather in, trust me. That's part of the reason he goes with him, so he has some company. You can't pen a man up and expect him to still feel like a

man."

"I'm not trying to pen him up, I'm protecting him...." She clenched her hands on the steering wheel. "He's my grandfather." His heart attacks scared the hell out of her.

"Then let him be. You live with him. You check his medicine. You see him every night and every morning, but he's a man, Georgia. He raised you. He raised your daddy. You think he wants you looking after him like he's the kid?"

She couldn't fault the honest assessment. From anyone else she

might have resented it, but A.J. had been her first crush so many years ago. She used to think he hung the moon and the stars. When he'd dated her sister, Georgia would sneak out the window onto the roof every night to see if he kissed her goodnight after bringing her home. In some ways, she wished she was still a twelve-year-old, daydreaming about her first kiss and picturing the cowboy at the window.

"You think I'm overprotective, too." Letting go of the steering wheel, she leaned her head against the seat. "Maybe I am, but

he's all I have left, y'know?"

"Yeah, I do. But you have friends and a life. He wants to live his and maybe if you live yours some...it will help you both. I'll keep an eye on him, too. Everyone does—you have to know that. Everyone wants to help. You just have to let them, Cricket."

"Ugh, could you please forget that nickname?" She groaned and scrubbed a hand over her face. In two syllables, he stripped away the last fifteen years and she was a pimply-faced teen again, eager for his approval.

"Nah, I like it. It suited you, or

it did. Don't you remember being a happy little thing? Cheerful and chatty? What happened to that Georgia?" Real concern reflected in his eyes.

"She grew up, found out life is a bitch, and spends most of her time fighting with an old man to keep him around. It's hard to be cheerful and chatty when you're doing that." Wow, bitter much? She hadn't meant to be so harsh, but it came out that way. "And why the hell am I telling you all this?"

"Cause you think I'm cute." He tapped a finger to her chin. "Buck up. Go have some fun. Anytime you

need us to pick him up or make sure he gets home, we'll do it."

"You know, my sister is stupid." Georgia never understood why Risa dumped A.J. right after high school, but she'd planned to head to a big school back East and said A.J. was a small-town guy with small-town dreams.

"She wanted different things, Cricket. We had no illusions about each other. Besides, I have Sheri now." He patted her car. "Now git gone, and have some fun. Go buy yourself something. I hear all the ladies like to do that." He strolled away and she whistled to get his

attention.

"A.J.? It's good to have you home." And she meant it.

"Good to be home." He touched the brim of his hat and went on about his business.

Starting the car, Georgia reversed onto the two-lane road and turned toward Freewill. Maybe she would go find something to do.

Her conscience twinged, worry for her grandfather so second nature she didn't know how to not be concerned. Double-checking her cell phone, she made sure the ringer was on. She didn't want to miss the call to pick him up. Still,



with the empty time in front of her, what fun could she have? Maybe the library has a book or three on how to have fun.

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"She worries about you." Greg watched her car pull away with regret. She'd talked to A.J. and then left. He'd wanted another glimpse of the fire in her scornful eyes.

"She needs to live." Crane turned and started walking again. "Neither of us died and she needs to stop acting like we did."

Together, they walked for an

hour until Crane found another spot to look at the uninterrupted view of the valley and the mountains beyond. Even in summer, white dusted the distant peaks. Settling against a sun-warmed rock, Greg closed his eyes and breathed in the air, as far from the sun-baked deserts and brutal, war torn landscape as a man could get.

"You didn't die over there, either." Crane spoke so softly Greg thought he misheard. But he opened his eyes to find the old man studying him. "It's time you started living again, too."

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Every night began and ended the same. He collapsed into bed too exhausted to think or feel anything. He always woke, his legs cramping and the sound of his bones shattering in his ears. Jerking upright, he stared at the wall and tried to get his breathing under control. The cramp in his right thigh felt like someone turned a screw into his leg—and he knew exactly how that felt. Pounding the rebellious muscle with his fist, he embraced the bruising sensation.

Like Crane said, he didn't die  
over there.

Death didn't hurt.

# Chapter Three

"Seriously?" Greg eyed A.J. and Sheri across the table. They'd dragged him into Freewill for dinner. He'd tried to beg off, but neither would hear of it. Apparently the evening conversation consisted of take-Greg-out-and-tell-him-horror-stories. "You two met via a sex date?"

Sheri's face colored deep pink and she laughed. "It wasn't a sex date, exactly."

"No, it was a sex date." A.J.

rubbed the back of her neck, amusement curving the corners of his mouth. "It just helped that we became a lot more than the sum of that date."

Tipping his beer bottle, Greg took a long drink rather than respond. He didn't have words to answer that.

"Huh, speechless. That's a sight I didn't think I'd ever see." A.J.'s easy grin didn't falter.

Fine. They brought it up. "Where did you find a sex dating service?" Sure, he'd seen the porn ads on late night television and had been caught in one or two

pornados on line, but what dating service promised sex ...legally?

"I didn't, Luke did. He and a bunch of the guys signed up for one set up by a Madame Evangeline. Or Madame Eve."

Greg's right eyelid twitched. "So it's an escort service?" What else would it be with a name like that running it?

"No." Sheri leaned forward. Her voice dropped despite their corner table in a nearly empty restaurant. Apparently, they'd arrived at an off hour for dinner, or in the lull between, according to A.J. "Madame Eve allows you to

meet the perfect person for you— matches two people looking for the same things. It's called a one-night stand because both parties want sex, sure. But sometimes they want different things or they want a connection they can't find in their everyday life. It takes a lot of the pressure off and you can have a good time. If you're lucky...." She glanced at A.J., and he met her look with the smile of a genuinely happy guy.

Uh huh. Considering she was a lady, he managed to stifle his snort of derision. "That's great, glad it worked out for you. But I'm



good." He stretched his legs, sore from the long hike. Each day, he and Crane went farther. Between hiking and the labor on the ranch, Greg grew stronger. Regular labor proved far more satisfying than physical therapy, too.

"It did work out for us, but it's more than just coupling up." A.J. paused while the waitress cleared away their appetizers and delivered their dinners—thick steaks and baked potatoes for the men, and a grilled chicken salad for Sheri. "It's about living again."

For the second time in as many weeks, someone advised him to

live again. "Do I look like I think I'm not alive?" Irritation scraped his nerves. Old Man Crane, he understood. The man had shamanistic leanings, counseled others, and the time together helped Crane as much as it did Greg.

"I think you've spent months in hell recovering from some seriously fucked up injuries." A.J. studied him. "You grabbed onto my invitation like a drowning man and I'm here for you. Recovery comes in steps...."

"Last time I checked, Westwood was the shrink." He clamped down

on the urge to get up and walk out. A.J. meant well. Sheri stayed focused on her salad, tension reflected in her tight grip on the fork. They couldn't understand what went through his head or his soul. Hell, he didn't understand it.

Georgia flashed across his mind's eye, but he shut the train of thought down. She might be gorgeous, but she didn't like him. Better to not borrow trouble.

"He is. But I'm your friend. I want you to have options to explore. To help you make a life outside and to heal." A.J. tapped the steak with his knife. "Options

that include more than helping me rebuild the ranch. If you want a life here, a clean slate, a fresh start—this is one way to kick start that. But it's just one idea."

"One idea." Greg grimaced. "I appreciate it."

"No, you don't, but you might if you ever decide to investigate it."

"Maybe—can we drop it now?" He didn't need to book a sex date.

Sheri put a hand on A.J.'s arm. "Sure we can. Because we're having dinner."

He slid a glance at his girl and his expression softened. "Okay, we're having dinner. Miller and

Jones are going to be another month or so before they join us...."

Glad for the change of subject, Greg cut into the steak. He had plans after dinner.

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Georgia stared unseeingly at the words in the book. Her grandfather watched a baseball game from his favorite armchair and played cards on his television tray. "I'm not disappearing sitting right here, Georgia. Why don't you go out and have some fun tonight?"

"Because I don't ever know what

you're going to do."

"Tonight, I'm going to play my solitaire for an hour and probably fall asleep watching the game." He eyed her before laying out another three and moving a black jack to cover a red queen. "I don't go walking after midnight."

"Oh, you're cute." She snapped her book shut and ignored the twinkle in his eyes.

"Ahh, Georgia. You're a young woman, you need to go out and find yourself a good young man and make me some gorgeous little great-grandbabies. All this fussing over me isn't doing you any good."

"I'm not fussing." She put her book on the table and walked into their kitchen. Separated from the living area by an open half wall and bar, she could still see the television and talk. "I worry about you. You don't take your medication, you go for long walks when you're not supposed to, always flouting what Doctor Jensen told you to do." She fished around in the freezer and pulled out a pint of ice cream.

Her go-to frustration food.

"You're fussing. Doctor Jensen told me to reduce my stress, exercise, and come in for regular

checkups."

"You're walking miles and miles every day..." She spread her arms wide. "That's too much."

"A man has to walk until he finds himself." Pausing his card game, he studied her. "I'm at the end of my life, Georgia. All the worry in the world will not make me young again. But it is making you old."

A knock at the door surprised her and she set her ice cream down to answer it. Greg Rainwater stood on the other side of the screen door looking deliciously sexy in a pair of jeans and a button-down, with his beautiful



black hair falling down to his shoulders.

"What are you doing here?" At my house. At night. Looking like sin.

"Good evening, Miss Crane. I'm here to see your—"

"Is that Greg? Let him in and don't be rude!" Her grandfather rose and waved him inside. "Come in, come in."

Her sour mood didn't improve with Greg's apologetic smile or the way her grandfather shook his hand.

"I didn't know we were expecting company." She had no

idea what she would have done if she'd known—perhaps changed her clothes and not worn her ragged sweats, torn T-shirt and a pair of socks that let her big toes peek through the top. She might have even taken her hair out of a ponytail.... I don't know? Put on make-up?

"You didn't ask." Her grandfather sounded positively gleeful.

For his part, Greg actually looked ill at ease. "I'm sorry," he murmured earning serious points for the genuine apology. "Your grandfather invited me to come by

and watch some of the game with him tonight."

"Come in, get a beer—we have some in the fridge behind the milk." Her grandfather avoided her eyes when he issued the invitation, because he wasn't supposed to have alcohol. And it shouldn't even be in the house.

"Help yourself." She motioned. "I'll just take my book and...."

"You could join us," Greg offered.

"No, Grandpa wants guy time." That couldn't have been clearer. "So enjoy. I'm going to change and take myself out for the evening. I

think there's a new band at the Watering Hole."

Scooping up her book, she fled into her bedroom. The last thing she wanted to do was go out. Her grandfather didn't want her there. It didn't matter that she'd turned down two fantastic job opportunities to stay on in Freewill and look after him. He'd found his new friend.

Dampness splashed against her hands, and she wiped away the tears she hadn't realized she shed. Frustration welling, she grabbed a black dress off the rack and ran a brush through her

hair. Light cosmetics would have to do and in ten minutes she had her keys and purse in hand, ready to go.

Greg rose to his feet when she returned. She refused to look at him. Being turned on by her replacement was not how she planned to spend the rest of her evening. "I'll be late." She announced. "Grandpa, you have two pills to take at nine. Don't forget them. Maybe Mr. Rainwater can remind you."

"Of course...."

She pivoted and headed out without looking back. Her stomach

sank. She had no desire to go to the Watering Hole and even less desire to listen to whatever band headlined, but she'd pushed herself out the door, so off she went. A hand caught her car door and opened it for her, and she let out a small shriek of surprise.

"Easy," Greg murmured. "I just wanted to tell you again, I'm sorry for barging in tonight. I honestly thought he would have told you I was coming."

Dammit, now I have to look at him. Glancing up, she summoned a small smile. Did he really have to be so pretty to look at? "Really,

it's okay. Sorry to be such a bitch. It's been a long year and he really likes you. So go inside, enjoy the game and just—please make sure he takes his meds when he's supposed to."

He didn't let go of her door. "You weren't a bitch. You're worried. I just wanted you to know I get it."

"Cool." Okay, she needed a way to eject from the situation before she made an utter fool out of herself. "Have a good night. I meant what I said about being late."

"I'll stay until you get home. If

you run into trouble or need a ride, call me." He held out a small slip of paper. "And you can call me when we're walking, too. I'll have my phone on, so you can reach him or I can call if I need help with him."

A peace offering in the form of ten digits written on a sticky note impressed her. "Thank you. I'll text you from the car so you have my number."

Greg smiled. "I'd like that."

Oh, eject. Time to go. Not hitting on him in my grandfather's driveway. She slid into the car and waved goodbye. He closed the



door behind her and stood there until she sent him the text message. A lame little, hey, this is me. She felt the weight of his gaze all the way to the street. Whether she really wanted to go or not, she had to.

Glancing over one more time, she waved again and accelerated down the street. She liked him. She didn't want to like him.

But she did.

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He had the bunkhouse conversion nearly complete. The little house would have three

bedrooms, two full baths and a kitchen area attached to a sitting room. More cottage-like than a bunkhouse—but they still called it a bunkhouse.

He'd been in Freewill a month. Four weeks and, bit by bit, he was discovering himself again. Sleep didn't prove as elusive, hard labor restored his physical strength, and the almost daily walks with Crane restored his spiritual health. Even the old man looked better. They pushed each other, talked at length—Crane even managed to get Greg to talk about his injuries, no small feat.

But Greg couldn't figure Georgia out. He saw her nearly every day. One day she blew hot, the next she gave him frostbite. And try as he might, he couldn't get the image of her in that black dress out of his mind.

She plagued him. He didn't want to overstep and risk insulting Crane, but thoughts about the woman crawled through his system like a fever and left him hot and uncomfortable and still he couldn't get enough of her. He made excuses to swing by Crane's place on the off chance he might see her.

She'd stopped coming after him every day, trusting Greg or A.J. to drive her grandfather home. He skipped going to Crane's for dinner and the game, because A.J. and Sheri were off for the weekend, and he'd promised to keep an eye on the ranch. A feeble excuse, but it worked. He wasn't up to keeping his hands to himself where Georgia was concerned.

Maybe I just need to get laid. He thought about the dinner a few weeks before and the service A.J. and Sheri had mentioned. Rising, he went to find his laptop, packed away in his duffel. He hadn't had

much use for it since he arrived.

What the hell—Crane's right. It's time to start living again. Relying on the phone line and a local modem to get on the Internet, Greg managed to finish most of a beer before he loaded the website up and scanned the rules and terms. What could signing up for one night of unfettered pleasure hurt? Maybe it might scrub the difficult woman from his brain.

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He outran the dreams, waking before it got so bad his legs

seized up. Or maybe his brutalized muscles had finally grown strong enough that he didn't find himself writhing in agony or crying like a little girl. But he was still awake. Rising, he paced over to the window. The ranch was silent at night—well, silent save for the scurrying of smaller forest animals, the occasional snort and stomp of the horses in their paddocks, and the whistling whisper of the wind.

Try as he might, he couldn't hear a damn thing it had to say.

# Chapter Four

Four weeks later....

The Marines they'd been expecting, Miller and Jones, had arrived the week before. They were paler than the last time Greg'd seen them, and Miller didn't interact much—less than ten words total since his arrival, and most of those the day the bus delivered them. Jones—the far more gregarious of the two—never shut up.

Greg enjoyed their company in small doses, but A.J. seemed to

take all of it in stride. Nothing ruffled him. Not even when Greg let him know he'd need at least twenty-four hours off. It took a month, but A.J.'s Madame Eve came through with a date for him. All he needed was to make the arrangements and confirm the details. Avoiding any friendly advice—or friendlier ribbing—Greg skipped mentioning why he needed the downtime.

A.J. didn't ask and saved him from the explanation. Renting a cabin at the Misbegotten Gaines seemed like a good plan. He hadn't cooked in a long time but craved



the privacy of keeping others away for the night. Picking up food to fix, he planned a simple dinner, one he could cook on an open grill. If his goal was a one-night stand with someone he'd never met and likely wouldn't see again, he wanted to be selfish and not share her with anyone else.

He spent the last couple of hours before he needed to head to the cabin to begin dinner walking with Old Man Crane. They went farther and farther each day, neither of them tiring out as easily. Unlike during most of their walks, Crane didn't say much. He

seemed preoccupied. Not that Greg could blame him, since his mind wasn't on their walk, or the woods, or the mountain air. He wondered about the night in front of him.

The best part of Wyoming spread out in front of him, all natural vistas, open land, and freedom. When patriotic songs were sung, they listed the grasslands, the open prairie, and the purple mountains majesty. Wyoming had all of it. The wide-open spaces gave his restless spirit a chance to heal from bruises he hadn't even recognized

he sustained.

The land and the old man both helped heal his soul and body. He didn't have a firm grip on what his future held yet, but he knew it would be there, in Wyoming, maybe helping A.J. with the plans for his ranch. Plans he hadn't shared either, but anyone with eyes could see he'd begun making long-term changes to his ranch. He'd refitted the barn, refitted the bunkhouse, and in the next two weeks, they'd start construction on a new cabin.

He managed to avoid taking Crane home, since Sheri waited at

the ranch when they returned. She had to go into Freewill and offered to take him. Greg appreciated it. He didn't need another run in with Georgia before tonight. But once the thought of her returned, he couldn't get her out of his head either.

Not the way a man should be planning an evening with a woman. Even a stranger deserved to have his full attention. He borrowed A.J.'s truck and drove over. The Gaines had given him a cabin on the outskirts near the lake, remote and private so he wouldn't

have to worry about anyone 'happening' upon him and his date.

Grill ready and dinner prepared to be cooked, he retreated to the porch and studied the landscape. The rest of the world was so far away, making the place close to perfect. Alone in the woods, with only the wind and the water for company, he almost regretted his plan to share the place.

"You have to be kidding me," Georgia's voice snapped through his reverie, a bullet crack in the silence.

He swung around and found her standing at the edge of the wood,

her white tank top seeming to glow against her skin. "Georgia?"

Her hair fell in a long, untamed cascade over one shoulder, and her mouth hung open in shock. "No. This is not happening." She shook her head and pivoted, marching back the way she'd come.

Greg set his beer down and jogged after her. "Hey, wait, where are you going?"

"I came to the wrong cabin. It's not a big deal." She kept walking and he pushed himself to catch up.

"Hey, Georgia." He caught her arm, forcing her to stop. "What are you doing out here?" Shouldn't

she be at home, watching her grandfather?

"Is that really any of your business?" She turned to look at him and tugged her arm free in the same motion. Heat flickered in her eyes. They were a true black—he couldn't see where the pupil ended and the iris began. Unearthly and absolutely stunning in the same breath.

"No, probably not." He didn't know why it was important to him, but he couldn't get the woman off his mind and then she appeared at the cabin.

"Well, thank you for that." She

blinked rapidly.

"For what?"

"For being honest." A smile softened her usually hard expression.

Getting a read on the woman was impossible, but probably not worth mentioning. "Okay. So why are you here?"

Folding her arms, she shrugged. "Why are you here?"

Yeah, he didn't really want to answer that question. "Does it matter?"

"You want to know why I'm here. You tell me. I'll tell you. Tit for tat." Challenge filled her eyes and



she lifted both brows, daring him. She apparently didn't think he would answer.

"I have a date." He'd never walked away from a challenge in his life and today wouldn't be the first time.

"Oh." Distress tightened her expression. "Oh. Crap. I have to go." She whirled again and paced away, but in the direction of the woods, not the lodge.

"Miss Crane—Georgia—what are you doing?"

"I don't know. It's a flight reflex." She slid her hands into her pockets and hesitated before

looking at him.

"A flight reflex from what?" He edged closer to her.

"From—probably making a huge mistake. Huge. Big. Very large. I need to go." And she took off again, heading once again deeper into the woods.

Greg couldn't help it, whether because of her frazzled expression or the fact that she kept biting her lip, he laughed.

"Why are you laughing?" She swung around, staring at him.

"You're funny." He grinned. "You're temperamental, but you're passionate." Walking toward her,

he kept his hands loose at his sides. "You're loyal, and you're fiercely protective of what you love." She was like a wild, exotic beast—easily provoked. "But you're afraid of what I might see if you stay."

"I'm not afraid of you." Her chin came up.

"I didn't say you were afraid of me." He towered over her. She was tall, lean and athletic, but she still only came up to his chin. In her heels, that night at her house, she'd been able to look him in the eye. There was something heartbreakingly fragile about her,

but he couldn't put his finger on it. "Of course, that begs the question of why are you running?"

"I'm not running. I'm standing right here." Her chest rose and fell with short, hard pants of breath and he let his gaze skim over her. The white tank top didn't disguise the dusky rose nipples beneath the fabric or their tense state.

What would she do if he kissed her? Where the hell did that thought come from? He frowned. He had a date. One he probably should be waiting for at his rented cabin rather than standing in the

middle of the woods arguing with one of the most incomprehensibly stubborn women he'd ever met.

"You're angry." The belated observation dragged him to the present and he forced his gaze upward from her breasts to meet her stare. The challenge in her eyes vanished, replaced by curiosity.

"No. Frustrated." He offered a little more honesty for her bucket. "I get that you don't like me going out with your grandfather every day. I get that you resent my friendship with him. What I don't understand is why you resent me?"

"Have you looked at you?" Spreading her hands, Georgia made a show of looking at him from head to toe. "I mean seriously, have you? You're perfect. You're good-looking, you're a Marine, took an injury in the line of duty, and now you're here, helping A.J.—the town hero—build a dream. My grandfather thinks the world of you, and he'd rather spend time with you than me. I'm attracted to my own replacement. What's not to resent?"

"We're going to come back to the bit about attraction in a

minute." He had to swallow an urge to chuckle again because, as amusing as she might be, he really didn't think she'd respond well to having him laugh in her face a second time. "Your grandfather isn't replacing you with me. He's helping me, something he seems to excel at doing and wants to do. You won't let him help you anymore and he needs to help people. It's how he's made."

"And I'm just the bitch who makes his life harder?"

"No, you love him. You're concerned." Withdrawing a step before he kissed her, Greg leaned

on one of the trees. The rough bite of the bark on his arm comforted and grounded him at the same time. "Kind of like he's concerned about you."

"I'm fine."

"Uh huh." He grinned at her rapid response. "You're so fine you're marching off into the woods to who-knows-where after coming to the wrong cabin. You're so fine you're trying to pick a fight with me."

Georgia's mouth opened and snapped shut again. "Oh, my God." She sighed and scrubbed a hand against her face. "I am."



"Hmm-hmm. So, you wanna back this up a little?" He held out his hand. "I'm Greg Rainwater."

She stared at his hand long enough that he worried she might refuse to shake it. After an eternity, she slid her hand into his. The friction of their palms touching was electric, but he admired the strength in her grip. "I'm Georgia Crane." She met his gaze. "I'm your date."

Oh. Hell.

What the hell was I thinking? Georgia stared at the tops of her hiking boots. The date called for

dressing comfortable—date being a loose term. She planned a night for some balls-to-the-walls sex action. She signed up to get laid without any of the strings or ties to her hometown, her grandfather, or all the good choices gone horribly awry.

Looking up at Greg's kind expression stirred lust inside of her. She'd managed so far not to throw herself at him—not even when he admitted to being at the cabin to meet his date.

Me. Clearing her throat, she withdrew her hand and tucked her fingers into the pockets of her

jeans. "Surprised?"

"Yeah." He looked more intrigued than turned off by the prospect of sexing her up. "You signed up with Madame Eve?"

"Guilty. And I might even be a little embarrassed by that fact, except—" The guy was a pure masculine aphrodisiac, hard-bodied, gorgeous and, oh God, she was supposed to have sex with him. Liquid heat raced through her blood and her face must have turned red because it scalded like fire.

"I did, too." Greg raked a hand through his hair. She loved that

he wore it long. She'd never have guessed that he'd been a Marine with hair like that, but evidently he'd been out long enough to get away from the military cut. "Why don't we go to the cabin, make some food, have some beer, and talk?"

The earth opening up and swallowing her whole didn't seem to be a viable option, so she nodded. Falling into step with him, she tried to calm her pounding heart without a hell of a lot of success.

"You okay?" Even his voice was attractive, deep and throaty. He

could have her out of her clothes by reading the telephone book out loud.

"I don't know. I show up for a date that I made online to have sex with a guy and I immediately go out of my way to antagonize that guy. I mean, I'm not this person—this constantly bitching, pissed-off woman." She couldn't even put her finger on when it had happened. I'm going to have sex with you. Nothing to be worried about there. I wanted an amazing lay and I got you, and I have no idea if I can live up to my own expectations.

He hesitated at the porch steps. Pausing, she watched him take the steps one at a time, moving with absolute precision and care. She hadn't noticed it before, the way he moved. Sure she'd noticed his body. The first day she met him he hadn't had a shirt on—it would have been hard to miss that body. Since then though, she'd done her level best to not notice him.

"You're not a constantly bitching, pissed-off woman." He flipped open a cooler and pulled out two bottles of beer. Popping the lid off of one, he held it out to her.

"You don't seem the type to say

something to placate another person." At least, she hadn't gotten that impression. She couldn't imagine her grandfather liking a kiss-ass.

"I'm not. I thought you were tough that first day. Hard core. Maybe a little over the top." He spoke with care as though choosing his words, but she heard the bite of something unspoken. He washed down whatever he didn't say with a swig of beer. He gestured to the slant-back chairs. She sank down into one and he took the other.

"Tough. Hard core. Over the

top." She repeated the descriptions. "You make me sound like a Marine, except for that last part."

"Some of my best friends are Marines, so there's nothing wrong with being tough or hard core in my book. Hell, even over-the-top can be good. I also know you worry. You love your grandfather, and you're scared."

He peeled away her layers like she wasn't remotely complex. Swallowing a mouthful of beer she studied her shoes. "Well, when you put it like that, I guess I'm pretty shallow."



"Prickly."

"What?" Did he just compare me to a porcupine?

"You're not shallow. You're prickly. You're used to having to do everything and you don't like asking for help. You're stubborn and you're coping with a very stubborn grandfather. So, prickly." He saluted her with his beer bottle.

"Okay, you are way too nice to be as hot as you are."

His lips curved into a grin and her pulse doubled. "That brings us full circle to the attracted line."

Embarrassment flooded through

her and she laughed. "I think I'm hopeless at this."

"At what?"

"Dating." Tipping the bottle up, she drank nearly half of it down. Maybe the alcohol could soften her nerves. Thinking she should clarify, she opened her mouth. And belched. It came straight up from her toes. Clapping a hand against her lips, she stared at Greg, horrified.

He met her stare evenly, drained his beer and belched louder and longer than she'd managed. And she couldn't help it, she burst out laughing and it

shook free the hard knots of tension in her gut.

"Better." He rose and fetched two fresh bottles. "Would you like to try that again?"

"You think we can keep calling 'do over' all evening and have it work?"

Leaning closer, he gazed into her eyes. "I think we can do anything we want, over and over, until we get it right."

Moistening her lips, she tried not to stare at his mouth. "Hi, I'm Georgia."

"Hi, Georgia," he murmured, his gaze dropping to her mouth. "I'm

Greg."

"I think we need to do that over," she whispered.

"Yeah?" He squatted slowly, one hand on the arm of her chair as though bracing for balance. His warmth was a tangible presence inviting her in.

"Yeah." She set her beer down and scooted forward on the chair. I really can't stop staring at his mouth. "Hi. I'm Georgia."

"Hey, Georgia, I'm up here." His words sort of hung there for a moment and she blinked, looking up to see the corners of his eyes crinkling and then his mouth

captured hers.

And she forgot how to breathe.

# Chapter Five

Kissing her had been an impulsive decision. She tasted like strawberries in summer, ripe and sweet with a hint of tart. Heat surged through his veins and impacted him like an IED—brutal, unexpected and clarifying—but letting go of her and stopping the kiss was harder than balancing on a high wire strung between warring countries.

Legs aching, he straightened and studied her. A dazed expression filled her face. Her

lips were a little swollen, and she darted her very pink tongue out to moisten the lower one. Easing onto his chair before he fell down, he picked her beer up off the table and handed it to her.

Georgia lifted a hand to her mouth and stared at him.

"Better?" Amusement curled beneath the leashed desire in his system. He'd been interested from the moment she marched across the field to confront her grandfather. Tabling it, he'd kept it there, but tonight.... "Look," he exhaled. "We can pretend tonight." He gave her an out.

"Pretend?" She blinked, confusion flickering in and out of her expression.

"Pretend. We can pretend we don't know each other. We can pretend that this was successful for both of us. We can eat. Hang out. And then I can take you home. No harm. No foul." Yeah, definitely the right thing to do.

"Why did you do it?" She leaned forward, elbows on her knees, and rolled the beer between her palms.

"Do what?"

"Do this. Sign up for this service." She licked her lips again



and he stuffed a groan down. Every time he focused on her mouth, he imagined what it might be like to have it wrapped around his cock. Not an image conducive to doing the right thing, just the pleasurable one.

"Lots of reasons, I suppose." Getting her out of his thoughts for one, but he couldn't tell her that without a little more explanation or reference. He didn't share well—his battery of psychological testing indicated he preferred to be a loner and opening up was difficult. During his recovery, he'd opened up to

Westwood more out of self-defense than anything else. The man was persistent in his patience.

"I grew up on a reservation in Oklahoma. My mother left my father when I was young. He drank—a lot." Greg laughed softly. "Took me a lot of years to be able to say that. My father drank a lot. He pickled his liver by the time I was fourteen. Passed away while I was at boot camp."

Georgia grimaced. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I made my peace with that a long time ago." He studied the bottle of beer in his hand. "In fact, I didn't drink anything

remotely alcoholic until I was in my mid-twenties. I didn't want to be my dad. Anyway, this isn't about him. My grandfather and my great-grandfather raised me."

"What about your mom?"

He shrugged. "She left the rez, my father, and me. I think she sent a card when I graduated high school and when my great-grandfather died. I haven't seen her in years and that's okay. She made a life for herself without us. It's hard to walk back from that."

Maybe she'd wanted to. His grandfather thought the graduation card was an attempt to

reach out and reconnect. Greg found he didn't really want to reconnect. The woman left when he was four and all he really remembered about her were the arguments and the smell of talcum powder. Those two memories did not a relationship foundation make.

"Yeah, my family is like that. My grandparents had five kids. When Grandma was alive, she was the glue. She brought the family home, every single holiday. It didn't matter where they lived or how far away they went—everyone came back a couple of times a year. But when she died...the

excuses started. One year it was the weather, then work, and then it was families of their own and... you know. Now it's just me and Grandpa." Her lips twisted. "I resented it for a long time. I mean how could they just abandon him? But he says they have lives and it's important to live in the present and not cling to the past."

"Did you grow up here? In Freewill?"

"Yes and no. My parents are archaeologists. They work all over the world, so my sisters and I, we would travel with them. They homeschooled us until we were

about fourteen or so. One by one, they sent us to Freewill so we could finish high school. We knew the town because we spent every summer with our grandparents." Her tone turned wistful.

"You're the youngest." He was an only child, but he'd been to enough therapy sessions to hear the different theories on birth order.

"Yeah. How did you know?"

"Because you're disappointed in your family. You want them to set a better example and do what you're doing." The clarity rang through him like a hammer hitting a gong. She wasn't trapped by her life,

but by her own ethics. She just hadn't reconciled one with the other.

"Yeah, maybe I am. A little." Georgia blew out a breath. "Which isn't really fair. When Grandpa had his first heart attack, my sisters, Risa and Ginny, came. Kali couldn't, but she called everyday, and Caro did, too. Risa's got a job in New York, she's an attorney, and she loves it. She got married, so she could only stay a couple of weeks. Ginny's in graduate school in Southern California, so she couldn't stay long either. They're busy and they have lives."

"Four sisters?"

She grinned, a broad, wide smile, and her eyes glittered with humor. "Uh huh, we're all about a year apart in age. So you can imagine we're a loud lot when we're together."

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

"Do you have a life?" Because the way she said it sounded like she didn't.

"I look after Grandpa. That's my life." She pushed some hair behind her ear.

"What about a job? I don't even know what you do."



She chewed her lower lip.  
"You're going to laugh."

"I will not." He had training. He could maintain his expression.  
"What do you do?"

Georgia grimaced and glanced down.

"Come on. What is it? Are you a sex therapist?"

"No." She laughed.

"A shoe saleswoman?" He waggled his eyebrows. He loved the way she laughed. It opened her whole expression, softened her. She should laugh all the time.

"No." She bowed her head, and her hair fell forward, hiding her

expression.

"You're a fuel specialist at the Git and Go? You keep the town running."

She fell back against the chair and giggled until tears ran down her face. "Would you still be interested in me if I pumped gas for a living?"

"I'd be interested if you asked me if I wanted fries with that," he replied, utterly serious.

"Finish telling me why you signed up for the service and then I'll tell you what I do." The enigmatic response intrigued him.

"Okay. Hungry?"

"Starving, actually."

He rose and got the grill going, stepping inside the cabin to grab the burgers. "I joined the Marines while I was in college. Thought it would be a good fit, structure and support. My grandfather came to the boot camp graduation, and he was pretty damn proud. He served with codetalkers during World War II, and he told me that, despite our native differences with the military, we also worked really well together. I enjoyed the work, enjoyed the people." He layered the burgers on the grill and Georgia came over to sit on

the railing next to him.

It was comfortable talking to her.

"Did you go to Iraq?"

"Yep. My unit was in the first wave to penetrate Fallujah in 2004." He tore off a strip of aluminum foil and set it on the grill and added some of the vegetables to the top of it. "I've got buns and condiments inside, if you want to make your burger the works.... Do you want cheese on yours?"

"No, thank you."

Greg glanced up and leaned over to kiss her. She didn't retreat and he only allowed himself the one

quick brush of his lips to hers.

"What was that for?"

"You looked kissable." He flipped the burgers one by one. "Anyway, about two years ago, I was in an accident. Got injured, sent home to recover, and received a medical discharge. A.J. offered me a job up here and a place to get on my feet, so I came. I like it here. It's good for the soul."

"Now you sound like Grandpa." Affection thickened the words.

"I like Crane. He's good for my soul, too."

"So that's why you signed up for

a one-night stand? Because it's good for your soul?"

He met her curious gaze. "A lot of guys in my unit recommended it. They made a pact, signed up—to help get back on their feet, be a part of the world again." He wondered if she knew A.J. and Sheri met that way, but it wasn't his story to tell. "I thought it would help. It was time for me to start living again. No strings attached to the pleasure and a way to test out what I want."

"That's really honest. I'm sorry I spoiled it."

Frowning, Greg finished flipping

the burgers again and stared at her. "You haven't spoiled anything."

"Yeah, but you already know me. So it's a little harder to be all one-night stand with no strings when it's me."

Not discounting the possibility, he shook his head. "You remember when I came by that night to watch the game with Crane?"

"Ugh." She rubbed a hand over face. "Yes. He didn't tell me you were coming and I was really rude—and messy."

"You were beautiful. You looked great, right down to the torn socks. Comfortable, and utterly

gorgeous. I hated that you went out all dressed up and some other guys were going to be looking at you. I wanted you to stay and watch the game, or better, take me with you."

"Oh."

"That surprises you." It wasn't a question.

"A little. I mean, you're Grandpa's friend and...."

"So I can't be yours?" He raised his eyebrows, leaning into her until they were nose-to-nose. "We can't be friends?"

She exhaled a slow, shaky breath. "I...I think I'd like that."



"So tell me...." He teased the tip of her nose with his, just the lightest of touches. Her eyes widened and her breath grew shallow. "...what do you do?"

"I write erotic romance."

He didn't laugh.

But holy hell did that turn him on.

Georgia couldn't believe it. She'd said it out loud. It made it real. She said it and he didn't laugh. If anything, he stared at her intently. "So you write sex books?"

"Erotic romance," she replied

primly then burst out laughing.  
"Yeah, I write sex books."

He flipped the burgers again and stirred the veggies on the tin foil. "So are you published?"

Face heating, she sucked her upper lip between her teeth and nodded slowly.

"Seriously?" The grin on his face sent her pulse skyrocketing.

"Yes." Is my face as red as the coals under the sizzling burgers?

He rapid-fired more questions. "Okay, I need more information. When did you start writing? Is there a chance I've read any? If not, where can I buy one? Why

erotic romance?"

"I've been writing since I was a kid. Started with picture books." She'd never shared that with anyone except her mother, who actually encouraged her every step of the way. "Um, you know I said my parents are archeologists?"

"Yeah. Grab those plates will you?" He motioned to the disposable plates on the side table.

"So, they're archaeologists and we traveled with them everywhere. When I was really little, my mom would make up these stories—okay, they probably

weren't made up because she included real history in them. Anyway, she would tell me stories from wherever we were, and she brought every location to life with the details of the people who lived and loved there, and their kids, and the gods they worshipped, etcetera. I loved her stories and, one day, I started telling one to her. I was all of five or six, I think. We started swapping who told the stories and one day I wrote one down." She balanced the plates as Greg added the burgers.

"Okay, buns and condiments are inside. Do you want to eat in there

or out here?"

"Make the burgers up and come back out?" It was a beautiful day and they were having fun.

"Sounds good." He dialed down the grill and slid the foil-wrapped veggies onto another plate. "Okay, so you and your mom made up stories to tell each other and then you wrote them down. I'm thinking your mother didn't add erotic scenes to your storytelling hour."

The very idea sent a ripple of laughter through her and she giggled. "Not hardly."

In the cabin's little kitchen, she went to work building her burger.

Greg reached around her for the ketchup, and she had to stretch across him to grab the mayonnaise and mustard. He teased the curve of her ear with a kiss and she shuddered.

"And that's cheating if you want to hear the rest of the story."

"Hmm," he murmured and nibbled her earlobe again. Heat curled through her and she forgot how to think. "Maybe I can wait for the story."

Are we really going to do this? Stringing one thought to the next was the most difficult thing with him touching her. He wrapped his

arm around her and flattened a hand on her abdomen. Burger half-forgotten, she leaned back against his chest. The tickle stroke of his tongue and breath on her ear sent a flurry of desire racing through her.

She'd written enough sex scenes to know where this would go and could hardly wait for it to happen. He continued kissing a path down her ear, grazing the lobe with his teeth until his mouth closed over a pulse point in her throat and her thighs went liquid. Her nipples were so stiff they actually ached, and she couldn't

catch her breath.

"But maybe you should finish your story, especially if this is research," he whispered, his voice dark and tantalizing.

"You are evil."

He tugged her shirt up and traced a pattern around her belly button. "Am I?"

"Yes," she nodded slowly. Apparently putting more syllables together was beyond her.

"I like you, Georgia." He sucked her earlobe between his teeth and her eyes crossed from wanting him.

"I...um...ooooh...I like you, too."



"Really?" He teased along the top of her jeans with his thumb. "I thought you didn't like me. You're always so mad at me."

"I'm mad at everyone." Not at the moment, though. At the moment, she could care less about the rest of the world. His chest was a hard wall. "You have a magic mouth."

"Do I?" He pressed another kiss to the side of her neck, and she felt his lips stretch into a smile.

"Oh." She breathed out each word. "How...am...I...s'posed...crap...answer...when you're doing that?"

Letting her go, he stepped

around her to lean against the counter. She grabbed hold of the edge to steady herself and bring her rampaging hormones under control. The weight of his stare rubbed her like a physical caress, and she fumbled while stacking her burger.

"I'm waiting," he teased.

Staring at him dazedly, she tried to remember what they were talking about. "What?"

"You were telling me about writing erotic romance."

Did he have to say erotic like that? It turned her inside out and left her panties wet. God, I write

about this stuff, why is it so hard to think when it's actually happening? My characters tease each other and have these great sexy conversations while they are stripping each other naked. The man touches my ear and I melt.

"It started in college," she murmured. "I wrote a short story, and it got published in the college magazine, and I guess I wanted to write more. And my roommate had the craziest sex life."

"Your roommate?" He fixed her toppled burger and picked up their plates. "Porch?"

"Sure." She trailed after him

and her gaze drifted over his ass. She'd admired his chest, his face, and his smile, but the man had an ass that didn't quit. His jeans stretched beautifully with every step he took.

So busy staring at his ass, she barely realized he'd stopped and watched her over his shoulder. "Are you checking me out?"

"Uh huh."

His slow grin sent her heart flip-flopping. "Okay. Do you mind if I sit down so we can eat? We're going to need the calories."

She closed her eyes and groaned. "You are the devil."

Chuckling, he nudged her over to a chair, where she sat and accepted her burger, setting the plate in her lap. He caught her mouth in another hard kiss. When his tongue sought entry, she forgot about the burger and sank her fingers into his rich mane. The kiss went on and on, but he didn't touch her anywhere, one hand braced on the chair, the other gripping his plate. Breaking the kiss, he pressed his forehead to hers.

"Eat. Talk."

"Hard." She snickered.

"Yes, I am." He brushed his

mouth to hers again then retreated to the other chair, sitting slowly.

"So not fair." But she took a bite of her burger before she ended up walking over and crawling into his lap.

He focused on her. "Very fair. You've made me wild since the first time I laid eyes on you. Now, tell me the story before we're naked and I don't care about it anymore."

"Have I really driven you wild since the day we met?"

"Yes." Greg placed his burger on the table and clasped his hands

together. "You wrote a short story in college...?"

Licking her lips, Georgia shook her head. "You really care about this story?"

"Yeah. I do."

"I wrote a short story and it was published in the college literary magazine. And I loved it. I loved writing something that other people read. My mom wanted to see it and she loved it, too. I was supposed to go visit them on a dig that summer, but she told me to take the three months and write. So I came here—and I wrote my first book."

"And you sold it?"

Bursting out laughing, she shook her head. "It was awful. I submitted it to, like, five places and all but one sent me 'thanks, but no thanks' letters. The fifth place, though—the editor said she liked my voice, but that my technique needed a lot of work. She also sent me some suggestions. So I went back to school and I found some writing groups and I wrote some more and I sent all of it to my mom, but you know it's funny, she always loved my stuff. She never gave me a hard critique. And I kept submitting and submitting. I



think I must have turned in—a hundred different ideas or drafts or stories, and none went anywhere.”

She took a bite of her burger and washed it down with a swallow of warm beer. It was so weird to tell him this, but he looked at her so seriously like he really wanted to know.

“So, I got a critique partner my senior year, and she told me my stories just weren’t sexy enough. And I thought about my roommate, Meghan. And I wrote a book about her.”

Greg paused, beer bottle

halfway to his mouth. "The one with all the crazy sex life?"

"Uh huh." Her face warmed.

"Did you tell her?"

"Yeah—no. I changed a lot of the details and the names and even that the character was in college. I made the roommates twenty." Her hands shook. This story happened to her almost seven years before, she shouldn't be so nervous.

"And?"

"And I submitted it to a few places, and you remember the first editor that I sent my very first book too, the one who liked

my voice...?"

He nodded.

"She sent me a really great letter with some suggestions and advice, and asked me to make a few changes and if I did it, then she wanted to see it again."

The letter changed her life. She spent the next week barely sleeping or eating as she massaged all the recommended changes into her manuscript. She still remembered how hard her heart beat when she attached the story to an email and sent the revision to the editor.

Greg gestured with his half-

eaten burger for her to continue.

"And Aella Desire was born." At his blank look she laughed. "That's my pseudonym. Aella for whirlwind and Desire is kind of obvious. The editor loved my changes. She contracted the book and asked me to write more in that same series. I've been writing them ever since."

"Your name means wind?"

"Well, yeah, the pen name does, but then so does Avasa...my middle name. My mother named us all after states, and my father insisted that our middle names all have to do with an element. Apparently, I'm long-winded."

"Listen to the wind," Greg murmured softly. "Are you done with that burger?"

She looked down at the burger she'd taken all of two bites out of. She wasn't hungry—at least not for food. "Apparently."

"You said earlier you were my date—you came here to have sex."

Oh, yes please. "It's okay if you changed your mind." No, it's not. Please say you haven't.

He rose, gathered up the plates, and slid the remains of their burgers together. Catching her hand, he tugged her out of the chair and wrapped an arm around

her again. She was chest to breast with him. And it was even better than when he held her from behind.

"I like you, Georgia Crane. A hell of a lot."

Shivering at his dark tone, she gave in to the desire to fist his shirt in her hands, and tugged. The buttons popped beautifully and it was so much better than in the books. Hard muscle and hot skin warmed her palms as she explored his chest, never looking away from his eyes. "I like you, Greg Rainwater. A whole hell of a lot."

"So we're on the same fade-to-black page?" He grinned and even with the heat spinning around inside of her like a pinwheel on the Fourth of July, she laughed.

"In my books? We don't fade to black."

# Chapter Six

Aware the woods had its share of scavengers, Greg carried their plates and food inside and left them on the counter in the kitchen. The cabin's rustic interior included a little sitting room and a very large bed. Georgia watched him from the doorway, backlit by the light from outside. The summer days meant later sunsets and he, for one, was glad for the extra light.

The wind. Her name meant wind—both her real name and her



pseudonym. Is that what Crane's been telling me for weeks? Was the old man acting as a matchmaker? A breeze stirred her hair, and Greg drank in the sight of her. Arousal glimmered in her eyes, and his cock ached when her tongue slipped over her plump lower lip.

"Are you hot?" Georgia murmured.

He crossed the room on slow steps. "A little."

"Does our 'do over' rule still apply?"

"Oh, yeah." He'd developed a swift fondness for that rule. It

was a good rule. But she surprised him by heading out of the door. Curious, he followed. She toed off her boots and stripped off her jeans. He nearly swallowed his tongue when her golden legs came into view. Where his skin burnished a deeper red under the brown tan, hers was all soft gold and amber light. She wore a pair of pale white lace panties that shaped her sweet ass. She undid her bra and slid the straps off, wiggling it out from under her shirt and the scrap of white lace joined her jeans and boots—leaving her nearly naked in the

see-through white tank and sweet lace panties.

It had to be the most erotic sight he'd ever seen. She trotted down the steps to the grass utterly unabashed with her state of undress.

"Where are you going?"

"Come on and find out." She tossed the challenge over her shoulder and jogged to the lake. Easing out of his own boots and stripping off his shirt, he followed willingly. She didn't slow at the water's edge, racing into the cool, nearly crystal water and plunging in. His legs ached with

the thought of the temperature drop, but maybe dampening the passion licking up his insides wasn't a bad idea.

He strode into the water with purpose. Its clarity let him see all the way to the soft bottom with a trace of grass and almost no fish. Oddest pond he'd ever seen.

"It's a snow melt pond," Georgia called, swimming toward him with lazy strokes. He stopped with the water waist-high and enjoyed watching her. The cooler water did next to nothing to his ardor—not when in direct competition with the soaking wet tank top

clinging to her skin. As soon as she was in reach, he scooped her up and pulled her to him.

Looping her arms around his neck, she swallowed. He could see the trace of embarrassment in her face as she dropped her gaze almost demurely.

"Have you ever done this before?" Sure, they'd both booked a one-night stand, and he fully intended to have sex with the woman he'd been partnered with—before he realized that woman would be Georgia. It didn't take him long to realize a single night would never satisfy him.

He wanted more.

"This' is a little vague." She slid her hands into his hair and wrapped her legs around his waist. The lack of tide didn't keep her from rubbing her sex along the bulge pressing forward on his jeans.

The blood drained from his head, and it took a moment to unstick his tongue from the roof of his mouth. He leaned down for a taste of her plump, sweet lips. The simple kiss burned away his other thoughts and turned carnal. Her tongue swept across his lips, seeking and gaining permission to

enter. The kiss satisfied the urge for closeness and awakened fresh hunger.

Her breasts pressed against his chest, the two hard points of her nipples stretching the fabric of her top. Sliding his hands down to cup her ass, he added to his torment, and by the time he drew back, they were both breathing heavily.

Resting his forehead to hers, he traced the edge of her panties with his thumbs. It would be so easy to slip beneath the fabric. "This being sex...?"

"Yes." She nipped his lower lip

and sucked it teasingly. One kiss wasn't enough, three hadn't been. He slid his tongue out and stole inside her mouth again and she moaned, the vibrations filtering through him. Uninterested in playing in the water anymore, he turned and carried her toward the shore.

Her legs tightened on his hips, and he growled at the pleasurable torture. If not for his soaking wet jeans and her panties, he could be inside of her. Unwilling to slow, he strode across the yard to the cabin and set her down long enough to navigate the stairs. His



legs protested the additional strain when he swept her back into his arms, but he ignored them.

Inside, he set her on the bed, stripped her out of her wet clothing, and got out of his. Face to face, she drew in a deep, shuddering breath. He plunged his tongue into her mouth over and over. He would never get enough of the flavor of her. She responded with the same passion he'd seen snapping beneath her anger, fisting her hands in his hair. They fell together onto the sheets.

"I want to go slow," he murmured. "But I don't think it's possible." The need to have her was a perpetual ache burning him alive. Curling his fingers between her thighs, he sought her sex and groaned when he found her damp and slick with arousal.

"I don't want slow," she encouraged him. "We can call do over later, you know."

Laughter crested his rising passion, and he grinned against her mouth, kissing her again as he eased a finger inside of her and teased her clit with his thumb. Her inner muscles grasped him

greedily, and he fought to remember he needed a condom.

Growling, he pulled away and scanned the room. He'd bought a box when he planned the night, and it took him a moment to locate them. Retrieving a foil package, he returned to the bed and stared at her as he ripped it open and rolled it into place.

In his admiration of her curvy hips and full breasts, he'd failed to notice the clean lines of her muscles. With supple legs and toned arms, she was a woman used to being outdoors. "God, you're beautiful."

He knew the moment she saw his damaged legs and he'd prepared for it. The scars weren't pretty. Slowing his breathing, he forced patience. She didn't turn away, nor did she wince. He waited for the pity to seep into her eyes, to erase the desire in them. Easing forward, she traced her fingers over his left thigh and then his right, following the line of scarring down to his knees. His cock jerked at the featherlight brush of her fingertips.

"Will you tell me what happened?" She lifted her chin. "When you're ready."

Something inside him eased, a knotting tension he'd barely been aware of. "Later," he promised. It wasn't a sexy story or a particularly pleasant one. "Right now I just want to touch you."

"I'd like that." She caught his hand and pulled him to her, and he sank onto the bed with her willingly. Their mouths collided, the spiraling lust in his blood exploded. He poured his want for her into the kiss, skimming caresses down her side and nudging her thighs apart.

He wanted to spend time on her breasts, he wanted to hear her

scream his name as he made her come over and over again, but the mad craving to be with her overwhelmed everything else. Greg needed this, needed her, now.

Hard and swift he entered her, and she gasped, digging her nails into his back. Lifting his head, he stared down at her, making sure she was okay. She caught his face in her hands, pulled him down for another kiss.

"I want you." Her throaty declaration ripped away any doubts.

The last thread of hesitation in

him snapped and he moved. She was hot, and tight, and sweet. A low, keening moan vibrated in her throat, and he groaned into her mouth. He felt wanted, felt the wave of her orgasm approaching as she writhed, her legs hooked around his hips increasing the angle of his thrusts.

The wild heat of her sex clamped down on him and she cried out. He couldn't hold back his own explosion as an orgasm wracked him. They collapsed together, their harsh breathing the only sound in the room.

For the first time since

returning to the states following his accident, he felt like he'd come home. He felt whole. The last shattered piece of him healed into place. He didn't want to crush her and rolled onto his back, dragging her over so she sprawled atop him.

The long tangle of her dark hair clung to his skin and curtained his face when she lifted her head to gaze down at him. She grinned. "So...do over?"

Laughter pinged through his soul and his body stirred. He might even have the patience this time to play with her breasts.



Cupping one, he teased the nipple with gentle strokes of his thumb. "Definitely do over."

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She sprawled on the bed, boneless and utterly wrung out. The man was insatiable. Or maybe that's me. They hadn't slept. Sometime in the middle of the night, they ate the leftover burgers and devoured the baked potatoes he'd forgotten all about. The outsides were crunchy, but the interiors were soft and perfect with butter.

And then he'd kissed her, and

she forgot about time. He spent an hour playing with her breasts. Teasing the nipples, blowing on them and she damn near orgasmed from the attention. Of course, one flick of his thumb against her clit and she had come. He seemed to have made it his mission to wring every type of climax from her he could.

He also told her the story of his legs—and the accident that shattered them. So many surgeries to rebuild his legs. So much time to recover and learn to walk again. She couldn't imagine going through it all alone, but he

promised her that his brothers never left him alone.

"Hey," he murmured and kissed her shoulder. "It's almost dawn."

"I know." They lay side-by-side, she on her stomach and he on his back. Fresh flutters of desire began to beat in her breast despite her exhaustion. Looking at him, touching him—it was all a gift that she could never have imagined. "I don't want tonight to end."

But that's what she signed up for—a one-night stand, an escape from her life to enjoy the passion she loved to write about.

"It doesn't have to." Greg rolled onto his side and rested his head on his knuckles. He ran his finger up and down her spine, lazily tracing her skin from her ass to her shoulders and down again.

"No?" She pushed up onto her elbows, trying to ignore the hope flaring in her heart. "But I thought you wanted a one-night stand?"

"Not anymore." His voice darkened with need. A frown marred his forehead. "Unless that's all you wanted."

The glimpse of vulnerability undid her. She was so used to

fighting for what she wanted, whether it was getting a book published or getting her grandfather to take his meds and look after himself, that she hadn't allowed herself to think that a one-night stand could answer the most basic need in her—the need to share her life with someone. Whoa. Getting way ahead of yourself.

Licking her lips, she tried to organize her thoughts. To find the rational argument. "I wanted—you. I signed up for the service because I heard about it during research I did for a book, but the

owner never answered any of my requests for an interview or research. I'd half-forgotten it until...." Oh, this is embarrassing. But if he wanted to pursue anything with her, it was better to be honest. Right?

"Until?" he prompted her; his gaze practically pinning her to the spot.

"Until you got me all hot and bothered the night you walked me to my car." Not allowing herself to look away, she waited for his response.

"You signed up because of me?" He seemed to be verifying his

facts.

"Yeah. Stupid, huh?"

"No." He surprised her.

"Because I signed up for you."

"Seriously?"

"Yep. I even wrote a description of you for my application." For the barest moment, embarrassment flickered in his beautiful face and she melted further. So strong, so raw, so terrifically masculine, but beneath it all—his soul was so exquisitely real. "I wanted to ask you out, but I always seemed to be pissing you off."

She should be ashamed, but she wasn't. "I was jealous of my

grandfather. I wished you were my friend and coming around to see me. Wow, you must think I'm an idiot." Writing romance and being good at it were completely different things.

"No, I think you're complicated." He leaned over and kissed her shoulder again. "Beautiful. Sexy. Funny. Loyal."

"Complicated?" The way he said the word made it sound like a compliment.

"I like complicated." He tucked a finger under her chin. "Last night, I got to know you, and I want to keep getting to know you."



Nervousness bubbled up beneath the thrill of those words. "Until you have to go?"

"I'm not going anywhere." He smiled. "A.J.'s asked me to stay and I plan to."

"Really?" She could work anywhere, but she didn't want to and wouldn't leave her grandfather.

"Really." He nodded. "You're stuck with me."

The corners of her mouth twitched upward. "So—we're not a one-night stand?"

"Not even close." He cupped the back of her head and pulled her to

him, kissing her with such tenderness, tears filled her eyes. "I can't wait to get to know you, Georgia Crane."

"I'm not calling do over on this," she warned. Her heart threatened to burst. She could fall in love with him so very easily. Rugged hero, wild lover, and gentle soul, all rolled into one amazing man.

"Good." He wrapped his arms around her. "We're going to date for six months, you're going to share custody of your grandfather with me, and this Christmas, I'm going to ask you to marry me."

Her eyes widened and she curled into him. "You have a plan."

"Hmm-hmm." He kissed her forehead. "I have a plan."

"And if I don't agree to this plan?" She couldn't help but tweak him.

He grinned. "It's my job to convince you. And I will."

Of that, she had no doubt. "Do you know what happens in my books at this point?"

"Please tell me it's more not-fading-to-black scenes?" he teased and cupped her breast.

"No, it's more...." She leaned up to kiss him, and whispered, "Fade

to happily-ever-after scene."

"With lots more sex?" He nibbled her lower lip and the desire in her roused, hungry for him again.

"Lots and lots. You have 'til Christmas to convince me, after all."

He rolled her over and pinned her to the bed, his naked and very aroused length pressed against her. "Challenge accepted."

# Epilogue

The Saturday after Thanksgiving dawned bright and cold. A fresh blanket of snow carpeted the town and turned it into a winter wonderland. Shops were open and the first wave of Christmas could be seen everywhere in the decorations and cheerful greetings. Miller and Jones left the ranch the week before Thanksgiving, happier, more settled Marines than when they'd arrived.

Greg felt the same. He didn't

wake up in the middle of the night drenched in sweat regularly and, when he did, Georgia was there to soothe him back to sleep. Everything was better after the summer—his body, his heart and his soul.

After a long summer of work, A.J. and Greg had the ranch all ready for winter and had a plan for spring. They would open the doors to recovering veterans who needed additional time, physical labor, and a place to get away from it all when they were done at Mike's Place. The ranch wouldn't be a full-fledged center, not the

way Luke built his facility in Texas, but it would be the place they could go to Turn the Corner.

Which also served as the new name for the ranch. The deeper snow also meant Crane couldn't go on his long walks up through the woods, but Greg made sure to meet him every day around lunchtime to walk the town—and get his education about Freewill history. Today, he intended to broach a different subject.

One he'd not brought up before. Georgia.

"She'll say yes," Crane commented as they walked toward

the big tree in the town square. The annual lighting ceremony would kick off at dusk with music, food, and merriment—despite the brutal cold.

“How do you know what I plan to ask her?” He meant it more as a rhetorical question. He’d learned over the last several months that Crane knew just about everything about everyone—usually before they did.

“A man knows that look. You’ve wanted to ask for a while, but you are a planner. You owed an obligation to A.J. and you wanted to be sure to see it through. You



wanted to prove to my stubborn granddaughter that you are a man of your word."

He nodded. "Yes, sir."

"And you've done both these things." It wasn't a question.

"I think so." He believed it. He and A.J. shook hands on working together at the ranch. He had a home there and it wouldn't be long before A.J. sold him a small section to build his own place. A.J. insisted. Greg had an idea for the house he would build—and exactly where. On the hill overlooking the vistas with plenty of room for Crane, so he could walk and listen

to the wind whenever he cared to.

The old man might be harder to convince than Georgia. But he had a plan for that, too.

"You will ask her tonight?"

"When they light the tree. You don't mind going with Sheri and A.J., do you?" He'd already checked with the other couple. They were more than happy to look after Georgia's grandfather. Particularly since Greg rented the remote cabin again and planned to steal away with Georgia for the next few days.

"Why would I mind? It is good you plan to ask her at the tree

lighting." Crane paused outside of the barbershop. He and the owner often played cards together in winter when business was slow. The older Indian reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a book. He held it out. It was one of Georgia's. "You're ready to listen to the wind." Crane winked and went inside.

Greg laughed. He hadn't seen this one, but he recognized the setting in the background. He flipped the book over and read the back of it. He recognized the hero and heroine, too. Curious, he flipped to the end and read the

last chapter.

The woman wrote about her own marriage proposal—right down to the question being popped at the tree-lighting ceremony. Complicated. Beautiful. Charming.

He memorized the dialogue and grinned. Whistling, he tucked the book into the inside of his jacket. He'd left behind a piece of himself in Iraq, a piece he would never get back. But it was okay. He'd come to Freewill and found so much more with Georgia.

Hell yes, he would listen to the wind.

## ~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:

<http://www.heatherlong.net>

## 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 man 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?



## Marine Ever After

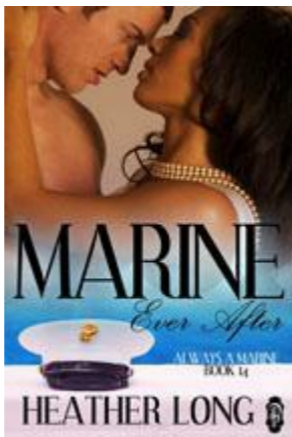
Marine Paul Torres is used to women who enjoy the pleasure of the moment and whom he can bed with a wink and a smile. But with so many of his friends settling down, he's turned on by the allure of finding the right partner as well. Even more so when he meets Lillianna Hansen while attending a wedding.

After a passionate night, Paul wakes to find her gone and though he wants more than a one-night

stand with the alluring Lily, his limited leave is up and he's forced to return to active duty.

All Lillianna thought she wanted was a good time. But Paul's attention—even from three thousand miles away—is hard to resist, and while she tells herself repeatedly she doesn't want a relationship with a Marine, she can't deny the consequences of their passionate night.

When she finds out she's pregnant, she's forced to reach out to Paul. But is she ready to let the father of her child be her Marine Ever After....



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