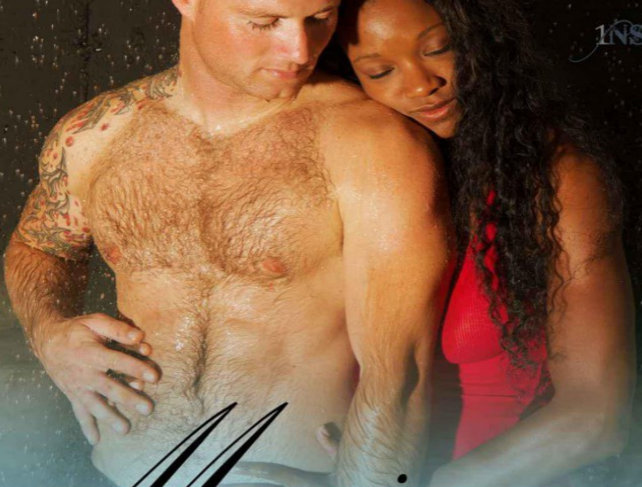


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Marine
with **BENEFITS**



ALWAYS A MARINE
BOOK 16

HEATHER LONG



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Marine with Benefits

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ISBN: 978-1-61333-560-4

Cover art by Mina Carter

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~Dedication~

This is for all of my readers, seriously. I have some of the best readers in the world, the enthusiasm and love you show my Marines never fails to make me smile. Thank you so much for going on this journey with me.

Marine with Benefits

A 1Night Stand Story
Always a Marine - Book 16

By
Heather Long

Chapter One

Kara Childs hated being late more than anything else. *Well, maybe not more than cooked carrots, but pretty damn close.*

Locking her desk, she sped down the hall while digging for her car keys. She was late, but she loved her job—and the veterans she worked with were worth the investment—even when unexpected patient needs led to schedule snafus. The veteran's rehabilitation facility started as a project by Marines for Marines, but had grown to include all branches of the military, as did the staff. While she'd never served, her older brother

deployed to Iraq, and her family got a flag and empty coffin to bury in return.

Her parents hadn't wanted her to take the job, not when the ghost of her brother's service might surround her. They struggled with their own anger and grief—anger at the Marines for taking him away, and grief for his loss. But from the moment Captain Luke Dexter sat down in her parents' Atlanta living room and described his goals, she had to be a part of it.

One week after they'd accepted their first patients, she moved into an apartment on the campus and dove into the work as a physical therapist. Strangely, or maybe not so strangely, working there helped her feel closer to

Keith—as did helping the men and women who made it home even when her brother hadn't.

She worked hard—particularly with some of the stubborn souls who walked through the gym doors—but adored every minute. Whether conducting classes in yoga and flexibility to decrease wounded soldiers stress and increase strength, or just hearing them out, she couldn't ask for more rewarding work.

Tonight's planned therapy didn't help anyone but herself. Working around Marines every day reminded her of what she'd lost—both her brother and his best friend, one who refused to do more than keep a polite distance.

Stubborn bastards, both of them.

She waved at Logan Cavanaugh, who headed in for his shift as she exited hers, but she refused to slow her pace. She'd already worked extra hours to cover for another therapist out with the flu and had just under ninety minutes to shower, shave, and primp for her date. Not that she had to rush or anything.

“Kara!” Logan called out.

Dammit. Swinging around, she gave him a distracted and harried wave. “Hey sweetie! I’d love to chat, but I’m going to be late.”

He didn’t let her blow him off, pacing toward her until she had no choice but to stop and wait. “Be careful tonight. Have a good time, but keep my cell number

handy. I'm free to come pick you up, if you need it."

Frowning, she studied the scarred visage in front of her. One corner of his mouth didn't tilt all the way up. He'd been a good-looking man before his accident, but the scars added intensity.

"Who have you been talking to?"

"Don't worry—only Jazz. She told me you signed up. Told both of us. Just...be careful."

Oh, this is rich. Especially coming from one of Jazz's two husbands. Kara loved the female Marine, one of her personal clients, but that didn't mean she wouldn't throttle her for throwing Kara to the wolves.

"I'm going on a date. You know, the

kind you met your wife on? I think I'll be fine."

Logan stuffed his hands into his pockets and leaned away, staring down the end of his nose at her. "Call me a hypocrite, but it's a little different."

"You didn't have pushy, overbearing, older brother-types telling you to be careful?"

Glib could have been her middle name. Growing up the baby sister to Keith Childs taught her that if she didn't stand up for herself and put the brakes on her brother's need to insulate her from the big bad world, she'd never have any fun—at all. Guilt pinged against her conscience. He'd been gone five years—five long, empty years without his

comedic messages or acerbic observations about her choices.

“Okay, I deserved that.” Logan accepted the insult easily. “Doesn’t change the fact that you don’t know who you’re hooking up with, and you don’t know what could go wrong. Not saying anything will, but if it does—*call* us.”

She counted backward from ten in her head. “Logan, I *appreciate* your concern. Really, I do. But this isn’t about you, or danger, or any of the myriad of things that could go wrong on a regular date. One of the reasons I signed up is because it’s so safe, and every one of you told me that. Jazz gave it her endorsement and so did Lauren and Rebecca. So, I’m going to go get ready

for my night out, and you're going to go to work.”

“And you'll call us if you need us,” Logan repeated with a stubborn set to his jaw.

Throwing her hands up in the air, Kara sighed. “Fine. *If* I need help, I *will* call. If you don't hear from me....”

“I'll assume you're having a good time and shut up.” Logan inclined his head, acquiescing the argument.

“Excellent.” Kara clapped her hands and leaned up to press an impulsive kiss to his unscarred cheek. “Thank you for caring.”

“See you tomorrow.”

“Thursday!” She called over her shoulder and winked. “I took tomorrow

off.” If all went as planned, she would spend the whole night getting laid, and would need to catch up on her sleep tomorrow.

She jogged to her car in the parking lot. It was hotter than hell in Texas, but she didn't care. The humidity couldn't compare to her home state. Here she baked. There she boiled. She rather preferred the former to the latter.

She could have foregone the short drive to her apartment, left her car in the center parking lot and jogged down the trail to her place if she didn't plan on leaving immediately. But what was the point of showering, adding cosmetics and dressing in a body-hugging, strapless red dress if she planned to melt

it all off on the walk back to her car?

And avoiding Logan's fraternal advice has its perks, too. Most of the time she appreciated his friendly interest. He reminded her of Keith—gruff and acerbic, but in a more direct manner. A raw grief burned in the back of her throat and she swallowed it. Closing her eyes, she forced deep, cleansing breaths.

Thankfully, the shower helped, and so did taking the time on her hair and picking out her lingerie—or lack of it since the dress fit too snug for even her thinnest of bras. She almost had her tears under control by the time she finished getting ready. Checking her makeup in the mirror, she used a tissue to blot up

some of the eyeliner her tears smudged.

“Okay, big brother.” She glanced upward. “I love you and I miss you, but tonight is about me and not you. I’m going to put all of this away. No peeking, or haunting, or making me feel bad, okay?” She didn’t get an answer, nor did she expect one. Talking to Keith had become a coping mechanism, one the psychologist she’d seen for the year after her brother’s death had recommended.

Giving her appearance a critical eye, she nodded. Not quite the dynamite she could have pulled off in college, but damn if she didn’t look fine. Smoothing a hand over the fabric of her dress, she grinned. She was used to wearing

sweats, T-shirts, shorts—comfortable stretchwear she could work out with her patients in—not killer sheaths that hugged every curve and reminded her she was a woman. Grabbing her purse and a silk wrap in case the club turned chilly, she checked the clock.

Plenty of time to get to the Sybarite Club for happy hour. Nerves fluttered in her stomach. I can do this, no chickening out at the eleventh hour. I saved up for six months to take this leap. It's time to let go of the past and all the what-could-have-beens. He's not ever going to be interested in me, no matter what I do. She refused to name the 'he.' Not tonight. Tonight is about me, my future, and my wants.

That would be her mantra.

Checking her hair once more, she grabbed her keys and strode for the door. No second thoughts. No backing out. Madame Eve promised her a night to remember, and she couldn't wait to get started.

Derek Green couldn't believe he sat inside the exclusive club. The Sybarite offered a pleasurable experience for the senses from fine dining, to excellent liquors, to live performances in a dynamic setting. That evening's menu included all three and a gorgeous woman he could drown all his lust with while he took the edge off. A win-win-win.

I shouldn't have taken the job at Mike's Place. He knew she worked there, knew everything about the job. How could he not? He didn't have to accept the position when Captain Dexter offered. It hadn't been his first—or last—offer, for that matter. Computers and asset management were his specialty, and retired military received a bump in interest from any number of employers.

None of his other options had Kara. *Nope. Stop thinking about her that way.* His resolution never lasted longer than a few seconds. His affection for Keith's gorgeous baby sister sank deep in his soul and he'd never get her out. The best he could hope for was a distraction.

And sitting here thinking about her

when you're waiting for a date is really not how to distract yourself. Rolling his neck from side to side, Derek tried to ease the tension knotting his shoulders. The itch to call her and let her know he'd moved to town wouldn't go away. He shut off his phone and stuffed it in his back pocket, but awareness hummed in his blood.

Raising his hand, he caught the waitress' attention. "Jack and Coke, please." He'd planned to stick to beer, but if the next few months meant living right up the way from Kara and maintaining his look-but-don't-touch policy, he'd need a little liquid courage to get through the night.

Just sign up, it's pretty

straightforward, and we've had some amazing experiences come out of the service. I wouldn't recommend it if I didn't believe in it. The advice came from three different Marines—Brody recommended it before he left, Damon suggested it on the phone, and Luke only added to the discussion when Derek asked him about Madame Evangeline's 1Night Stand.

He needed to get it together. The night needed to help him purge his demons and have a good time. The waitress delivered his drink, and he swirled the ice around in the glass, watering down the alcohol. An icy hot shiver skated over his skin. Twisting in the seat, he looked toward the entrance in time to

see her walk in the door. Every cell in his body leaned in her direction, drawn by the inexorable force of nature named Kara Childs. He'd know her anywhere.

Steel bands squeezed his chest, compressed his lungs, and bruised his heart. She was gorgeous. A red dress hugged her luscious curves, too much so. His dick stood at attention without a second thought for courtesy, commitment, or promises made. And damn if she didn't make an entrance, her arrival capturing more than a few looks of interest from single men at the bar and a few not-so-single men at tables.

Rising, he crossed the room to her. The moment her gaze collided with his, heat flashed through him. She had no

business being out in a dress like that, much less in a club like this.

“What are you doing here?”

“I planned on asking you the same question.” He caught her arm and turned her around, not quite hurrying her back up the red-carpeted steps toward the front door. “And why aren’t you wearing some damn clothes?”

Kara stopped, and unless he planned on picking her up or knocking her over, he had to stop, too. He had to admit the former idea held a certain appeal.

“Let go, Derek.”

“You shouldn’t be here.” He kept his voice low. The scent of plum and flowery blossoms radiating from her skin smelled like coming home.

“Really?” The cold spray of her gaze flicked over him and cooled his ardor. “I live here. What’s your excuse?”

“I’m moving here—moved here.” Yeah, not how he planned to drop that particular bomb. And from her shocked expression, not one she expected either. “I planned to call you.” It was a little too late to apologize. “After I settled in.”

Her chest rose with a swift inhale, and his gaze dropped to the warm, dusky curves of her breasts visible above the strapless line of her dress. That dress suited her. The red set off the rich chocolate of her skin—displaying her like a goddess carved from pure ebony. His cock jerked in his pants, and he was grateful for the lower illumination near

the door.

“Well, thanks for the notice.” She made a pretense of ignoring him and surveyed the room. “If you’ll excuse me, I have a date.”

Violence rocketed through him. “With who?” He hadn’t realized he gritted his teeth until he tried to speak.

“With a gentleman named none-of-your-damn-business.” She tugged her arm out of his grasp.

Flushing hot and cold then hot again, he moved to stand next to her and studied the room. Who the hell was she meeting in a place like this? How did she even know the Sybarite Club existed? Keith’s baby sister did not belong in a club like this. “Who are you

here to see, Kara?" He bent his head, his lips damn near brushing the warm curve of her ear, half tempting him to kiss it while he was there. Locking down that urge, he ordered his body to knock it off.

She was—and had always been—way out of bounds.

With almost painful slowness, she turned her head to meet his gaze. The tips of their noses brushed, and the electricity of that brief contact zinged through him. *Son of a bitch, I have it bad for the one woman I can never touch no matter how fucking beautiful she is.* Keith Childs' baby sister was more than off-limits, she sat on a throne at the top of the mountain. Derek had known her since she was a toddler. He

and Keith became fast friends in kindergarten and rode the path of growing up together, even enlisting on the same day. Sometime between their childhood and his boot camp graduation, she'd grown into an awkward teen with a sweet smile and gorgeous chocolate-brown eyes.

He'd always known about her crush, and as flattering as it may have seemed, he was way too old her for her—then.

On leave during her high school graduation, he came face to face with the sexiest woman he'd ever seen, and it took him time to reconcile that woman with the awkward little sister. Twice she walked in on him coming out of the shower at her parents' house, and twice

he'd walked away from the intoxicating temptation of her.

But he kept his distance and Keith, who'd noticed where his gaze strayed, thanked him for it.

The next time Derek saw Kara had been at her brother's funeral. She cried on his shoulder and he held her all night on the sofa of her parent's house, and then he'd gotten the hell out of there before he broke the promise he made to Keith. Looking after his friend's little sister did not mean seducing her. He and Kara kept in touch, but he kept the distance lengthy—all the better to watch out for her rather than take advantage.

“Earth to Derek, come in Derek.” She snapped her fingers in front of his face

and he blinked.

“What?”

“I need to see if my date is here.”
With a half-sweet smile, she patted his arm. “Call me next week or something, maybe we can have lunch.”

And then she walked away.

Derek slid his hands into his pockets to keep from dragging her back. The dress turned out to be worse from the back. It hugged her hips and shaped her ass so perfectly, he wanted to slide his hands over it and squeeze as he pushed her against a wall and slid in between her dark thighs—

Fuck. His cock was downright painful. His date needed to show up so he could tell her it wouldn't work out

and get the fuck out of there before he killed whatever schmuck Kara had come to see.

He could take a hell of a lot, but he didn't want to watch her with another man.

Kara spoke to the hostess and the woman smiled and led the way through the club toward the other side—and Derek's table.

His gut plummeted.

Kara's my date.

Life was not fair.

Chapter Two

Her date must have been in the restroom. Kara thanked the waitress who seated her and ordered a glass of red wine. Avoiding looking toward the door didn't erase Derek's presence. *Of all the gin joints in all the world, why did I have to walk into his...tonight?* Seeing him again delivered a kidney punch she hadn't expected. Tonight was about putting him out of her head, not dragging him back into her life.

Fighting irritation, she glanced at Derek. He remained where she'd left him, hands in his pockets, staring laser beams at her from across the room. *What*

the hell is his problem? Tingles of awareness, which zinged through her every time they were in the same room, brought the same level of uncomfortable familiarity they always did. Shrugging off the unease coiling in her belly, she tried to focus on staying upbeat for her ‘date.’

The presence of the drink and the jacket on the chair opposite hers told her the one-night stand was already in the lounge somewhere. But she’d been at the table almost five minutes and even had her glass of red wine to sip. *Maybe he took one look at me and decided against the date?* Disappointment curved beneath the uneasiness.

Dating had never been her favorite

activity. Not when the guy she wanted refused to acknowledge her existence and the one time, the single time he kissed her, he'd set her blood on fire with a fever she still couldn't shake. Another sidelong look at the door and she found Derek gone. Relief warred with a fresh wave of disappointment until she saw him walking toward her.

Right toward her.

Rising, she pointed a finger at him. "No. You go find your date, your table, your *whatever*, and leave me in peace." The last thing she needed on her date was lust-filled thoughts about Derek, a deliciously decadent Twinkie with his complicated history and murky emotional center. She'd planned for this

night for way too long.

Instead of obeying her, he paused and smiled. “Who says I’m not on the way to my table right now?”

The man’s grin was both cocky and sincere. *Bastard*. “Then go the long way to your table.” Stuffing her ego into a box, she softened her tone. “Please, Derek? I am meeting someone, and I really want it to go well.”

“Uh huh.” His gaze went from her to the table and back. “And I’m in the way of it going well?”

“You’re in the way of my privacy.” Like Keith, Derek wrecked a number of her dates when he visited. But unlike her brother, his best friend did it because, when he was around, he filled her head.

Hell, I don't stop thinking about him when he's not there. But he's not interested. He made that clear. “Do me a solid? Go.” She all but shooed him away.

To her horror, he chuckled and slid around her to sit down.

At her table.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, heat blasting through her

“Sitting at my table.” He leaned back in the chair, his expression almost neutral. “Surprise. Apparently, I'm your date.”

No. No. No.

Her mind locked on that word and chanted it. *Life is not this cruel.* Who was she kidding? Life didn't have to be

cruel, not when Derek's humor ran to pranks. "Stop fooling around."

Returning to her seat, she crossed one leg over the other. For the first time since putting on the strapless number, she wished she'd brought a jacket. She felt way too exposed under his assessing gaze.

Covering her nerves, she picked up her wine glass and sipped. "Derek, go find your own table."

"Why are you meeting someone for a one-night stand?" His low voice raised the hair across her body and a shiver rippled up her spine. Dumbfounded, she stared at him. "Yes, I am aware of what kind of *date* you're on. What the hell are you thinking meeting a total stranger in a

bar for sex?”

Whether because of the judgment in his tone or the cool appraisal in his eyes, her spine stiffened and she lifted her chin. Sitting forward, she set her wine glass down and flattened her palm against the table. “One, I am a grown-ass woman. I do what I want, when I want, with whom I want. Two, you are a *friend* and only a *friend*, as you have categorically reminded me on at least two very poignant occasions, which means you get exactly *no say* in my choices. Three, this is my date, my night off, and I am showered, shaved, and ready to have fun. If you think looking like this was easy, you’re wrong. I’m glad you’re home and you’re safe, but

since you couldn't be bothered to even drop me a text to let me know, you can get your ass up from my table and go the hell away.”

“God, you're beautiful when you're pissed.” His wild grin only managed to inflame her temper further. “And since you brought it up—one, I noticed you're a grown ass-woman, no one could miss your fabulous breasts in that number. Two, I am your *friend* and I will never not be your *friend*. Meeting strangers is dangerous. Having sex with them is stupid. Three, I am your date.”

The waitress came over and smiled. “Are you two ready to order?”

Calling his bluff, Kara looked at the waitress. “Is this the guy you served at

this table before I got here?”

Shooting her a puzzled look, the waitress nodded. “Yes, this is Mr. Green’s reservation. Your card was for this table.”

Kara’s stomach sank down to her toes and she didn’t dare look at him. Not when her wine threatened to come back up. How the hell could she have gotten Derek for her one-night stand?

“Could you give us a few minutes, sweetheart? Maybe some fries for an appetizer.” His voice washed over Kara, as if muted by a very great distance.

“Of course.”

“You’re my date.” It sounded stupid to say it out loud.

“I already said that.”

“You’re my date.” She repeated it, all her anticipation evaporating like a popping soap bubble.

“Kara? You okay over there?” His droll tone was colored with concern and she laughed.

“No, I’m not okay. I paid for....” *A night I wouldn’t soon forget so I could put you out of my head once and for all. I wanted some clean fun, a good time, and I get you.* But the words clogged in her throat, unspoken. “I need to go.”

She didn’t make it two steps before his hand clamped on her arm. “Don’t.”

Not looking at him, she shook her head. “This isn’t funny, Derek. Please let me take what little is left of my pride

and get the hell out of here.”

“Stay. Have dinner with me.” He cleared his throat. “I know I’m not what you had planned, but we can still have a meal.”

Swiping her tongue over her lower lip, it took effort not to dig her teeth into it. She didn’t need to scrape off her lipstick—although, what did lipstick matter? *This is Derek*. “I didn’t come here for dinner, and you should know that because if you’re my date...you signed up for a one-night stand, too.” Her voice climbed a little on the last, dangling on a slightly hysterical note. Derek tugged her back to the table and she fell into a chair.

“Yeah, I did.” He pulled his chair

around and sat, blocking her in and bracketing her legs with his. “But we’re not going to worry about that right now.”

“Really?” She studied him, anger and disappointment brewing a bitter cocktail in her gut. “What happened to ‘meeting strangers is dangerous and having sex with them is stupid’?”

A muscle in his jaw twitched and he said nothing as the waitress delivered the fries. Apparently the waitress sensed the palpable tension, because she left without another word.

Rallying, Kara reached over to pluck a French fry from the basket. Studying the slender length of crispy potato, it hit her. Derek was her date.

Her *date-date* arranged by Madame

Eve.

Heat tingled through her and her sex clenched.

She was supposed to be naked with him tonight.

A prearranged, preapproved, agreed-upon sex date. Turning her head, she smiled and let her gaze rove over him.

“What?” Derek demanded, wariness filling his eyes.

“You’re going to have sex with me tonight.”

The tidal wave of lust crashed onto the rocky shore of reality. Her blunt words were meant to shock him, but they only served to heighten the raw need shredding his will. Every emotion Kara

experienced played out on her face—from her crushing disappointment to her very blatant interest.

“No.” It nearly strangled him to say the word, but he managed to get it out. “But I will buy you dinner.”

He needed to take control of the situation and fast.

Snorting inelegantly, she picked up her wine glass and leaned forward. The angle gave him an even better view of her breasts than before, and need pounded inside of him with every breath she took.

“Didn’t you read the date requirements when you signed up? It’s a night of casual, no-strings, all-you-can-stand pleasure and fun.”

Keith would have had a coronary if he knew his sister signed up for a service like that.

“And that’s the last of that conversation.” Motioning to her menu, Derek picked up his own. It didn’t matter that he couldn’t see the words or her plum scent tickling his nostrils threatened his sanity. Thinking about her brother punctured the craving swelling inside him. “I’m thinking steak. I haven’t had one in a long time.”

“Really? You picked this club, with its private rooms and arrangements, because you were so full of lust...,” she drew the last word out until he locked gazes with her, “for steak?”

How the hell would she know about

the private rooms? He'd been surprised by the offer when he booked his reservations, but the concierge explained the Sybarite Club catered to the needs of all its patrons—which included private rooms for the more adventurous. He was fine with a bed and turned down the offer of a toy box, or to have them deliver his own.

Toy box.... Shaking his head, he reached for his beer. “Yes, I want a steak. A big one. Maybe a baked potato with it.” Stuff that took time to cook and give him time to switch to water—and maybe drown himself in the restroom with a make-shift, cold shower.

Kara chuckled and the soft, throaty sound of it stroked his senses. “You do

realize I'm not a virgin nor have I been hoodwinked, fooled, or somehow tricked into being here? No one took advantage of me.”

Her virginity hadn't occurred to him, but since she brought it up.... “Who was he?”

“Why? Jealous?” She tapped a polished nail against the side of her glass. “You don't get to be jealous, Derek. Not when you've turned me down twice and tonight, if you keep this up, will be a third strike and you're out.”

Snapping the menu closed, he gave her a hard, heated look. “Kara, this isn't a game.”

“I've never pretended this was a game. I've never had to pretend anything

with you—or at least I didn't think I did.” She pursed her lips. “But I needed tonight for me, and it wasn't about you. So, if you're really going to play the stick-in-the-mud—eat your dinner. I'll contact the service and cancel this and see if she can make me other arrangements.” Kara drained her wine glass and rose, but Derek caught her wrist.

“Don't.” It wasn't a request. He'd never been a grabby kind of guy, and as unexpected as her presence was, he felt perversely grateful for it and didn't want her to leave.

Ever.

“Don't what?” It wasn't the anger under her words or the heat flashing in

her eyes that undid him, but the hurt glimmering just beneath the surface.

Exhaling slowly, he nodded to her chair. “Kara. Sit down. Please.” He tacked the last word on as an afterthought. Touching her had been a mistake, but he didn’t let go of her wrist. He rubbed his thumb against the silky smooth skin, aware of the erratic beat of her pulse.

She sank back into the chair. He’d expected more of a fight. At her tug, he let go of her arm, but didn’t retreat from her space. Being so close to her intoxicated him.

“What do you want from me, Derek?” She looked at him and then away. The corners of her mouth tightened and her

eyes shimmered. A study in contrasts—tough, but vulnerable.

“I’ve missed you.” Blunt honesty was the best he could do.

“Yeah, that’s why I hear from you so often.” Anger surged around the words and her jaw tightened. “And not that I’m not happy to see you—wait, I’m not happy to see you, and do you want to know why?”

Her tongue swiped over her full lower lip and the action riveted him. He ached to trace it with his own tongue and kiss her luscious mouth until they both panted from lack of oxygen.

“Because you see me as some punk-ass kid instead of a woman. I came out tonight because I needed this, I wanted

it, and instead I get the guy who can't wait to put a thousand miles between us and acts like a scalded cat if I touch him." As if to prove her point, she cupped his cheek. Her palm seemed softer against the roughness of his skin.

The scent of plum blossoms filled his nostrils with every breath and the fire of his desire roared to full life. It physically hurt to be so close and not touch her. All the rational reasons why wanting her was a bad idea played through his mind.

She was his best friend's kid sister.

Keith asked him to look after her.

Keith died.

And Derek promised....

“She’s young. She’s gonna grow up and marry herself some fancy doctor or a lawyer, the kind of guy who comes home every night and kisses his wife and makes sure she has everything she needs.” Keith rested against the railing of the sloped porch of his parents’ house. Derek had been forced to stand and look forebodingly at the kid picking Kara up for her senior prom.

That part hadn’t been hard.

Watching her get in the limo with the lean basketball player—that cut.

“She deserves better than us, Der. You know that.” Keith didn’t fool around. Ten times smarter than Derek, Keith could have gone on scholarship to any number of schools, but he enlisted

right alongside Derek's foolhardy ass. They were good at what they did.

He nodded. "Yep."

"Okay, then stop staring at her like you can imagine her naked or I'll bust your nose. Again." The friendly warning lacked any real menace, but Keith didn't pull his punches.

He'd broken Derek's nose twice before—once by accident and once because Derek mentioned taking Kara out. He thought Keith objected to their differences, but Keith never focused on the race card—instead he always pointed to the goals-in-life disparity. Derek was a Marine and Keith wanted more for his sister.

The reasons for staying away all crumbled to ash in his soul, licked up by the greedy, hot flame of need.

“Are you seriously going to sit there and stare at me?” she demanded and pulled away.

He caught her wrist and rubbed his cheek against her palm. “Shh.”

“Did you just shush me?”

He could almost see the mercury rising on her temper. Leaning forward, he captured her face in his hands and kissed her. The first brush of his mouth on hers was hard—he meant it as a lesson—but she met his force with her own demand. Opening to the invasion of his tongue, she tasted even better than he remembered.

Kissing her was the sweetest mistake he'd ever made. Silencing her turned carnal, and she drew him in, captivating him completely. What few shreds of reason remained sounded the alarm, but he ignored it. By the time he pulled back, they both panted.

Leaving the table for the room he'd booked roared through his mind—a room with a bed, soundproof walls, and utter privacy. Blunting the edge of his passion on some stranger was supposed to make facing her so much easier.

But he didn't want any other woman.

He hadn't in a really long time.

The dazed look in her eyes gratified him, but he wanted more. Rising, he grabbed his jacket and her wrap and

tugged her to her feet. For the first time in he didn't know how long, she offered no protest or sharp retort. Guiding her through the restaurant, he caught the host's eye and nodded to the private door the man showed him to earlier. It was open by the time they reached it.

Kara threatened to book another date, another one-night stand with some stranger, and he didn't doubt for a second that she would do it. The hallway was well-lit and quiet, the closing door muting the sounds on the other side. He walked deliberately, identifying each room number until reaching number eight—his new favorite number. Inserting the key card, he unlocked it and guided her in.

Only once they were inside did he let her go and lean back against the closed door. Tossing her purse, his jacket and the wrap onto the little chair, he slid his hands into his pockets and waited for her to turn around.

“Are we...?” She couldn’t quite seem to meet his gaze. Wonder and wariness came with awareness.

He didn’t usually have to struggle for control, it came naturally to him, but he wrestled with the urge to toss her on the bed and go down on her until the only thought in her mind was him.

“Take off your dress,” he ordered, barely recognizing the low, rough sound of his voice.

Challenge rallied her spirit and her

eyebrows lifted. “I beg your pardon?”

He didn't smile. It took too much effort to do anything other than stay against the door. “Take off your dress or it's going to rip when I take it off you in about thirty seconds. Maybe less.”

Surprise rippled across her face and she took a step toward him. In the hushed silence of the room, the slide of the fabric on her skin was torture.

“Derek?”

“Twenty-five seconds.”

Her breath caught and she ran her sweet pink tongue over her full lower lip. “I thought you....” Apprehension filled her eyes.

“Twenty seconds.” He fisted his hands in his pockets, trying to keep them

still.

“Okay, so now we are having sex? I want to make sure I’m on the right page of *Derek for Dummies*.” She put her hands on her hips, a sassy tilt to her chin. Apprehension and wariness fled, leaving his forbidden goddess to dare him.

“Fifteen seconds,” he murmured, almost looking forward to shredding the dress. She didn’t need to be out in public in it—no other man deserved to see her looking that fine.

“I swear to God, Derek, if I take off this dress and you walk out with it in your hand, I’ll prance through that club bare-ass naked.”

His eyes nearly crossed at the image. “Ten seconds.”

She reached for the zipper and he held his breath. The metal slid down with a loud rasp.

He forgot to count.

The dress hit the floor and he forgot to think.

Chapter Three

Kara couldn't stop the shiver wrapping around her spine. Meeting his bold demand left her nude save for a pair of sheer panties. Derek stared at her like he wanted to take a deep bite out of her. Despite her bravado earlier, she didn't possess near as much worldly knowledge or experience as she pretended. Losing her virginity and one other serious boyfriend accounted for the two whopping notches in her belt.

And they had nothing on Derek. He was quiet, deliberate, and radiated a pure masculinity that heated her body just by being in the same room with her.

The cool air tightened her nipples. She expected him to do more than simply stand there, but he didn't move away from the door. His gaze locked on her. He was so much more than just a good-looking man. Sexy, exasperating, amusing—and loyal to the bone.

“Turn all the way around for me.” Her heart kicked her ribs at the order. “I want to see....”

See what? Instead of asking, she slid out of her heels and turned in a semi-circle to face him, more curious to see his reaction than anything else. Strain etched his face and a muscle ticked in his jaw. For a second, she thought his throat even convulsed with a hard swallow.

Did looking at her really affect him that much? When he still didn't leave the door, her skittish nerves resurfaced and she folded her arms, blocking his view of her breasts.

He frowned. "Did you change your mind?"

The look of genuine worry knitting his brows together softened her heart. Stepping toward him, she shook her head slowly. "No. I have not changed my mind—but you're just standing there, staring at me, and I'm a little naked here."

A smile curved his lips and her heart flip-flopped. His bronzed skin reddened around his ears—the poor things always burned. His normally dark brown hair

had bleached light blond by his time in the sun, but where his haircut grew in, it darkened.

She drew closer to him, leaning toward his heat. Being near him always felt like that, the sheer force of him pulling at her.

“Be very sure, because when I touch you, it’s going to be a rush and I won’t be in all that much control. You have no idea how much I want to taste you, kiss you, feel you come—and that’s just to start.” His voice was slightly rough, and his eyes dilated.

Holy hell...I do affect him.

He’d always pushed her away, dismissed her, laughed her off—except the single time he’d kissed her. But after

that kiss, he left. Torn between the desire to know and the desire to feel, she took the initiative and threaded her arms around his neck.

Initiating the kiss wasn't hard, but she didn't stay in charge for long. He took her lips in a hot, open-mouthed possession. Yearning hummed through her, and her head started to spin. He whirled her around and pressed her up to the cool wood of the door. She could barely hear his voice, he said something against her mouth. He glided his fingertips over her, delicate skimming touches that grew more insistent.

She found the buttons of his shirt and yanked them free, uncaring when one went flying. Pulling her head back, she

glared. He shot her a questioning look, his breath coming in hard, shallow pants.

“Shirt. Off.” She drew her finger down the line of bare skin revealed by the separated buttons. “See? I can give orders, too.”

He grinned, stripped the shirt off and tossed it behind him. She splayed her hands on the hard wall of his chest and the light dusting of hair that coated him. Like the hair on his head, it had bleached golden, too. God, he was so built—hard sinewy strength, and she discovered a whole new appreciation for the gentleness of his touch.

“Hey,” he whispered, pulling her attention from the solid cut of his pecs to meet his dark gaze. He bent his head and

kissed her again, and this time she didn't imagine a sense of control. The contact inflamed her senses and devoured her will. He never stopped caressing her, shaping her breasts, teasing the nipples before following the outline of her shape to her hips, then down to her ass.

She moaned as he lifted her and hitched her legs around his hips. Even through the clothes separating them, she couldn't mistake the hard length of his cock for anything other than what it was.

He wants me. The thought ripped through her like a geyser of pure joy. Whirling her away from the door, he walked toward the bed and laid her down. Hooking his thumbs into her panties, he tugged them off her legs and

stopped.

His expression squeezed her heart. Joy softened his face—joy and something like awe. He swallowed hard, his dark eyes almost unreadable. Need crawled through her, and she pushed up on her elbows.

“Derek...?”

“Yeah?” His gaze fixed on her legs and stoked the heat burning through her system to near boiling. The naked desire on his face should have terrified her, but it only served to make her bolder.

“I won’t break.” Extending her leg, she ran her bare foot down his pant leg.

“You have no idea how much I want you right now. I’m not entirely sure I trust myself.” Veins popped on the

corded muscles of his arms, like he physically fought himself.

Sitting up, she kept her movements slow and careful. She recognized that look on his face. She'd seen it on enough veterans to know he struggled with something internally and no matter how intimate their position, it didn't have to have anything to do with her.

Working her way to the end of the bed, she set her feet on the floor. Careful, as though coaxing a baby bird, she caught his hand. "It's okay. You're here with me, Derek. Can you take a deep breath?"

He squeezed her hand and bent down to kiss her knuckles. Dropping to his knees, he nudged her thighs apart and

leaned in to her. The warmth of his breath teased her skin and sent a wave of tenderness through her. Stroking the back of his head, she pressed a kiss to his temple.

Little by little, he wrapped his arms around her and inhaled deeply. He shuddered with the exhale.

“That’s it, breathe,” she murmured. “Deep, cleansing breaths.”

The vibration of his chuckle teased her skin and her sex clenched in response. Did he want comfort or need it? *And am I going to hell for being turned on by it?* She cradled him, soaking up his heat and nearness.

His cheek rubbed against her breast, the rasp of his stubble rough and

tantalizing. Her nipples tightened almost painfully with need. The lazy heat at her core turned into a raging inferno. Derek groaned and closed his mouth over one of her nipples. Pleasure spiked through her.

“I love you, Kara.” The muffled words shredded her, and she eased back from his seeking mouth, but he wouldn’t be denied. He captured her nipple and sucked the tip between his teeth, scraping sparks of pleasure through her overwrought system.

She’d longed to hear those words for so many years, hanging on his every smile and casual joke. Loving him brought her almost no respite since she realized what she felt for him wouldn’t

easily go away or be dismissed—no matter how he might rebuff her advances or interest. Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes.

“Oh, Derek...” She held onto him and stroked his back. “I love you, too.”

She had no idea if he heard her. His slow, sensual assault moved from one breast to the other. He slid his hand between her thighs, and she nearly wept needing him. He worked his way down to her belly and kissed the flesh on the inside of her thigh.

“Derek?” she murmured. Slipping his palms under her ass, he lifted her. Her next words strangled in her throat as he licked his way up the seam of her sex. “Okay.” She closed her eyes and fisted

the bedspread. “We’ll talk later....”

Derek wanted to take and plunder. Confessing he loved her wrenched something loose, and he was out of control. He set his mouth on her sex with loving licks. She writhed and moaned beneath him as he kissed a path to her clit. Sucking the nub hard, he savored her every reaction.

Working a finger into her, he groaned when her inner muscles clamped down. Would she grasp as greedily at his cock when he thrust into her? Would she tug him deeper and deeper? Could he lose himself inside her as he’d wanted to for so long? He drew on her clit over and over until she began to thrash. With her

orgasm imminent, he pulled away. He wanted to be inside her when she came, wanted to feel her fly apart in his arms.

Annoyance echoed in her low growl and he laughed. He delighted in her, working his way up her length. Her smooth skin spurred him on, every soft breath took him apart piece by piece. He wanted to take hours with her, play out every fantasy, provoke every possible reaction. He'd dreamed of the moment over the years, when he allowed himself the pleasure.

He'd planned how he would take her—against a wall, on a bed, on the floor—above her, below her, behind her, pushing her until she was out of her mind and begging him. But he was the one

going out of his mind, and his body begged for relief. Reason and his intentions abandoned him. When her mouth collided with his and she arched up to him, her heat scorched him through his pants.

Naked.... He needed to be naked immediately. Kissing her hard, he rose and stripped. Fumbling for the condoms in his wallet, he swore when the three scattered on the bed. Kara sat up and laughed, the wild warmth and radiance in her face ravishing him. Scooping up one of the condoms, she ripped the corner off the foil with her teeth.

His tension dissolved in horny, teenage humor. "I think that's the sexiest thing I've ever seen."

She paused and gave him a speculative look. “I don’t know that I’d confess that, Marine. Remind me that we need to work on your definition of sexy.” Despite her admonition, she rolled the condom into place, and he shuddered at the caress of her hand, surprised as hell that he didn’t come at her gentle attention.

“You are my definition of sexy.” His hands shook with desire, and he couldn’t see anything else but her. “I wanted to make this last for you.”

“Honey,” she wrapped her arms around his neck as he grasped her hips, adjusting her, “You’ve made this last more than a decade. I will *kill* you if you make me wait any longer.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He grinned and entered her with one, hard thrust. She bit down on his shoulder, her moan barely muffled and reverberating through his soul. A man who prided himself on control, he fought to keep his thrusts in check, but Kara dug her nails into his back and cried out encouragement as they rocked together. She came apart with every gliding thrust and her inner muscles clamped down just as he’d imagined, drawing him so deep he forgot where he ended and she began.

Somehow he managed to find her mouth. His balls tightened and he cried out his own release as an orgasm exploded out of him. The moment finally coming true had haunted his dreams for

years, always tempting him with the forbidden fruit. But it didn't matter how many times he'd imagined it or woke sweat drenched because of her, the dreams couldn't compare to the decadent reality of it.

Collapsing on top of her wasn't the most graceful thing he'd ever done, and it took a while for his brain and body to reconnect. She grunted beneath him, but didn't complain, the delicious shivers wracking her, convulsing around his cock and eliciting his own series of shudders.

"I don't deserve you, Kara," he whispered.

"Okay." She patted his shoulder and he had the sensation of someone

mollifying a child.

“Hey.” It took everything he had to raise up and look down at her. “I mean that.”

“Uh huh.” Her eyes were half closed and a lazy smile curved her lips. She looked drunk. Gorgeous, but drunk. The perfect Cleopatra and he wanted to worship her body like an altar. The purple prose amused him—but it fit.

“You’re not listening to me.” He deposited a kiss on the corner of her sensuous mouth.

“You don’t deserve me. You mean that. I’m not listening to you.” Kara cracked one eyelid open. “I am listening to you, but I’m also floating on the sea of orgasm and ecstasy at the moment. We’ll

talk about your relationship inadequacy later.”

“Inadequacy?” The challenge to his masculinity couldn’t be ignored.

“You are too easy to tease.” Laughter rippled through her expression and she pinched his ass. “Way too easy and you said you loved me. Which means you don’t get to take it back.” She wrapped her legs around his hips, effectively trapping him.

He remembered saying it and he tested it out again. “I do love you. I’ve loved you for a really long time.”

Easing over onto his side, he pulled her next to him. He’d barely looked at the room and found he didn’t care that they were inside a club or that the rest of

the world waited just down that hallway. All that mattered—Kara—was in his arms.

Finally.

“Say it again,” she murmured.

“I love you.” Yeah, saying it really didn’t suck.

Chapter Four

Kara had no idea how much time passed while they lay there. Derek never let go of her. Their breathing returned to normal and the erratic, racing thump of his heart slowed. She savored the moment. He *loved* her. Drunk on his admission, she wanted to bask in it before he roused and changed his mind about what he said.

Exhaling a soft sigh, he rubbed her arm. “Kara....”

“Don’t.” She nuzzled his chest.

“Don’t what?” He trailed his hand along her shoulder.

“Don’t take it back yet. We have the

rest of the night. I want to enjoy this for as long as it lasts.” she snuggled and kissed the spot over his heart.

“Kara, do you really think so little of me that I’d take back saying I love you?” His quiet tone darkened, and a thrill skated up her spine. Whether for the repeat of his declaration or the danger in his voice, she couldn’t be sure.

Apparently they were going to have the conversation whether she wanted it or not. Lifting her head, she studied him. “I can count on my hand the number of times I thought we were going somewhere and then you shut me down. Twice when you were in a towel.”

“I don’t have enough fingers or toes to count the number of times I’ve been

stupid in my life.” He curled her hair around his finger. “I promised your brother I would look after you, and he wasn’t the biggest fan of me getting you into bed.”

“Yeah, but Keith—Keith had plans.”

“Yes, he did.” Derek chuckled. “You were going to marry a doctor or a lawyer. Some boring nine-to-five suit who’d come home every night, set you up in a big house, and make sure you were taken care of. A gentleman with a good education and the money to make sure you never lacked.”

God, that sounded like Keith. Their modest parents never let them go hungry, even if they had to keep the frills to a bare minimum. Most guys would have

cared how it affected them, but not Keith. He went military to pay for his education and had their parents put his college fund into hers.

Resting her chin on his chest, Kara sighed. “Did you ever get around to interviewing potential candidates? I’m assuming he handpicked my husband.”

“Nah, though he did like that one boyfriend of yours—Arnold? Ackron?”

“Andrew?”

“Yeah.” Derek grimaced. “Him.”

“Andrew liked to spike sorority girls’ drinks with roofies and get into bed with them so they’d date him.” She busted him on it during her sophomore year and saved her roommate from a hell of a bad night.

“Son of a bitch.” His arms tightened around her. “Keith did not know that.”

She shook her head. “Of course he didn’t. He didn’t know a lot of things about me ’cause he would have pounded Andrew into mulch and gone to jail.”

“I’d have helped.” The flat agreement didn’t surprise her. Keith and Derek were two peas in a pod, brothers from another mother.

“So manly and tough, looking after me. What is it with you Marines? Even Logan wanted me to check in tonight if anything went hinky so he could rescue me.” She shook her head. “Ya’ll seem to think I can’t take care of myself.”

“It’s not about thinking you can’t—it’s about thinking you shouldn’t have to.

And who's Logan?" And that dark dangerous note threaded through his voice again.

It would be fun to tease him—later. "My very, very married co-worker. He helps out in the physiotherapy wing. His wife is one of my patients."

The hard tension in Derek's muscles eased. "Glad to hear it."

Doubt ambushed her. "I won't hold you to it...the confession. I know you said it could never work between us, and I know what my brother made you promise."

His expression froze and he sighed. "Kara...."

"No. It's okay. I get it. I get honor, and fidelity, and loyalty. Semper fi and all

that—okay maybe I don't get it completely, but I want to. I'll respect it even if I don't like it.”

“Are you done?” He raised his eyebrows in question.

“I just wanted you to know I understand, and I'll do my best to keep my distance.” Though if it had been hard before, it'd be unbelievably impossible now. She'd touched him, felt him beneath her—in her. And everything about it was so right.

“Done *now*?” The line of his mouth thinned, whitening at the edges, and a muscle in his jaw twitched. Apparently she'd pissed him off again.

“Fine.” She let it go. “I'm done.”

“Good.” Sliding a hand behind her

neck, he tugged her down and captured her mouth, blotting out all the whirring thoughts in her head with a fresh blanket of lust. Her heart ping-ponged against her ribs and excitement coiled in her belly.

Breaking the kiss, he kept his forehead pressed to hers. “There are three things you need to know about me. The first is Keith was my best friend in this world. I’d have cut off my arm for him, and I did. He asked me to leave you be, let you grow up, and when he knew he wouldn’t make it, he made me promise to look after you. Second, I’m a man of my word; I don’t break it. If I say something, I mean it. I promised him to look after you and make sure you were

happy and I let you grow up. You're a grown woman. How did you put it earlier? A grown, fine-assed woman.” His grin shackled her heart. She would do anything for this man. He was the missing piece of her puzzle. “And three, I love you more than I love my own life. Staying away from you has been the hardest damn thing I've ever done, but when you were eighteen and in my room that day—yeah—that made it even harder. I took a job at Mike's Place to be near you. I'm out. I won't have to go back again.”

Her heart skipped. “Discharged?”

“Fully. Keith didn't want you with a Marine because he knew we aren't nine-to-fivers, you'd be alone more than

you'd be with me. But I'm out, and nine-to-five with you sounds like plenty of adventure for me. And I want it with you."

It sounded like everything she'd ever wanted, except.... "Derek Green, you took a job to be *near* me and then planned a one-night stand with some stranger?"

Yeah, he'd hoped they'd gloss over that part. "In my defense, you planned a one-night stand of your own." He kept his arms tight around her lest she try to slip away.

"I thought I didn't stand a chance with you and I got tired of hanging around waiting for you to notice." She pinched

him—hard.

“Ow.” Capturing her wrist, he shook his head. “I always noticed you.”

“Uh huh.” She whacked him with her free hand, and he caught her wrist and rolled her onto her back, pinning her to the bed.

“Ow. Stop hitting me.” He laughed.

“You’re stupid.” She pursed her lips and scowled at him. “You make *plans* to be near me, but you don’t call, and you book a sex date before you see me? And then you tell me you love me? And then you tell me how it’s always been about me? How was tonight about me?”

“Who am I in bed with right now?” He couldn’t defend the choice. It seemed the right thing to do at the time and he

had no idea how bad an idea it was until she walked into the club.

“That’s only because we were matched up.” The news didn’t seem to mollify her.

“Sweetheart, I think the fact that this Madame Eve lady matched us speaks for itself.” Trailing kisses across the frown wrinkling her brow, he teased the corners of her eyes and then pressed his lips to each of her cheeks. “I wanted to do everything right and keep my word to Keith, but looking after you means making sure you’re happy...and I can’t do that from a distance.”

“You just figured that out?”

Damn, she was amazingly beautiful, even when angry. The sparks in her eyes,

the curl of her lip, and the open challenge in her expression were amazing facets of the perfect jewel. He'd seen so many horrible things in his life and done worse in the name of defending his country, but Kara cleansed him like fresh spring air after a stormy, turbulent winter.

“I'm a slow learner, but I never forget.” He nuzzled the corner of her mouth. He couldn't get enough of her. “And I'm very determined to make sure you never forget, either.”

“So if I'd just jumped your bones a few years ago? Shown up in a towel or less than that...we could have avoided all of this?”

The mouthwatering image turned him

on. He grinned. “Maybe, but now you can make me pay for my transgressions for the rest of my life. I promise to be a model Marine and take it like a man.” Laughter huffed against his ear and he lifted his head to gaze at her. Opportunities to fix the past didn’t come up often, and he wouldn’t waste this one for anything in the world. It didn’t matter how long it took or what he had to do, he’d come to Texas for Kara no matter what other stories he made up to excuse his choices.

“I’m going to hold you to that. And I haven’t forgiven you yet.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He trailed his fingers down her arms, and dipped his head lower to kiss a path to her breasts.

“Please, tell me how I can make it up to you.”

Her only answer was a groan.

One week later....

“Kara, your boyfriend is here,” Logan called across the gym, loud enough that everyone heard it. Silence cut through the room and she bit back a retort to watch Derek walk the gauntlet under the watchful gaze of more than two dozen servicemen and women working out on various pieces of equipment.

Damn, if he didn't hold his head high. Apparently word of their dating made for swift traveling gossip at the facility. She hadn't encouraged it, but she hadn't

denied it, either. But what a week it had been. He'd started his new job and picked her up every day for lunch and dinner and brought her to work after breakfast. The perfect week, and she kept waiting to see if the bubble would burst. To his credit, Derek focused on her and not the rumors.

“Ready?” Amusement gleamed in his eyes.

She never wanted it to end. “You really are the perfect Twinkie.”

He blinked. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Completely delicious, and impossible to say no to.” She wrapped her arms around him and gave the guys a show with a toe-curling kiss. The hoots and wolf whistles broke them apart and

Derek laughed.

“Since you can’t say no,” he rubbed his nose to hers and then withdrew, dropping to one knee. Fear knotted along with the hope lodged in her throat. “Why don’t you marry me?”

Her heart donkey-kicked her ribs. “What?”

“Will you marry me?”

A dozen reasons to say no rioted in her brain. It had only been a week. They had so much history between them. They never talked about plans or the future, and they spent so much time being drunk on each other. She didn’t even know if he snored—she always fell asleep before he did and woke after. How well could they possibly know each other? So

many reasons to say no, to say wait.

But she only needed one reason to say yes. It had always been Derek. She had not, and would never, love another the way she loved him.

“Yes,” she whispered and melted into his kiss as he lifted her up and spun her around. Shouts and whistles and applause surrounded them, but Kara barely heard any of it. Derek belonged to her—finally. They had the rest of their lives to answer everything else.

~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>

[Marine in the Wind](http://bit.ly/12ycDzJ)

<http://bit.ly/12ycDzJ>

Freewill bound...

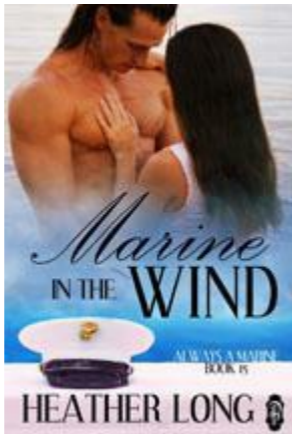
Greg Rainwater lost a piece of himself in the deserts of Iraq, a piece his Shaman great-grandfather would call his soul. Heading to Freewill, Wyoming, the retired Marine hopes to find what he's looking for. After one meeting with the beautiful Georgia Crane, he thinks he has found the missing piece. She has other ideas.

Under her skin...

Georgia gave up her dreams to look after her stubborn, ailing grandfather in small-town Freewill. Newcomer Greg isn't helping by enabling the old man to break her careful rules every chance he gets. That doesn't stop her from lusting after the hot Marine—she simply refuses to give into the desire.

Sexual healing...

Paired together by Madame Eve's 1Night Stand dating service, Georgia is mortified, while Greg can't believe his good luck. Distrust turns to attraction and irritation to desire, but can they bridge their differences and find what they're missing—each other?



Marine
IN THE **WIND**

ALWAYS A MARINE
BOOK #5

HEATHER LONG



Whiskey Tango Foxtrot

Have you ever woken up every day afraid of everything?

For single mom and widow Melody Carter, six months passed since an IED ripped her life apart. Everyone is sympathetic and offers platitudes of comfort and support. Everyone thinks they know why she's grieving, but Melody isn't mourning her broken heart. She's ashamed to be grateful her abusive husband won't hurt her anymore and scared for her child. Born with a mild heart defect, her daughter needs lifesaving surgery and with her funds

tight and her emotional scars tighter, she's running out of options. When she receives an offer for assistance from Mike's Place, can Melody put her faith in the 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

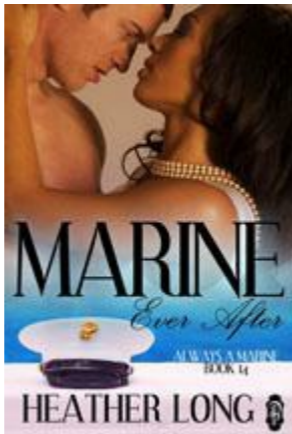
Marine Paul Torres is used to women who enjoy the pleasure of the moment and whom he can bed with a wink and a smile. But with so many of his friends settling down, he's turned on by the allure of finding the right partner as well. Even more so when he meets Lillianna Hansen while attending a wedding.

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....



MARINE

Ever After

ALWAYS A MARINE

BOOK 14

HEATHER LONG



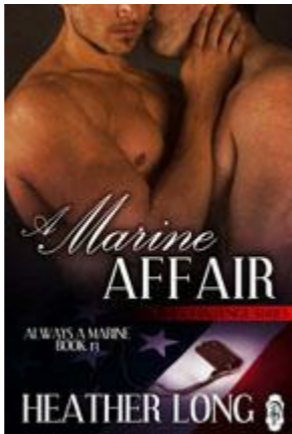
[A Marine Affair](#)

Secret lovers for years, Commander Rick McConnell and Colonel Elijah Masters have nurtured their very private relationship with planned vacations and leaves, always meeting somewhere different—always escaping off the grid. It worked for them—career officers with a desire to serve their country and a passion for each other.

The repeal of the military's policy, *Don't Ask, Don't Tell*, provides them with the tremendous opportunity to come out to their friends and loved ones. Rick

wants to seize the day, but Eli isn't so certain. His hesitation leads to a fight, an ultimatum, and a breakup. Rather than confront their issues, Eli takes a foreign assignment.

A year's separation changes both of them. The last person Eli expects to see when he steps off the plane is Rick, but the physician wants another chance with the only man he's ever loved, and he has a plan. Will bitterness, recriminations, and loss keep them apart or can these two officers rediscover the faith and loyalty that bound them for so long?



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