

RENO'S CHANCE

From the "Honk If You Love Real Men" Anthology

By Lora Leigh

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Prologue

It wasn't a party she wanted to go to, but Raven had promised her best friend Morganna that she would be there. Being there meant she would, of course, run into Reno .

Reno, with the softest gray eyes she had ever seen, the most luscious buff body God had ever given a man. As she left the bathroom, her body washed, scrubbed, lotioned, and perfumed, she assured herself it wasn't for Reno .

But she knew better.

Her body knew better.

She wanted to come up with an excuse to stay home, but she knew she wouldn't. It had been weeks since she had seen him and she missed him.

They were friends, she told herself. She was allowed to miss him. It didn't mean anything. Just because her heart hammered in her chest at the thought of seeing him, her breasts became swollen, her nipples hard and tight, it didn't mean anything except he could turn her on.

That was all it meant.

She threw herself on the bed, turning on her back to stare at the ceiling overhead. It wasn't the ceiling she saw, though. She closed her eyes and it was Reno she saw. His head lowering, his lips so full and sensual, taking hers.

She was shocked at the moan that passed her lips, the heaviness that filled her body, the liquid warmth she could feel between her thighs. His hands were broad, callused. How would they feel moving over her naked body, cupping her breasts as his fingers, then his tongue, rasped over her nipples?

She licked her finger and thumb, moving it to her nipple, mimicking what she thought he would do and had to bite her lip to keep from crying out at the pleasure.

"Yes," she whispered instead. "That's what I want, only better."

And it would be better. His fingers would be hotter, rougher, more demanding.

Her legs shifted on the bed as her hand moved down her midriff.

Pathetic, her mind jeered.

She could fantasize, she told herself fiercely. That's all it was, just a fantasy.

She touched the bare flesh between her thighs and a broken sigh fell from her lips.

God, she wanted him.

And she could have him. She knew she could. He had been chasing her for nearly two years now. Every time he came home, he watched her with a promise swirling in the stormy depths of his gaze. And that didn't count the stolen kisses, the knowledge that one day soon, he was going to start chasing her in earnest. She knew it was coming. Knew she could fight him only so long.

If she fought him at all.

He made her hot, wet. Her fingers slid across the dewy flesh, gliding along the silken juices that eased their way until they rasped against her swollen clit.

"Reno," she whispered his name, her breathless voice sounding as hungry as her body felt.

But it was Reno she saw. His touch, his fingers that stroked the sensitive little bud that kept her on the edge of pleasure, her release a strangled breath away as she imagined his lips covering hers, his tongue licking, stroking, probing. She gasped, her fingers moving faster, more firmly against her clit as she felt her release peaking.

"Yes, take me." Her head tossed on the pillow, her fingers pushing her pleasure higher. "Now, Reno. Now."

She imagined him moving over her, his cock, broad and engorged with lust, sliding through the wet folds, pushing forward, stretching her, taking her...

Her hips arched as the explosion tore through her, pleasure singing through her body as she whimpered

in need. But it wasn't enough. It was never enough. The release, despite the pleasure, was tinged with a hollow emptiness, a knowledge that nothing could match the real thing. That if Reno were with her, taking her, she wouldn't be whispering—she would be screaming.

Her hand fell back to the bed as she took a deep, weary breath.

He was all she wanted in the world, all she had ever really needed. And he was the one man she could never allow herself to have.

Chapter One

"Need a ride?"

Raven McIntire stiffened in shock at the raspy, dark voice behind her. She turned slowly, her breath halting in her throat at the sight that met her eyes.

Reno Chavez. Six feet three inches of tough, powerful muscle and finely honed strength. Thick, midnight black hair cut close to his head showed off the strong, harsh features of his face. Brooding gray eyes, high cheekbones, lips that drew the eye time and time again. He was a well-built, powerful male animal and he knew it. Even more, Raven knew it, and had been hopelessly drawn to him for years.

How did you fight the man your heart ached for? The one who had been your best friend, your confidant, your protection as a teenager? The first man you ever fantasized about, and the only one that made you hot enough to whisper his name in the dark safety of your bed?

It wasn't easy, but she had been managing it. Well, sort of. He.

did manage to sneak the odd, knee-weakening-make-her-want-to-beg, kiss whenever he had the chance. She had sworn she wasn't giving him any more chances after the last one. But she was still standing there, staring up at him like a lovesick fool.

He tipped the bottle of beer to his lips and drank, his eyes locked on hers as she stared up at him in fascination. A woman couldn't help but be fascinated by him and she was no exception. The only difference was, she liked to think she was smart enough to stay away from the bad boys and keep on the safe side of the emotional court.

"I called a cab." She lifted the cell phone she held in her hand as she flashed him a bright smile.

Reno had always been a bad boy. A devil-may-care charmer who had stolen her heart when she was no more than a teenager and continued to hold it. Even now, after he entered the one career that made him off-limits to her. She knew the perils of loving a Navy SEAL, and was terrified of the cost of giving into the seductive war he had been waging on her for the past year.

He continued to watch her as her gaze flickered nervously to the street. She was standing on the porch of his sister, Morganna's house, having ditched the party nearly a half-hour before. She wasn't a party girl, no matter how she tried to pretend for her friend's sake at these little get-togethers.

She wore the short, flirty black skirt with its low-rise waist and the matching, snug, sleeveless top with its high-rise hem. Her tanned belly was bare clear below her navel, the little diamond navel ring she wore glittering in the overhead light of the porch. And there was no mistaking the fact that he noticed. His gaze kept drifting down, his eyes heavy-lidded, making her belly tingle in response.

It reminded her too much of the touch of his lips, his hands moving over her back. The last few times he had been home after assignments, he hadn't let a chance to touch her go by. He was trying to seduce her, and Raven knew it. Knew it and had no idea how to combat it.

"Stop looking at me like that, Reno," she ordered him, frowning as his gaze lifted to hers again.

"But I like looking at you, Raven." A grin tilted one corner of his mouth as he stared down at her. "I like looking at you a lot. Did I ever mention how much I miss the days when you flirted and teased, instead of running from me?"

She snorted indelicately. "I bet you do. You have enough women chasing after your tight butt. You don't need me." She glared at him suspiciously. "How much have you had to drink anyway?"

"Not near enough," he sighed as he reach out, pulling at a curl that fell over her shoulder. The action had her heart racing, her womb clenching in hunger. "Do you realize this is my first night home and my bed is occupied? I went to find the earplugs to drown out that crazy music and crash for a few hours. But I think the bed is going to need de-lousing first."

His lips twisted with a grimace, though his gaze was rueful as he stared down at her. And he did look tired, exhausted, in fact. Raven knew he wouldn't be likely to sleep here until tomorrow night, not if his bed was in use.

She crossed her arms under her breasts, knowing that what she was about to do was dumb. Really dumb. But if she had a weak spot, it was Reno . It was a weakness she fought continually, but a woman could only be so strong. And, she didn't have a chance against an exhausted vulnerable Reno .

"Look, if you mean it about the ride, I have an extra room. You can crash there until you're rested enough to de-louse your bed." she offered. Hell, she couldn't see the man suffer. He fought for God and country. It just wasn't right.

He tilted his head slowly, those gorgeous gray eyes of his softening marginally.

And she was softening, as well. All she could remember was the touch of his lips, his hands, the heat of that hard, corded body the last time he had been home. What he made her feel was dangerous, addictive.

"You don't have to do that, Raven. I'll toss Morganna out of her bed."

"Good luck." She snorted at that one. "Last chance, Reno . My cab should be here in the next five minutes, and if you don't have me on the road by then, I'm taking my offer back."

A grin quirked his lips. "You drive a hard bargain, Raven. My bag is still packed," he said lightly. "I'll go grab it and my keys. Stay put."

Evidently, the lure of a quiet bed was too much to resist. She sighed as he turned and reentered the

house, his tight buns flexing beneath his jeans as he moved. Damn, that man was packed from head to toe. He was definite male candy and she had a horrible sweet tooth.

She throttled a purely female groan of frustration at the thought. He couldn't have a clue just how hard she had lusted after his male form over the past years, or how hard denying him over the last few months had been. The only thing that had saved her from drowning in her own drool was the fact that she knew he was way more man than she could handle. That had been forcibly brought home to her just after her eighteenth birthday, nearly seven years before, when she surprised him by bursting into his bedroom in her excitement to see him. Reno was six years older than she was, a grown man, sexual and intense, even then.

She shivered at the memory. She had shuddered, eyes wide as she stared at the curvy blonde tied to his bed.

"Perv," she had snapped before turning and literally running.

He had been naked, aroused, hard and thick and long and tight... and hard and thick and long... She closed her eyes and clenched her teeth as her clit began to throb and her pussy spilled its slick juices along the sensitive folds between her thighs. She wasn't going to think about it, she told herself fiercely. If she did, she would never get any work done tonight.

"Let's go." He stepped outside, his duffel bag slung over his shoulder, the keys to his pickup in his hand.

This was stupid, told herself silently. But she couldn't stop the rush of pleasure as his hand settled in the small of her back and he urged her to the side of the street. Callused and wide, his fingers nearly spanned her lower back, the strength in them sending a thrill shooting through portions of her anatomy that she wished weren't nearly so responsive.

He led her to the wide, double-cab, black pickup she had admired earlier. She should have known it was his, she thought in resignation. It was as strong as he was. A man's vehicle.

Opening the door, he gripped her hips before she could do more than gasp, and lifted her into the seat. Eyes wide, surprise whizzing through her, she stared back at him, aware that her response to the action must be plain on her face. Dammit, she was supposed to be playing it safe.

"Scoot in," he whispered as his hands slid slowly from her bare waist, and he stepped back, his hand going to the door.

Drawing in a deep breath, she swung her legs into the truck, moving in just enough for him to close the door. Her flesh tingled where he touched her, heated and ached for more.

"Dumb, Raven," she whispered to herself as he loped around the truck. "Really dumb."

He opened his door, tossed the duffel bag in the back and stepped easily into the cab. He had no problem navigating the height from the street because his legs were so damned long, she thought irritably.

The truck pulled from the curb as she sat nervously, staring out the window, calling herself every kind of fool she could think of. This was kind of like the lamb inviting the wolf into its pasture, she thought in disgust.

"Thanks for the bed, Raven," he said softly as he turned at the corner, his voice sending shivers down her spine.

That voice should be illegal. Someone should put duct tape over his lips and a sign on his body that declared him dangerous to the female sex, because that's exactly what he was.

"Not a problem." Liar, liar, she raged silently. There wasn't a chance in hell she was going to get any work done with him in her house.

She tugged at her skirt as his eyes strayed to the bare flesh of her lower thighs. Dammit, she knew this skirt was a bad idea. It was sexy and fun and showed her body off to its best advantage. And Reno was definitely taking advantage of all the bare skin flashing.

She could feel his gaze flickering over her legs, her profile, and though he kept both hands carefully on the wheel, she could almost feel them coasting over her body instead. Callused and warm, rasping against her flesh as she arched to him.

She clenched her teeth, pushing the vivid fantasy back as she restrained the shiver that would have worked over her body. Flames licked just beneath her skin, sensitizing her flesh, reminding her why she didn't have a love life. Because she knew, clear to her soul, that no other man could make her want him as intensely as Reno could. Without a touch, without a word. Hell, he didn't even have to be in the country.

Pathetic. Stupid. Reno was so far out of her league that they didn't even exist within the same reality. He was a warrior, a fighter; his world consisted of blood and death while hers existed within the security he helped create. And to be honest, he terrified her. The needs and desires she had when she thought of him, the fantasies that taunted her in the deepest part of the night and the sexual hunger she could feel building within her were too intense, too damned strong.

"Here we go." He pulled into the parking lot, swinging the truck into the empty space in front of the town house. "I really appreciate you letting me stay over."

She glanced up at him. Damn, he did look tired. But still sexy as hell. She was such a lost cause where he was concerned.

"Not a problem," she said again as she gripped the door handle and swung the door open. "Come on and get settled in. I have to work some tonight, but I'm pretty quiet on the computer."

She pulled her key from the minuscule purse she carried at her hip. Behind her, she was aware of Reno moving silently. How the hell did he do that? There wasn't even the sound of his shoes on the pavement.

She unlocked the door, flipping on the light to the small living room as she led the way in.

"Come on up. The bed is made and everything, so you can crash whenever you want to."

She moved up the stairs, uncomfortably aware of him following her. She could feel her butt burning. Oh God, was he looking at her butt? Unconsciously she clenched the cheeks of her ass then forced herself to relax. Dumb. Dumb. Dumb. He hadn't even touched her and she was ready to rape him. This was so pathetic.

She opened the door to the spare bedroom, the one directly across from her own, and stood aside as he brushed past her. His arm slid over her breasts as her breath caught in her throat. She barely managed to throttle a hungry moan at the contact.

"Well. Good night." She had to get away from him. She had to close him up, get him out of sight.

He dropped his duffel bag to the floor and turned to face her, a slow, predatory move that reminded her of a wild animal or a hunter on the prowl. Why did she feel like the lamb?

He smiled then. A wry quirk of his lips, really, as the gunmetal color of his eyes gleamed with amusement.

"Good night, Raven," he said, his voice huskier, deeper.

The sound echoed in her pussy, her very wet, very aroused pussy. This was not good. Not good at all. She escaped the room, now heavy with his male presence and the predatory lust she saw reflected in his gaze. Morganna had warned her that Reno wouldn't wait long before pushing for what he wanted. He had made his intentions clear to her, informing her in that brisk, no-nonsense voice of his that he wouldn't let her run from him much longer.

And she had most likely just played into his hand.

Raven gritted her teeth as she paced the living room, pushing her fingers through her hair and again calling herself every type of fool she could think of. She was no match for Reno, and she knew it. How was she supposed to fight him? Hell, he was every woman's fantasy come to life, and he was now flat in the middle of her home, right across the hall from her bedroom, his hard body aroused. Yes, she had seen that bulge pressing against his jeans, the way his eyes darkened as he watched her, the determination in his gaze.

Reno was through playing, and Raven had a very bad feeling she wasn't going to get far resisting him. But what bothered her even more was the fact that she wasn't entirely certain she wanted to resist him. And that scared her more than anything.

It was her own fault, she reminded herself with harsh criticism. The day she had turned nineteen and learned that he wasn't staying home after his tour in the Navy was finished, that he was actually taking the BUDs training to become a SEAL, she had been enraged.

Not Reno. Not the man she had pinned all her dreams on. She couldn't lose him as her mother had lost her father. As she had lost her father.

"Don't go. I'll do anything," she remembered whispering tearfully, staring up at him, her hands on his chest, all her naive beliefs that her love for him would keep him with her, filling her.

He had smiled that crooked little grin she loved so well as he touched her cheek and lowered his head. She knew he had meant the kiss to be light. To be comforting, rather than exploding out of control as it had.

"I'll be back," he had sworn. "I will, Raven. For you."

She had slowly backed away from him, shaking her head, as her lips throbbed from the kiss that had sent a swelling wave of hunger rushing through her.

"If you go. I won't be here." She had choked on her tears, her fears. "I won't be here for you."

"You'll be here," he had whispered then, his voice immeasurably gentle, confident. "Just as I'll be back, Raven. You'll be here. And once I have you, baby, I won't let you go."

She had made certain he never took her. That he gained no more than the stolen kisses he managed to get when he caught her unawares. That he took no more of her heart than he already possessed.

She was going to drive him insane.

"Damn woman," he growled.

She had been running from him for years, and he had been aware of it.

But he had made up his mind on a cold winter's night as he lay alone in his bed, smiling like a fool over a teasing remark she had made one evening. He had made his mind up. Raven was his, and she was going to stay his.

She had been too young then, only seventeen, unaware of how sexual he was, of how dominant he could be. He wanted the woman he saw emerging within her, not the child she still was.

At the time, he was on leave from the navy and knew the course he wanted his life to take. As soon as possible, he was heading for SEALs training and a military career. It would be years before he could have her. Years, he knew, before she would be mature enough to accept loving him, despite the career he had chosen. But when he had told her his plans two years later, her reaction had only reinforced his belief that she needed to mature first.

She was mature now. And stubborn. Stubborn enough that he knew, if he waited any longer, she would slip out of his grasp forever. With each year, she set herself more firmly against him, more determined that he wasn't the man for her, simply because the career he had chosen was the same one that had made her parents so miserable.

He wasn't going to let her run any longer. She was stronger than her mother whether she knew it or not. And he knew damned good and well that she loved him. Otherwise, he would have had a lover to deal with, rather than just her stubbornness. And dealing with her just might end up driving him over the edge of frustration.

His cock was throbbing and that flirty little black skirt she was wearing wasn't helping matters. It barely covered her ass, showing her long, beautiful legs to advantage, at the same time baring her lower stomach like a feast to a starving man.

Long, golden brown hair, thick and filled with riotous curls, fell down her back, while her blue eyes watched him with wary arousal. She tried to hide it, but it was there, just as clear as the press of her tight, hard nipples against the snug, matching top.

The flush of her creamy cheeks, the soft part of her pink lips. She was a temptation he wasn't going to deny himself much longer. He had waited too long as it was. What good did it do a man to fight the endless wars, to survive the wounds and the loss of friends when there was no warmth left in his life? Only fantasies. And it was time to make the fantasies come to life.

His dream of being a SEAL, a warrior, had been fulfilled. It eased that pit of fury he felt each time he heard of the injustices that plagued the world. Now he had his biggest dream to fulfill. That of possessing Raven, heart and soul.

He was in her home. That was the first step. Undermining the enemy's defenses was best done from inside, as SEALs had proved more than once. Slipping under the wire, undetected, silently setting up the explosion to come.

And she would explode.

He grinned at the thought. Of making Raven so hot, so wild, she went up in flames in his arms.

Damn, he could feel his balls drawing tight against the base of his shaft, his own release begging for freedom. He had a limited amount of time to make this work. For the time being, he was on leave, but that would end the minute his team was needed. He might have a few weeks, at the most, to work with.

And if he didn't touch Raven soon, feel her lips under his, her body pressed against him, then he was going to be a candidate for the asylum.

He shifted his shoulders in an effort to relieve the tension building there. He was exhausted. He had expected to come home and rest at least one day before putting his plan into motion. Instead, he found his bed occupied, his sister in a frenzy, and the object of his obsession standing before him like the most erotic fantasy he could have imagined. Damn, that skirt.

Reno was an ass man and he knew it, and Raven's ass had tempted him for years. Perfectly rounded, taut and tempting. Her breasts were his second favorite. Full, rounded globes, her nipples pressing hard against the material of her shirt.

Son of a bitch. His cock was so damned hard, he would never manage to sleep tonight. He shook his head at the arousal beating through him and Raven's obvious determination to close him out of sight. He knew his sister's best friend better than she thought. She wasn't working, no matter what she said, so he had no problems whatsoever disturbing her. He was a man on a time limit, and he wasn't given to being wasteful with his time.

Anticipation surged through him as he strode to the bedroom door and opened it quickly. The stairs were just to his side as he turned the corner and started down them. He heard her voice, lowered, a feminine hiss of fury as she talked on the phone.

"Dammit, Morganna, the man is exhausted. He has shadows under his eyes and his face is almost dead gray. What the hell were you thinking? You knew he was coming home. He told you he was coming home."

Reno stopped halfway down the stairwell, his head tilting as something melted in his heart. He actually felt the muscles of his chest, his heart, expanding then relaxing at the realization that she was ripping his sister's ass over that party.

"I don't care how pissed off you were at Clinton. That's no reason to treat Reno like that. For God's sake, he needed to sleep and you let your friends take his bed. What kind of sister are you?... Well you shouldn't have had the party to begin with. Smack Clinton around. Having a party is not going to get his attention, you nitwit."

Actually, it would, but Reno saw no reason to point that out. Her brother Clint would make his move when he was ready and not a minute before. He was just as stubborn as Raven. Maybe more so.

"Get his bed replaced, Morganna. He cannot stay here..."

The hell he couldn't.

"Don't give me excuses. I want zero excuses. I want a phone call in the morning saying his bed is ready for him to occupy. Period. Or I swear to God I'm going to tell Clinton all about your lurid little fantasies

that you force me to listen to."

Lurid fantasies? He grimaced. He did not want to know about his baby sister's lurid fantasies. It was time to cut this conversation short.

Sighing silently, he moved down to the next step heavily, allowing her to hear him practically stomp down the stairs. When he rounded the closed-in space to the small living room, she was off the phone and staring at him with wide eyes. It was the cutest sight.

Wariness and hunger reflecting in her deep blue eyes, her breasts moving hard and fast, peaked with hard little nipples as she watched him nervously.

"You're supposed to be sleeping," she snapped, a frown forming between her brows. "I hate to hurt your feelings, Reno, but you look like something the cat dragged in."

A smile tilted his lips. She made him smile, made him want to linger in the warmth she filled him with.

"I feel like something the cat dragged in." He agreed with her there. "Am I disturbing you?"

Her shoulders lifted in a defensive shrug. "Not really." She cleared her throat nervously. "I was just yelling at Morganna. Unfortunately, I think she's too used to it. She wasn't paying much attention."

"That's Morganna for you." He watched as her gaze flickered over him, touching him with curious, hungry eyes before forcing her gaze away, staring at every point in the room, except him.

Damn, he loved how shy she could be. How sweet she was. How prickly she could get. He figured he had loved Raven all her life in one form or another. But what he felt for her now consumed him. The plan he had set in motion tonight was risky, and he admitted it, he was taking a chance, but he was damned tired of waiting for her to realize how much they meant to each other.

She was watching him warily now, biting her lower lip nervously as her gaze flickered over him again.

"You're acting like I'm going to pounce on you, Raven." He moved closer to her. He wanted to touch her so damned bad, it was killing him.

Stopping in front of her, he reached out, one finger twining in a tight curl that fell across her shoulder. Her breath caught, a flush washing over her face.

"Aren't you?" she snapped. Fiery, accusing, Raven was nobody's fool. She might be stubborn, but she was smart as hell. "Every time I turn around, you're trying to grope me."

He spread his hands out innocently. "I'm just standing here talking to you, baby. If I was going to pounce, you'd be flat on your back on that the couch rather than standing there deliberately provoking me. And as I recall that last kiss, you were groping right back."

It had been right after his last assignment. He had returned home a week late to find Raven sleeping on the couch, having evidently waited with Morganna until he arrived.

How was he supposed to resist her? Years of fantasies, of aching hunger, and there she was, a temptation to his body and to his heart, that he couldn't ignore.

She hadn't sniped at him or tried to run from him. Sleepy, seductive, she had lifted to him, her lips opening eagerly for his kiss when he knelt beside the couch. He would have had her in his bed minutes later if Morganna hadn't interrupted them when she did. That kiss, her eagerness for him and the soft breathy sound of her voice as she whispered her pleasure had sealed her fate. She was his woman.

She frowned darkly. He frowned right back at her.

"I am not provoking you," she informed him imperiously. "You're tired and disagreeable. And I really think you should head on to bed and go to sleep."

She wasn't running from him, but he could see the indecision in her eyes, the sweep of arousal and

emotions filling her. She wasn't going to back down easy, and she wouldn't give in without a fight.

"I should be," he agreed, his voice rough. "I really should be, but this is a hell of a lot more important right now."

His head dipped down before she could move, if she intended to move. Her eyes widened, her lips parted and he caught the gasp that escaped her throat.

Bombs exploded in his head. Fire rushed along his nervous system until it centered in his aching cock. She was ambrosia. She was the elixir of life.

His arms circled her, tight, as he restrained his need to eat her alive. His lips moved over hers, his tongue spearing deep as a shattered moan escaped her throat and her hands tightened at his waist before moving to his back.

He could taste coffee, mint and woman and the alternating flavors exploded on his senses, going to his head like the strongest narcotic. Reno bent over her, surrounding her; he wanted to draw her into every cell of his body as her lips opened, her tongue met his and his senses flamed. Sweet, velvet heat. The taste of her went to his head, the feel of her causing his erection to pulse and pound with a hunger barely leashed.

"Reno?" Her voice was dazed as his lips slid to her cheek, to her neck.

Her head fell back as his teeth raked her shoulder, her body becoming liquid, pliant. His. He allowed his hands to move, rather than holding her to him, roaming her back instead, pulling at the short length of the skirt until one hand could smooth over her bare buttock. Bare? Fuck!

His hand clenched on the curve as she trembled against him, a thin wail of pleasure escaping her throat a second before she jerked out of his arms.

"That was damned unfair." Raven stared back at him, shock and pleasure racing through her system as she fought to make sense of the impulses that still pounded through her body. He made her drunk, made her greedy for more of his kiss, his touch.

Oh God. That kiss. Her hand rose to her lips, her fingers feeling the swollen curves as her shoulder tingled from the rasp of his teeth.

Dammit, she was supposed to be denying him, not falling into his arms like a wimpy sex kitten. But it never failed; he touched her and she melted. She lost her mind, her sanity, her ability to remember the fact that Reno would never let her escape with any part of her heart intact.

He was watching her with blatant hunger. There was no apology, no attempt to hide the lust that burned in his eyes and darkened the features of his face.

"Who said I was going to be fair?" He growled, coming closer, looming over her as she backed into the entertainment center behind her. "Raven, are you wearing panties?"

Heat flooded her face, her body.

"Yes!" she gasped. "I am. Dammit, Reno, you aren't supposed to kiss me like that."

Like he was starving for the taste of her, ready to consume her at a moment's notice. How was a girl supposed to keep her sanity when a man stripped her control with no more than the touch of his lips?

"Why?" His voice was dark, incredibly deep. It vibrated in the pit of her stomach, causing her womb to spasm in need as her pussy creamed heatedly. The panties in question were going to be soaked if this didn't stop.

She breathed in deep, striving for control as he moved closer, pressing her into the shelf of the entertainment center as she felt the length of his erection pressing into her lower belly.

"Do you know how long I've waited for you, Raven? Since you were seventeen, teasing me, tempting me to take what I couldn't have. You're not a kid anymore. You're a woman."

She couldn't handle this. How was she supposed to fight him and herself? Especially when she wanted him so desperately?

"Find Gina what's-her-name," she snarled back, remembering the day she had burst into his room to find him naked, preparing to take another woman.

"You were a kid. I was a man, Raven. You are not a child any longer."

She shook her head. This wasn't happening.

He was destroying her defenses. He was going to break her heart.

"You tied her down," Raven gasped. She didn't want to be tied down. She really didn't. No matter how many times she dreamed about him tying her to his bed, torturing her with his touch.

"Mmm," he murmured against her lips, his tongue stroking over them slowly. "Yes, I did. Just like I want to tie you, Raven. Stretched out on my bed, unable to do anything but feel me. Feel me now. I'm dying to touch you."

His hands slid to her buttocks as he lifted her, notching the hard length of his cock against the swollen pad of her pussy as her clit throbbed in pleasure, in need. Her hands gripped his shoulders, her nails biting into the fabric of his shirt as, helplessly, her legs parted, her thighs gripping his outer legs as his hands held her closer, his fingers massaging the flesh of her ass as she shuddered in his arms.

She couldn't get the picture out of her head. Her tied to his bed rather than Gina Delaney. Her legs spread for him, the bare folds of her cunt wet and glistening as he came to her, his cock like a living arrow preparing to impale her.

"Reno. Reno, wait..." His lips were at her collarbone, his tongue stroking the sensitive skin as he thrust slowly against her, stroking her clit into full blazing life.

Every cell in her body was screaming for his touch. Her breasts were swollen, her nipples... God, her nipples were on fire.

"Ah, Raven," he whispered, lifting her closer, pressing deeper between her thighs as she shuddered, her thighs clenching, her hips moving against his, rubbing his shaft against her clit as she fought to breathe through the incredible sensations. "Baby, I don't know if I can let you go now."

"We have to wait." She shook her head, struggling against him and herself as she felt the hands at her rear parting her flesh, sending a heated strike of pleasure whipping through the tight, forbidden little entrance there.

"Wait for what?" he growled. "For another excuse to run? You run every time I come home, Raven. How am I supposed to seduce you when I can't even find you? Dammit, the waiting is over."

Chapter Two

Okay, a command, given in such a sexually rough, dominant voice should not have the juices spilling from her pussy like warm honey from a comb. But it did, and they were, even as he picked her up off her feet again and moved quickly to the couch, laying her down as he loomed over her.

His face was savagely cast, his cheekbones high and sharp, his lips full and hungry. She could feel every erogenous zone in her body perking up and taking notice of the commanding male form that had her in his grip.

"Reno, this isn't boot camp," she protested, even as she tried not to moan when he pressed her thighs part, his hands gripping her hips, holding her still as her skirt pooled inches above the decent line.

Could he see the crotch of her panties? Were they as wet as she suspected? She shuddered at the thought of him seeing the proof of her desire.

"Hell no, it's not," he growled. "Damn good thing too, baby. I'd have to punish you for insubordination

first thing. I might anyway..." His voice dropped, becoming raspier, sexier. "I could really get into spanking that pretty little ass, Raven."

No. No. No spanking. So why were the cheeks of her ass clenching as though it might be fun?

"Pervert," she gasped instead as his head lowered, his lips pressing over her navel as his tongue curled around the small diamond navel ring and tugged.

Her hips came off the couch, a high, broken cry leaving her lips as her hands gripped his head. To pull him back. Yes. Make him stop. So why the hell was she holding him closer, her fingers clenching in his hair as reality began to recede?

It was so fucking sexy. She had never known anything so erotic as Reno's lips on her stomach, his tongue flicking over the ring as his hands moved to grip her thighs, parting them further, sliding high.

She shuddered in his grip, her knees bending, her skirt rising above the crotch of her panties as his fingers smoothed over the flesh of her inner thighs.

"Perfect," he whispered as his lips began to move higher. "There you go, baby, just lay there and let me make you feel good. Do you know how much I've wanted to just make you feel good? Make you burn for me?"

His tongue swiped over a nipple as he neared her breast. Even through the material of her short tank top, the sensation was incredible. Hot enough to send the blood surging through her body, her nipples hardening further as an unfamiliar burst of heat surged from her nipple to her pussy.

"Feel good?" His voice was a rough growl as she stared up at him.

His hand hooked into the stretchy fabric of her top and began to lift it.

Raven whimpered. She couldn't help it, and the helpless sound of arousal infuriated her. She heard her

own hunger, her own weakness in the sound. The complete inability to deny the whiplash of emotions and erotic pleasure that seared her senses. Her hands gripped his wrists, but she couldn't whisper the words she knew it would take to stop him. All she could think about was his tongue licking over her ultrasensitive flesh, sucking her into his mouth, stroking the intensity of pleasure higher.

"There we go, baby," he crooned as she released his wrists, allowing him to pull the material over her head and toss it aside.

God. She was practically naked in front of Reno Chavez. His stormy gaze was eating her up, his hands trailing incredible shards of pleasure over the sides of her breasts as he watched her with a lust-filled expression.

"Reno..." She whispered his name, terrified to believe it was actually happening, he was really here, his hands moving quickly over the buttons of his shirt and stripping it from his shoulders.

She reached for him. She couldn't help it. All that tanned, hard muscle with the light arrowing of short, dark hairs was too much to resist. She sat up, barely noticing the surprised pleasure in his expression an instant before her breasts raked over his chest. Her hands gripped his neck and she pulled him down to satisfy the overwhelming need for his kiss.

Within seconds he had her flat on her back again, but she had what she needed. His chest sliding over her nipples, his tongue plunging into her mouth, twining with hers as her hands roved his shoulders, her nails raking, her sensuality taking over as her greatest fantasy began to come true.

It wasn't smart. Holding her heart back from him would be the hardest thing she had ever done in her life. But she needed this. She needed him. Once and for all she needed to exorcise the ghosts of her own fantasies. She had known since she was no more than a teenager that Reno was her greatest weakness. And now she knew he could destroy her.

She moaned in protest as his hands pulled at her arms, bringing them from around his neck as he gripped her wrists in one hand and stretched them over her head, his eyes lifting as he watched her with narrow-eyed hunger.

"Stay." His voice was impossibly dominant as he issued the sensual order. "Keep your arms up, your hands right there. Don't make me tie them, Raven." Then he smiled, a slow, intensely erotic curve of his

lips that had her fighting to breathe. "Or is that what you want? "

To be tied up? Hell no! But she couldn't get the thought out of her head. As she clenched her hands, keeping her arms in place, she could almost feel the restraints holding her, sending her imagination flying until she felt him move.

"Oh God. Reno..." His fingers released the little purse at her side, then slid the zipper of her skirt down.

"I want you naked, Raven," he told her firmly. "If you intend to say no, baby, you better do it now."

No. No. No. No. Her head was screaming the word, but it wouldn't come to her lips. Instead, she gripped the armrest of the couch, shuddering as he eased the skirt over her thighs, moving away from her to strip the material completely off her body.

"Sweet mercy," he whispered as he stood by the couch, staring down at her.

Raven knew the point of no return had already been reached. There was no turning back now and she knew it. She didn't want to turn back.

She watched, breathing harshly as he toed his sneakers off, and his hands went to the waistband of his jeans. As though in slow motion, she watched, the metal buttons were flicked open, the jeans parting, revealing the dark material of his snug boxer briefs.

Seconds later, hooking his fingers in the waistband of the briefs, he peeled off both jeans and underwear, the thick length of his erection, the purplish head bulging, heavy veins straining against satiny flesh, was free.

"I want to touch you," she whispered, her gaze locked on his cock. "Please, Reno. I need to touch you." Her mouth watered with that need.

"Later, baby," he groaned. "If you touch me now, I'll lose it."

He knelt on the floor then, spreading her legs until one rested on the floor, the other, knee bent, still on the cushions of the couch. Leaning forward, his tongue flicked out to lick over her nipple before drawing it into the incredible heat of his mouth.

"Reno. Oh God. Reno. It's so good..." She writhed beneath him, unable to keep from watching, her eyes locked on his lips as he drew her nipple into his mouth. His tongue rasped it as he sucked it deep, sending sharp fingers of lightning-hot sensation rushing straight to her cunt.

It was incredible. Unlike anything she had known before. Anything she could have imagined.

He growled, the sound vibrating through her, throbbing through her clit and causing her hips to arch with an involuntary violence.

"Easy, baby," he whispered, kissing his way to the other mound, his tongue licking over the tip before he drew it in as well.

"So good," she whimpered. "Reno, I don't know if I can stand it."

She was arching to him, trying to press her flesh deeper into his mouth, willing to beg if that was what it took as she watched him tug at the peak, his cheeks working rhythmically with his tongue to make her crazy.

"You can stand it, baby." His voice was deeper, more sexual as his lips began to drift down her stomach. "I've dreamed of eating you like candy."

He was going to kill her. She was certain of it. She stared at him, dazed, out of her mind with the sensations spearing through her like wicked fingers of fire as his lips trailed to the elastic band of her minuscule thong.

"So pretty," he whispered as his head lifted, his hands moving to her inner thighs, spreading her legs

further as his lips smoothed over the crease between her leg and the heated flesh of her cunt. "So sweet and hot."

"Oh sweet God... Reno..." His lips capped over the hot mound, covered by the silk of her panties as his tongue pressed against the tortured nub of her clit.

She tried to close her legs, to clench against his head, to hold him in place while she rubbed against him and rocketed through space. His brief chuckle was her warning that he wasn't going to allow that. His hands tightened on her legs, holding them in place as his tongue prodded at the tormented, nerve-ridden flesh.

"Reno, really. I swear. I don't think I can take it," she cried out desperately. "I've waited too long. Fuck me now."

He jerked up as he stared back at her, his eyes nearly black as his gaze clashed with hers. The groan that tore from his throat was tormented as his hands ripped the panties from her and he moved quickly over her.

She felt the broad head of his cock part the swollen folds waiting below. She was slick, incredibly wet as he pushed against the hungry opening of her vagina.

"Damn, you're hot," he whispered as he lifted her legs, bringing them to his hips, holding her still as he pressed closer, grimacing as the crest penetrated the snug opening.

"Now, Reno," she begged shamelessly, her nails digging into the couch as she strained closer. "Please. Now."

A throttled groan left his chest as he surged inside her, hard and deep, forcing his way past unused muscles as the fierce, thick length of his cock impaled the tight sheath.

Raven's eyes widened as a shocked cry of pain left her lips. She struggled beneath him, her hips writhing as her hands flew to his chest, pressing against him as she fought to adjust to the fiery, involuntary stretching of her vagina.

"Fuck!" He stared down at her in shock, his hands at her hips, flexing, gripping her tight as his erection throbbed almost violently inside her.

"Reno." She tried to smile as she forced herself to relax. She had read about this. It was supposed to hurt the first time. She knew it would hurt the first time. Everyone said it would. She had to relax.

She felt her pussy ripple around him as she concentrated on the muscles there, forcing herself not to clench tighter around him, but to allow the flesh to accommodate him, to clasp him snugly rather than fighting against the penetration.

"You should have told me." He was panting above her, the struggle for control obvious on his face. "Dammit, Raven, you weren't supposed to be a virgin."

Her eyes narrowed. She could feel the pleasure building now, the tension gathering in her clit, in her womb, the release that had tormented her since his first touch.

"And you're not supposed to be an asshole, but you are," she gasped. "Now finish it, dammit."

She flexed around him, moaning at the incredible sensation, the snug fit, the feel of him inside her, a heavy thick weight pressing against delicate, sensitive nerve endings.

A strangled scream left her throat as he began to move. The short, incredibly firm strokes made her crazy. She couldn't stand it. She strained against him, her hips meeting his as she fought for breath.

He was being careful. Dammit, she didn't need him to be careful. This was her first time, her first real climax, her first everything. She wanted it all.

"Harder," she panted, twisting against him as her fingers gripped his shoulders. "Do it harder."

"I don't want to hurt you, Raven." His voice was more an animal growl than a groan. "Dammit, wait."

"No." Her head thrashed against the cushions. "Harder, Reno. Fuck me. Fuck me like we both need it. Do it now."

As though her words triggered the desired response, he moved over her, bracing one elbow at her head, tucking the other beneath her rear to lift her to him as he nearly pulled free.

The hard stroke of his cock over the tender nerve endings had her arching closer, eager for more, a second before his control disintegrated.

Raven held on to Reno as he began to ride her hard and deep. She was shocked at her own cries, primitive, desperate—but even more shocking was the pleasure ripping through her.

The pressure building in her clit as his pelvis stroked against it was almost painful. His hips lunged against hers, driving his erection to the hilt inside her over and over again as she felt her mind begin to unravel. She couldn't survive it, surely no one could take such pleasure and ever be the same again.

The sensation built in her womb, her clit, the overfilled recess of her pussy as she felt the muscles there tightening, the tension coiling...

"Raven." His head lifted, his gaze spearing hers as her eyes drifted open. She was so close. So close. "Are you protected?"

The words barely registered; the meaning was lost to her.

"What?" she gasped. She needed more. She tightened further as his cock surged inside her with a rhythm that left her fighting just to hold on to her sanity.

"Protected, Raven," he groaned, his hand tightening in her hair as he forced her attention to him. "The

pill. Goddamn, anything. Are you protected?"

Protected. The pill. Thank God her doctor had prescribed them to regulate her monthly cycles. "Yes..." she wailed as the pleasure began to clash and careen inside her. "The pill. Yes. Oh God, Reno, harder. Harder..."

He gave it to her harder. Bracing his knees on the couch, the hand at her hip clenching with bruising strength, he gave her what she needed.

"Fuck. Come for me, Raven. Come now, baby..."

There was no need for the harsh command. She was holding on the edge, desperate to fly to the center of the shocking heat consuming her. She didn't come. She didn't release. She dissolved. She fragmented. She exploded. She lost herself as the pleasure became a white-hot conflagration that ripped through her soul and sent her flying to space and beyond.

She was only distantly aware of him looming over her, driving harder, deeper, as a new, surging flood of heat inside her sent her higher. All she knew was perfection. Merging. A complete, terrifying release that kept her floating as the pleasure slowly receded, leaving her limp and wasted beneath him. And certain that nothing would or could ever be the same again.

Chapter Three

It was one o'clock in the morning, there wasn't a chance in hell Morganna was conscious enough to even answer the phone, let alone understand Raven's bitching. And the man slowly easing from her body looked like a sated demigod as he sat on the couch at her feet.

Uncomfortably aware of her nudity, Raven hauled the thin blanket from the back of the couch as she sat up herself, pulling it around her almost desperately. She could feel his eyes on her, watching her with that eagle-like glare of his.

"You should have told me." He sighed then, running his hands over his hair as he breathed out roughly. "You weren't supposed to be a virgin, Raven."

She turned and gaped at him in disbelief, nearly speechless at his comment and the irritable tone of his voice.

"Well, excuse me, Mr. Experience," she snapped in reply. "What does my being a virgin have to do with anything anyway? What was I supposed to do, excuse myself and go get fucked by someone else before you had your turn?"

He grimaced before turning his head to look at her. And she really wished he wouldn't look at her that way. All satisfied and sated and considering another round.

"I wouldn't try it now if I were you," he grunted, reaching out to touch her hair as she pulled back from him. "I wouldn't be happy."

"And your happiness matters, of course." She rolled her eyes at that.

She ached in places she had never known existed. A deep, pleasant ache. She wanted to curl up on the couch and sleep for a week, to relish the bone-deep feeling of completion that she couldn't extinguish. Damn him, he should come with a warning sign.

He didn't answer, merely watched her. And that was more nerve-racking than the sound of his voice. He could always do that to her. Look at her as though he saw into her soul, or he was a part of her soul. She shivered at the thought.

"I'm going to bed." She pushed herself to her feet, wondering if she could actually walk now. "God, I must have been insane."

She wavered as she stood, forcing her legs to steady, wishing she could force the ache building in her chest to go away as easily as she made her legs obey her. Holding the blanket to her tightly, she made it the first step.

"I don't think so." He stood up, placing himself in front of her, giving her an up-close view of that gorgeous chest as he did so.

She could feel their combined juices easing from her pussy now, dampening her thighs, reminding her of the pleasure of moments before. That memory sent a shiver racing down her spine and a coil of heat building in the pit of her stomach again.

His hands gripped her upper arms, his fingers caressing her sensitive skin as she lifted her gaze to his.

"Reno." She swallowed tightly. "We need to think about this. I need to think about it."

She couldn't deal with him now, she had to make sense of this, she had to find her bearings. This was Reno, for God's sake. She had known him all her life, lusted after him since she was fifteen and shed tears for him while he was on assignment. This was the only man who could break her heart, who could destroy her soul.

He snorted in reply to her desperate words.

"Yeah, like I'm going to give you a chance to come up with excuses to run from me."

The world spun around her as he lifted her into his arms, turned and headed for the staircase. She clutched his shoulders, fighting to force back the melting sensation in the center of her chest. He was carrying her, with little or no effort. Taking the stairs quickly and moving into her bedroom.

"I'll help you shower."

"I don't need any help showering." The panicked sound of her own voice shocked her.

He moved into the bathroom. "Then I want to sleep with you Raven. Just sleep. I want to hold you close and feel you breathing against me." He sat her on her feet, his hands cupping her face, lifting it until he could stare down at her intently. "I'm not going to let you go tonight."

She shivered. She tried not to, but she couldn't help it. She had known he was bossy, dominant, a man who knew what he wanted and how to get it. She just hadn't expected that phenomenal will of his to turn on her in quite this manner.

"You forget, I've run for a reason." Her hands gripped his wrists as she stared up at him. "We'll break each other's hearts, Reno."

She could see the exhaustion marking his face, clearer now than it had been before. A haunting hunger filled his gaze, and Raven knew in the bottom of her soul that she wasn't going to deny him. For now... for this moment... he needed her. Surely, for the short amount of time he would be here, she could protect her heart. Couldn't she?

"This is a good idea, Raven." He lowered his head, his lips whispering over hers. The kiss was soothing, calming. Emotion raged just beneath it, subtle, but intense. Emotions she refused to delve into.

"One of these days, your bossiness is going to get you into trouble," she warned him as he pulled back, a small smile playing about his passion-swollen lips as he moved away from her to adjust the water in the shower.

She could do it. She took a deep, fortifying breath. It was too late to turn back now anyway. She could have tonight, enjoy his touch, his laughter, the qualities that made him so very unique to her. And when he left, she could let him go without the tears or the rage or the fear. She was strong enough. She didn't have to love him.

"Come on, baby." He stepped into the shower, his hand catching her wrist as he pulled her in after him.

"Do you ever ask for anything?" she asked as he sheltered her from the spray and began soaping a washrag.

His smile flashed, filled with amusement and warmth.

"When I have to."

Raven frowned at that.

"All of you macho SEAL-types are so damned bossy. Reminds me why I steered clear of them."

Her brother Clint was a SEAL; most of her friends' brothers were in one part of the armed forces or another. They were all bossy, domineering men who forged their own paths, whether in life or in love. They left, and sometimes they never returned. .

"You weren't steering clear of me, Raven," he told her then, his hands incredibly gentle as he pressed the washcloth to her chest and began to wash her. "I just let you think you were."

She snorted mockingly. She would argue, but that washcloth felt so good, rasping over her flesh, washing away her thoughts as easily as it did the sweat from her body.

She tilted her head back, allowing him to have his way. She had fantasized about this too much, and unfortunately, he was better than the dreams had ever been.

"You should be falling on your feet," she whispered, the sound of her voice punctuated with a gasp as the cloth moved between her thighs, cleaning her slowly.

"Maybe," he growled, "I should rest."

He knelt in front of her, spreading her legs as he lifted one, propping it on the small shelf at the side as the washrag moved over the bare flesh of her pussy.

"Damn, Raven. Do you know how pretty you are? Silky and soft, and so responsive to my touch." He shifted, allowing the spray to rinse her as he dropped the cloth, using his hands to help dispel the suds there.

Arousal built within her quickly. She knew what he was going to do and she didn't know if she could bear it.

His fingers moved over the narrow slit, parting her swollen flesh as she fought to get her bearings, to breathe. If she could just breathe, she could maintain her control.

"I've dreamed of tasting you..."

Oh God.

"Fucking you with my tongue, sucking that pretty little clit into my mouth..."

She felt her juices gathering, weeping with sensual abandon from her sensitive cunt as her head rolled against the wall of the shower. The explicit, diabolical words made her weak, made her long for him to do it with every fiber of her being.

Her hands braced against the wall and the shower door. She couldn't touch him. If she touched him, she would beg, plead for him.

"Reno..." Her thin wail filled the shower stall as his tongue swiped through the slit, circled her clit, then disappeared.

Her eyes drifted open as she stared down at him, her legs weakening at the erotic sight of him kneeling before her, his tongue moving in again, circling her clit as he stared up at her.

Not fair. Oh God. She couldn't stand it.

Her hands moved involuntarily, her fingers digging into his scalp as she parted her legs further, pressing

him closer.

"More..." she panted. "Lick me more."

He hummed in approval, his tongue dancing in the slick cream that began to coat her as her hips tilted further.

"Oh yes," she moaned. "Like that, Reno. Lick me all over."

She was trembling, watching him, feeling his tongue circle her clit, lick along the narrow valley, circling the sensitive opening of her vagina, teasing her with the threat of a sensual thrust into the suddenly hungry depths. His hands were at her buttocks, spreading them open, sending chills racing up her back at the flare of heat that invaded the tiny entrance there. The sensations were building, pulling at her, ripping away the veil of distance she tried to maintain as he teased her with his tongue.

"Reno, do it," she whispered desperately as his fingers slid lower, parting the folds of her pussy as his tongue teased and tempted. "Please. Please do it."

"What, baby?" he whispered wickedly. "Tell me. Whatever you want, I'll give you."

Her eyes fluttered; her knees weakened. His tongue stroked, taunted, yet never gave her what she knew would throw her over the edge. She wanted it inside her. She wanted to feel his tongue shoving hard inside the snug depths of her pussy as she watched him. Watched him eating her like he loved it, lived for it.

"Do it," she cried out fiercely. "Dammit, Reno, stop teasing me. Please."

He flickered over the opening, licking at the juices falling from her as she shuddered at the pleasure. So much pleasure.

"Fuck me with it." She thrust her hips closer, her hands pressing against his head, her gasping moans

turning to a shattered scream when he did as she begged. His tongue plunged deep, filling her, pumping inside her as her orgasm took her by surprise, hurtling her into a rapture she could only give herself to.

"Son of a bitch!" He was on his feet, lifting her, bracing her against the wall a second before he wrapped her legs around his hips and plunged deep inside her.

Shocking. Burning. He filled her to overflowing and then made her take more. Delicate tissue parted, clenched, hugging him heatedly as he began to move, sending her flying again, ripping away, layer by layer, the shields around her soul.

"Ah God, Raven baby... so tight... so hot... hold me, baby. Hold me and mean it."

She couldn't do anything less. She held on to him as though her life, her very heart depended on it. And in a way, she knew it did. He was filling her soul, the one thing she had sworn she would never allow to happen, was happening.

Her legs wrapped around his waist, tightening, her arms around his neck locking in place, her lips searching blindly for his as she convulsed again, jerking in his grip, trying to drive him deeper, harder, as the world rocked around her in a release that seemed never ending.

Reno pumped inside her, hard and fast before his groan filled her senses and the heat of his release filled the hungry depths of her pussy. She milked him, moaning in exhaustion as the tremors of release shuddered through her again, leaving her limp, ragged in his hold as his arms tightened around her.

Moments later, she was only distantly aware of him pulling free of her, cleaning her again, then himself, before he shut the water off and dried them with quick, economical movements.

A smile curved her lips though, as he picked her up in his arms and carried her to her bed. Curling against his chest, his hands buried in her hair as his arms surrounded her, sleep overtook her. Warm, sheltered, free of the teasingly erotic dreams that used to haunt her, she slept in her warrior's arms.

Reno stared into the darkness of the bedroom, Raven's warmth tucked close to his heart as he sheltered her against his chest. She slept naturally, easily. Not that he expected the battle to be over by any means.

A sleepy smile quirked his lips. He'd better rest tonight, because he had a feeling that come morning, she would be just as prickly as ever. Not that he intended to let it do her any good. He was a part of her, whether she wanted to admit it or not. Just as she was a part of him.

And being a part of Raven was like being reborn. Never had he known anything as sweet, as hot, as soul-fulfilling as being her lover.

He had warned her, the night Morganna had interrupted them, that her days were numbered. He wasn't waiting any longer to claim what he had known for years was his.

She shifted against his side, a murmur of pleasure leaving her throat as his hands rubbed lightly down her back, and she settled against him once again.

"I love you, Raven." He whispered the words he knew she didn't want to hear. Gave them to her while she slept, knowing that, for now, it was the only way she would accept it.

"Reno..." His name as it left her lips filled him with pleasure. Even sleeping, she knew where she belonged.

Chapter Four

She had slept with Reno Chavez.

She hadn't just slept with him, she had been taken by him. Held by him. Fucked senseless, to be honest, she snapped silently.

Raven leaned on the kitchen counter the next morning, her head cradled in her arms as she waited for the coffee to finish, for the rich fragrance teasing her senses to become an elixir that would hopefully clear her head. Bring her sanity back. It would be really nice if it could turn back time.

She moaned pitifully.

She couldn't even claim she'd been drunk; she hadn't so much as touched a beer while at Morganna's. She had been stone-cold sober until Reno kissed her. Until his hands stroked her body, bringing her nerve endings to life and a ravenous hunger clawing at her womb.

She pressed her thighs together at the memory, hating the feel of her loose shorts rasping against her flesh. She wanted Reno's hands. Even the loose shirt was uncomfortable on her sensitive body. She could strip it off. She could undress, go to him... She gritted her teeth in mental refusal.

She was not going to think about it. She was not going to relive each and every slow slide of his cock inside her vagina, stroking the pulsing nerves there, stretching her, filling her, making her burn...

Her fists clenched as she rolled her forehead against her arm.

She couldn't have made a bigger mistake if she had actually put effort into coming up with one. Sleeping with Reno was tantamount to jumping from a plane without a parachute. It wasn't just risky; it was suicide to her emotional well-being.

He had been hard-headed as a boy, bossy as a young man, and now he was so firmly dominant, it was enough to make her teeth clench. What happened to the nice young man who put Band-Aids on her knees and bought her ice pops from the corner store? Why did he have to become the big tough SEAL who insisted on a career that risked his life every time he went to work?

"Dumb. Dumb. Dumb," she muttered as she lifted her head, staring at the slow stream of black liquid that ran into the carafe.

"When are you going to break down and buy a real coffee-maker?"

She stiffened at Reno's amused voice, refusing to turn and face him, to stare at that incredibly sexy body. The same one that had risen over her last night, pushing between her thighs as he filled her with the hard,

broad flesh of his cock. She shivered at the memory.

"This one works," she mumbled. And it had been her mother's before she died five years before.

There was no way she was going to consider facing the day without coffee. She needed it. It was essential. Otherwise, she was going to melt into a puddle of aroused goo before she ever managed to push Reno out the door.

He grunted noncommittally behind her.

"We'll get a coffee grinder later and some fresh beans. I'll make you some real coffee."

Turning her head slowly from the shelter of her arms, she stared back at him. Over six feet of lean, smooth, hard muscle. Damn him. He wasn't wearing a shirt. His chest, with its smattering of hair, was displayed in all its dark glory, muscles shifting, tempting, encouraging...

"Don't you have a bed to buy or something?" She straightened quickly, jerked a cup from the hook on the wall and prayed the dark brew would hurry. She had to clear her head, or she was never going to make it through the day.

"Are you trying to run me off, Raven?" She could hear the grin in his voice, see it when she glanced back at him.

"Yes," she snapped desperately. "I am. I can't deal with you this morning. Go torture Morganna."

Like she thought for a minute that he was going to do that. She should have known better, she told herself frantically. He had warned her that last time, when he woke her with a kiss, looming over her like a tide of passion, that her days were numbered. She had tried to convince herself he wasn't serious. She should have known better.

"I don't think so, baby. Do you think I'm going to let you run me off this soon?"

Uh-oh.

She blinked back at him as his expression hardened, his gray eyes turning stormy. She knew that look, and it did not bode well for getting rid of him.

"How soon, then?" She slammed the cup to the counter and jerked the pot from under the small stream inching into it to rapidly fill the cup.

She brought the cup to her lips and sipped too quickly. The hot liquid burned her tongue, but it did nothing to erase the remembered feel of his touch.

"Damn, Clint was right, you're a grouch in the morning," he stated as he moved to the pot himself, causing her to back away quickly. If he touched her, she was a goner.

"I'm always a grouch." She frowned as he poured himself a cup of coffee. "And that's my coffee."

He lifted his brow mockingly. "I know a cure for your grouchiness."

The wicked smile playing about his mouth had her womb convulsing in arousal. Damn him. Damn him. She could feel her body preparing for him, aching for him. Even more frightening was the fact that it felt right. His presence in her kitchen wasn't as upsetting as it should have been. It felt comfortable, impossibly natural. She hated having people around her first thing in the morning, but Reno was different. Which meant he had to go.

"As soon as I finish my coffee, I'm throwing you out." There was just no other answer.

She moved to the table, cradling the cup lovingly as she inhaled the scent. Sanity resided there surely.

"You'll have to grow quite a bit first, darlin'." He wasn't amused; he wasn't smiling. He was staring at her from determined, intense eyes.

"And don't call me darlin'."

He leaned against the counter, his bare ankles crossing as she glanced at his feet. Dammit, even his toes looked sexy.

She sipped the coffee, remaining silent. There had to be a way to get him out of her apartment, short of calling the police. And what was she supposed to tell the police? Excuse me, Officer, but I let him fuck me last night, so of course he thinks he has rights now.

She rolled her eyes at the thought. Of course he thought he did. She knew Reno. There wasn't a chance in hell he had even considered a one-night stand. He was her brother's best friend. Her best friend's brother. He was playing in earnest.

Panic flared at the thought of that. Oh hell. She looked up at him wildly, taking in the small grin quirked at his lips and the way he watched her. As if she were his.

"It was just sex."

He laughed. Asshole. He sipped his coffee and grimaced.

"I'm definitely going to have to show you the fine art of preparing coffee," he drawled. "This stuff isn't going to help your attitude at all, Raven."

"My attitude is not the problem. You are," she informed him through gritted teeth.

"I invited you over to sleep. Not come in and take over," she said, feeling desperate as she got up from the table. "You weren't supposed to... to—" Her face flamed. "—do what you did."

"What did I do?" His eyes widened, almost innocently. She could see the knowledge glowing there, even as the sweatpants he wore began to tent in the front from his erection.

She swallowed tightly at the sight of it. Her mouth was watering. Oh God, why was her mouth watering? Why were images of going to her knees and pulling the waistband clear of that thick flesh suddenly torturing her? And her mouth was watering. Weak, Raven, she accused herself firmly. You are so weak.

"That," she said, her hand waving toward the erection. "That's what you did last night. You seduced me."

"Seduced you?" He was clearly laughing now as he glanced down at the tented material. "With my cock? That was seduction? Baby, all I did was kiss you. You kissed back."

"Well that was enough," she sniffed. "Now it's time for you to get dressed and leave."

He set his cup down on the counter, his eyes narrowing, and trepidation skated down her spine. She knew Reno. Knew his looks, his moods, and his stubbornness. She knew when he was about to do something he knew was going to piss her off. And he had that look now.

"Come here." His voice was deep and rich like black velvet.

"What?" she said, staring at him warily.

"I said, come here," he growled. Raven shivered in reaction. Her pussy was gushing at the sound of his voice. She was so easy.

"No." She crossed her arms over her breasts, hoping to hide the telltale rise of her nipples. Damn they ached for his touch, his mouth, his tongue flickering over them.

His brow arched.

"You know," he said conversationally. "I'm dying to watch the bare flesh of that pretty little ass turn red. Get over here, Raven, or I'm going to see just how fast my hand can make it blush."

Reno watched as Raven's eyes flared, the blue darkening, filling with arousal and heat as she stared at him with wild-eyed panic. He wanted to chuckle, but he had a feeling it would push her further into retreat. As though he was going to allow that.

He mentally shook his head, watching her trying to rebuild her defenses to keep him out.

Poor Raven. It didn't matter.

Nothing was going to diminish the heat and the hunger between them.

"You did not just threaten to spank me," she suddenly snapped, blinking in amazement as she watched him.

"Yes, I did," he said refuting her statement blandly. "Now come here." He pointed his finger directly in front of his feet.

Anger sizzled in the air. Pure feminine fury heated the room as her arms dropped slowly to her sides and her cheeks flushed with emotion.

"How dare you order me around!" She was seconds from stamping her foot. Damn, she made him hot when she flamed like that. "This is my house, Reno," she said, pointing at her chest, her own eyes narrowing. "My kitchen, my house, and you're leaving."

Reno studied her before quickly coming to a decision. She was trembling with anger... and panic. He didn't want to push so hard and fast that he lost her. So he'd leave, but he wouldn't be gone for long. He'd give her a bit of time to miss him, but he would be back. Besides there wasn't a chance he could stay away long, not after having had her, feeling the heat of her pussy gripping his cock, the sweet tight

muscles rippling around him as she came, holding her satisfied body next to his afterward.

He straightened, watching her closely. She stiffened, her foot moving back as though to retreat before she quickly checked the motion.

"Raven, come here," he said more gently.

If possible, her eyes widened even more in panic at his softer tone.

He was very well aware of the risk he was taking. Convincing Raven to open her heart was fraught with danger. Not the physical kind, but the emotional kind. She had seen the result of her mother's life with her Navy SEAL father. The long absences, the fights when he returned home, her mother's inability to accept the danger her father faced and her father's refusal to deal with the situation in any a way except to take more missions, to stay away longer, until finally he hadn't returned. He had been killed while on a mission, leaving her mother to deal with her guilt, and Raven to face the world without a father.

Her lips tightened defiantly before she stalked over to him.

"Now what?" she snarled up at him.

"This."

He lowered his head. He didn't touch her except with his lips. He gripped the counter behind him with both hands, itching to grip her instead. No force, no demand, nothing but the arousal whipping between them, making him crazy, making her hot enough to sear.

Her lips opened on a strangled gasp, her hands reaching for his waist, her fingers curling against his flesh as his tongue surged deep inside. Slanting his head, he pressed closer, groaning when his erection cushioned against her stomach as she rubbed against him, a whimper of lust escaping her throat as he nipped at her lips, stroked them with his tongue, then delved inside for the sweet nectar of her passion.

When she was soft, pliant, molded to his body as her tongue tangled with his, he slowly drew back.

"Reno..."

Her soft gasp of protest had him gritting his teeth as he fought every instinct inside him screaming to take her to the floor, to convince her, to force her to admit what she was so obviously denying.

Instead, he drew in a hard breath and stepped away from the temptation of her sweet body. God, she had no idea how hard it was to step away from her, to leave her as aching as he ached for her. But he couldn't, wouldn't risk losing her. If he carried through now, took her to her bed as he wanted to so desperately, then it would weaken not just his resolve, but the inroads he had made into making her realize what they could be to each other.

"Now I'll go." He turned and walked out of the kitchen. "I'll see you in the morning, Raven. I'll bring the coffee."

Chapter Five

Raven stomped around the house for hours, cleaning what didn't need cleaning, cursing men, their arrogance and their damned alpha, dominant, gung-ho, hero complexes.

She had cursed both Reno and her brother Clint for years for the very things that made them so special. They were warriors, determined to protect, to make a difference. And they did make a difference. But he was still being arrogant. Relationships weren't war zones.

"There is no relationship, dammit," she muttered furiously, stepping out of the shower and drying off quickly before fluffing her hair.

She was not going to sit around tonight and wait for him. She had waited for him too many nights, pacing the floor with Morganna, chewing her fingernails if they knew he was on a mission, shedding tears when he was later returning home than he had told his sister he would be. She and Morganna both waited for that black government car that would bring the horrifying news of a death.

Now, she was supposed to sit around the damned house and torture herself over feelings and emotions she knew she was never going to be rid of.

She loved him.

Dammit, she did love him but that didn't mean she had to like it.

She jerked the red silk and lace thong panties and bra from her drawer and pulled them on, knowing they looked good on her. Sexy and hot. They made her feel wicked and wild. Almost as wicked and wild as Reno made her feel.

Biting her lip, her hands moved slowly, cupping her swollen breasts as her thumbs rasped over her distended nipples. She closed her eyes, and could almost feel him touching her, making the heated burn ignite fiercely in the depths of her womb.

He wasn't supposed to do this to her. Make her miss him so desperately, make her wish she could accept as easily as he did. But he wasn't the one who would be left to pace the floors, to fill with anger. And that was the part that terrified her. She didn't want to be like her mother, always angry or depressed, terrified when she heard the sound of a vehicle coming up the drive.

Reno and Morganna's parents had died six years before in a car accident. Together. There had been no government condolences, no questions were ever answered regarding how they died. Where they died. The questions Raven's mother had asked every day until her death.

She plucked the sexy little black dress she loved so much out of her closet as the past ate at her soul with a hollow ache. It fell halfway down her thighs, the thin straps barely covering the bra straps as the bodice draped over her breasts. The shimmery black silk felt good on her, looked good on her.

She paired it with the high-heeled, black strappy sandals and drew in a deep breath before shoving keys, cash and ID into a minuscule purse and headed downstairs.

She wasn't married. She didn't have to sit at home and pace the floors and she damned sure didn't have to worry about Reno Chavez or his perceptions and arrogance. Let him sit and brood if he wanted to. She was going to play.

She was bored out of her ever-loving mind, but she wasn't going to admit it to Morganna, who had joined her on her little evening adventure.

"Reno's going to be pissed," was Morganna's only objection to the night's activities as they walked into the small club, the pulse of the music surrounding them, the smoky atmosphere dim and not nearly as appealing as Raven tried to pretend it was.

"He'll live," she snapped. "Your brother is entirely too dominant, Morganna. And I'm still pissed at you for letting your friends use his bed."

"Of course he's dominant," Morganna laughed as they made their way through the crowd to the back of the club and a lone empty table. "He wouldn't do what he does if he wasn't. Admit it, Raven, it's one of the things you love about him."

It was one of the things that terrified her about him.

"No, that's what you love about Clint." She took her chair and looked around impatiently for the waitress. "I like my men a little safer. You know, Morg, the 'stay at home and hearth' type of guy?"

She waved the waitress over, impatient to get on with forgetting about Reno and his arrogant my-way-or-no-way attitude.

"You like fooling yourself is what you like," Morganna laughed after they gave the waitress their drink orders. "But you go right ahead. I like watching Reno in action. He's smooth. Clint should take lessons."

Raven directed a dark look at her friend.

"Drop the subject. I'm here to have a good time, not to talk about Reno."

She danced with the first man who asked, not the up close, slow and sway, but a fast hard beat that filled her veins and allowed her to ignore the memories threatening to overwhelm her senses.

She sat out the slower dances, a rare occurrence for her, which only made her angrier. But she couldn't stand the thought of another man holding her, not yet. God, how pathetic was that, she wondered as she moved to the hard beat echoing though the club.

She swayed in time to songs, her hair flowing down her back, caressing her upper shoulders, reminding her of Reno's touch. She closed her eyes and saw his face, only to snap them open and glare at her present partner.

She glanced across the room and her heart shuddered in her chest as she swore she caught a glimpse of him moving through the crowd. No one could move like Reno, with a male predatory grace that drew the eye and had women panting to rub against him like cats.

Shaking her head, she pushed the suspicion away.

She didn't know why she was letting this affect her so drastically. The physical attraction had bloomed between them for years now. She had known that she would eventually end up beneath Reno in bed; she just hadn't expected the raw power of it.

She moved back as the rawboned, broad young man she was dancing with reached out to clasp her hip, flashing him an irritated frown when he pouted back at her. She wasn't in the mood to be groped. She wanted to dance, expend the energy pulsing in her body and forget about the one man she knew would be cemented in her brain forever now.

As the band paused, preparing to strike up another number, a hard hand suddenly gripped her wrist, pulling her around as she gasped in surprise.

Oh hell. Reno was pissed.

She stared up at him, aware of the immediate hardening of her nipples and their ultrasensitivity against the lace of her bra. Between her thighs, her clit began to throb with the same furious, hard beat of her heart.

"Well, fancy seeing you here," she yelled out above the music as he began to drag her across the dance floor. "Let me guess, Morganna called you."

"Morganna shows good sense at the oddest moments." His head turned, eyes narrowed on her as he began to pull her out of the crowd. He stalked across the room, heading for the shadowed corner of her table. Rather than being pushed into one of the chairs there, she found herself flattened against the wall as his head lowered, his lips at her ear.

"What are you doing here?" She stared up at him defiantly. "I don't remember inviting you."

"No, you were too damned busy running away from me," he snapped.

She should have told him then and there she didn't want him, didn't need him, but the words wouldn't come out of her mouth.

"Jealous, Reno?" She was breathing harder, her nipples pebbled and pressed tight against her dress.

"Not jealous at all," he assured her tightly. "You wouldn't let another man touch you, would you, Raven? You know who that sweet little body belongs to, don't you?"

"Yeah." She smiled slowly, aware of the drowsy passion that reflected in her expression. "Me."

He nipped her ear firmly, sending shudders racing through her. "I'm going to paddle your ass for that one."

"Oh, spank me." She gave a mock shiver, her voice sarcastic despite the tremors of trepidation skittering up her spine.

She gave a startled jerk as he imprisoned both wrists in one hand, holding them above her head as the other moved to the back of her thigh, running up the skirt of the dress to cup one rounded cheek of her ass firmly.

The feel of his hand, callused and warm, had her breath catching in her throat. The implied threat in the action should have pissed her off, at the very least should have made her more nervous than aroused.

"Oh baby, I will spank you." To prove his point, his hand moved back before delivering a light, warming tap to her flesh. "You have no idea how well I'm going to spank that pretty little ass. If you wanted to play the vixen, sweetheart, then you knew where I was. You could have come to me."

Her head fell back against the wall as his fingers slid beneath the edge of her panties and trailed down the narrow crevice separating her buttocks.

"I wanted to forget about you, not run to you," she snapped breathlessly, fighting herself and the weakness that struck her knees as his fingers probed ever closer to the slick curves of her cunt.

She could feel her flesh heating further, the thick juices coating her pussy, preparing her for him as her mind filled with the erotic images of the night before. Reno coming over her, parting her thighs as he slid between them.

Her breath hitched in her throat as her vagina spasmed in greedy hunger.

"We're going to discuss that one as well, darlin'," he growled at her ear, pressing his hips against her lower stomach, letting her feel the thick erection behind the fly of his jeans. "We're going to discuss all your little bad habits, in depth." Two fingers plunged inside the weeping entrance of her cleft, stretching her sensitive flesh as he pushed her to the edge of climax.

The music surrounded them, the awareness that anyone could be watching. Not that they would see much the way Reno had positioned her.

"Reno..." Her gasping wail was low, a throttled cry of need as his lips slid to her throat, his teeth raking as he took gentle nips, then soothed the little fire with the warmth of his lips and tongue.

"Damn you, Raven." His voice was rough, the edge of control apparent in the husky baritone. "You're pushing me too far, baby. Only you would refuse to settle back and see where the hell this could go. Why do you want to push me?"

He thrust his fingers in her weeping pussy, holding her on the edge of sanity as she fought to keep from screaming out her demand that he take her. There and then.

"I'm not pushing you," she gasped. "You keep pushing... Ah God, Reno." She had to bite her lip to keep from begging as he slid his fingers from her, panting as his lips continued to caress her neck, his breathing heavy and labored.

She stared up at him as he pulled back from her, lowering her arms, but still holding her wrists prisoner with his powerful hand.

"Show-off," she accused darkly as her gaze flickered to her bound wrists. "Why didn't you just bring the handcuffs?"

"Don't tempt me." His smile was all teeth. Predatory, intent. "Now come along like a good little girl, Raven."

She frowned at the heavy mockery in his voice. He might be a bit more than pissed, she thought, which only caused her own temper to rise. He had no right to be angry with her; it was her choice how she spent her time, not his. And she would be damned if she would put up with this attitude because she decided to spend time dancing rather than waiting around on him.

"Hey, dude, you got no right to be hauling her out of here." The big boy from the previous dance stood in their way, bringing Reno to a slow stop.

Raven glanced over his shoulder, wide-eyed. The younger man wasn't as tall as Reno, but he was thick and heavy, built like a damned linebacker and staring at Reno like a bull on a rampage.

"Sorry, dude, but the lady belongs to me." A normal rational man might have paid attention to the warning in Reno's voice, not to mention the savage look on his face.

"I didn't see no brand, asshole," the younger man swayed drunkenly in front of him, causing Raven to stifle a groan of mortification.

Reno would never let her live this one down, and neither would Clint, once he got wind of it. Dammit, why did these things have to happen to her?

"You just didn't look in the right place," Reno informed him, his voice deep, deadly. "Count yourself lucky. If you had, I'd have to rip your throat out."

Raven's eyes widened. This Reno was scary. He looked ready to fight, to defend, to claim.

"Uhh, Reno, let's just go." She pushed at his arm, aware of the grip he still retained on her wrists.

"Tough little man, aren't you?" the boy laughed, and Raven groaned miserably. The other man had to be drunker than she thought, to even consider insulting Reno so rudely. Besides, Reno was at least six inches taller than the other man. Sometimes wider did not mean better.

Before she could do more than gasp in surprise, she was free, and Reno had the boy by the throat. Slowly, he took the younger man to the floor as beefy hands wrapped around his wrists and brown eyes began to bulge at the lack of oxygen.

"Don't mess with me, boy," Reno growled mercilessly. "Or my woman. Period."

When he released the younger man, Raven glared at him.

"You're insane," she said, slapping at his arm with enough force to sting her hand as he stared back at her in surprise. "Your woman, my ass! You are a bully, Reno. A macho, self-serving, arrogant SEAL bully and I'll be damned if I'm going anywhere with you."

She turned and swept through the crowd, her face flaming in embarrassment and fury, even though her body was still heated, throbbing.

My woman.

Something inside her had melted when he rasped the words, his tone thick with possessiveness and male fury, while another part screeched in horror. He had claimed her. It wasn't just sex to him, he was serious about this, and that point had just been driven forcibly home. Not that she hadn't been aware of it already. But now, she knew it down to her soul. All her dreams, hopes and fears were tied up with one man. With Reno.

She was screwed.

Chapter Six

Reno stayed carefully behind Raven's car as he followed her home, his hands gripping the steering wheel.

She was right. He had been pissed, jealous and riding the fine edge of his control; otherwise, he would have handled the younger man with a bit more discretion. Truth was, he wanted to kill that kid for daring to try to come between him and Raven.

He wiped his hand across his face as he fought his raging emotions. Never had he had felt the adrenaline pumping through his system as it was now. His cock was harder than it had been at any time in his life and the urge to fuck Raven until she was too exhausted to fight back was nearly overwhelming.

She was driving him insane, not that he had expected anything less from her. He had known that stealing her heart wouldn't be easy, and binding her to him even harder. She looked at him and saw her parents. The father who left to fight, the mother who screamed and raged and drank too much while he was gone until the day he returned in a casket.

It was the danger of the job that some women couldn't handle. And he would have worried that Raven couldn't handle it, if he didn't know for a fact that each mission Morganna knew he was on, she and Raven waited out together. Laughing, joking, calling him names and insulting him to hell and back, as reported by his sister. But she handled it. Just as Morganna helped Raven handle Clint's absences. They had a support system they had relied on most of their lives.

She was stronger than she thought was, Reno reflected, as he pulled into the driveway behind her car. He watched, eyes narrowed as she flounced out of the car, that little black dress flirting with her upper thighs as it whipped around her in a cloud of silk.

More slowly, Reno got out of the truck. Slow and careful, he cautioned himself. He had lost it at the club. Hell, he had nearly fucked her in that dark corner for everyone to see.

"Go away, Reno," she snarled as she unlocked the front door. "I don't want to see or talk to you. At least she didn't try to slam the door in his face. She pushed into the house, leaving it wide open for him. Reno controlled the smile that wanted to touch his lips. She could yell until hell froze over, but he knew her. Inside out and upside down, he knew her, loved her, and he would be damned if he was going to let her find excuses to throw him out of her life.

"Aren't you tired of being such a coward, Raven?" he said as he followed her inside, closing and locking the door behind him.

She whirled around, the long, sleek golden brown curls that made his hands itch fanning around her slender body.

"Me? A coward?" An imperious thumb pointed into her chest. "I'm a realist, Reno. Unlike you, I prefer to see the truth rather than the pretty lies you want to feed me."

He crossed his arms over his chest, slowly. "When, Raven, did I ever lie to you?"

"Every time you touched me," she yelled back at him, thinking of the past two years, the teasing kisses and flirtatious touching. "Pretending it was something light, something friendly. You want it all, don't you, Reno?"

"Hell yes!" He snapped, facing her across the room, knowing if he got too close, there was no way he could keep from touching her. "I never pretended any different, Raven. You were the one who kept running, who kept refusing to face facts. You're the liar, Raven, not me."

"I never lied to you." Her hands swiped through her hair, frustration and pain evident on her face. "I told you I couldn't handle you. I couldn't handle the kind of relationship you want from me."

"Fuck that," he growled. "I don't want just a damned relationship with you, Raven. I want forever. And you knew it all along."

Raven stared at him wide-eyed.

"No..."

"Yes, by God, you did," he bit out. "You'd flit around, teasing and flirting, a little kiss here and there, a pet and a pat and you thought that would be enough to hold me off. Now you're finding out otherwise and it scares the hell out of you."

Determination straightened her shoulders and glittered in her eyes. "I want you to leave." Her voice was rough, ragged with emotion. "Leave and don't come back, Reno."

A mocking smile twisted his lips. "Yeah, I guess you do." He crossed his arms over his chest again, restraining the need to hold her, to promise that everything would be okay. "If I leave," he continued, "you'll keep hiding your head in the sand, pretending that somehow, someday, if I'm killed in action, then it won't hurt. You'll survive it without a bottle in your hand and your heart will remain intact."

He watched her pale, the color leaching from her face as she stared back at him in shock.

"Do you really think you can do it, Raven?" he asked softly. "Do you think it won't hurt? Do you think you have your heart packed away nice and tight where nothing or no one can break it?"

"Stop." Her voice shook, breaking his heart. But her rejection hurt worse. It seared his soul.

He moved toward her then, gripping her shoulders before she could evade him, staring down at her as he fought his own raging emotions.

"Will it work?" He wanted to make her see the truth. "Look at me, Raven. If I die tomorrow, will it hurt any less than it would if we had a year or twenty together? Will you lay me in the ground any easier? "

"Oh God!" She shuddered, her eyes filling with tears as she stared up at him in misery. "I couldn't stand it. Don't you see, Reno? I couldn't stand it if something happened to you."

Those tears. He couldn't handle her tears. God, don't let her cry—it made him want to kill someone. And since he was the one causing the tears, that didn't leave many options.

"You don't understand," she said, dashing away her tears. "What if I'm like my mother? I don't have the courage to face that."

"The hell you don't," he said, and swooped down, taking her lips, forcing her head back against the wall as he took the kiss, as he needed to take her heart. Fully. Completely. And her response was everything he knew it could be, everything he knew she kept hidden inside her soul.

Her lips opened, her tongue reaching out for his, suckling him inside the warmth of her mouth as she lifted to him, pressing the hard tips of her nipples into his chest as her arms wrapped tight around his neck, her hands gripping his head.

With a ragged growl, he pulled her closer, lifting her into his arms and turning for the staircase. If this was all he would have, then he would take it. But by God, he would show her. If it was the last thing he

managed, he would show her exactly what she was throwing away.

Chapter Seven

The expression on his face was like none she had seen before. Powerful, dominant, the hard planes and angles tightened into sharp relief as he moved.

"Reno." The protest was halted by the simple means of his lips covering hers again as his hands gripped the rounded curves of her buttocks, pulling her up and flush against the thick cock ridged behind the fly of his jeans.

Heat flared instantly, spreading from her pussy through the rest of her body as her hands gripped his shoulders and she arched closer. She couldn't imagine never knowing this again, never being held by him, loved by him.

Twisting in his grip, she fought him for the kiss, as desperately hungry for him as he seemed to be for her. His hands clenched the flesh of her rear, pulling at the curves until an erotic, sharp little tingle pierced the small entrance of her anus at the separation of the flesh.

"Feel it, Raven. Feel how sweet and hot it is. That doesn't just go away, baby; it haunts and eats at the soul and makes you so fucking hungry for it, you think you'll go crazy without it. That's how I've been. That's what tears at me every minute we're apart. Needing this. Your taste, your touch."

She stared up at him, knowing she couldn't refute his words. The memory of those brief, heated kisses in the past, his arms surrounding her, had tormented her. She needed him, needed him until it terrified her, but it made her aware of the weakness of her heart and the battle she was losing to hold it aloof.

Then the world spun around her as he lifted her in his arms, ignoring her instinctive protest as he strode across the room and quickly upstairs.

"Reno... you're taking over again," she gasped as he stepped into her bedroom, lowering her feet to the floor before pulling her back against him once again.

"I'm not taking you fast enough." He growled, bending his head as he tilted hers back, catching her lips in a kiss that stole her objections, just as it stole her breath.

He chuckled, the sound rough and strained as she worked her hands between them, moving for the buttons that held his cock prisoner. She wasn't going to stand there, allowing him to control her, to dominate her so easily. She couldn't deny the pleasure, but she could make him just as crazy as he was making her.

"No, no. Bad girl." His hands caught hers as he turned her around quickly, pulling her back against his chest as one hard arm locked around her waist. "Look in the mirror. Look how pretty you are, Raven."

She blinked at the image in the large mirror that sat atop the chest. Reno's hand moved along her shoulder, lowering the strap of her dress down her arm until the draped bodice fell away from the swollen curve of her breast.

The red lace of her bra showed up clearly against her pale skin, the picture reflected back at her was one of a forbidden taste of sensual excitement. He stood head and shoulders above her, staring down at her as he stripped the dress from her upper body, his lips moving over her neck and shoulder as the material dropped to the floor.

Raven stared into the mirror, seeing him as he surrounded her, a broad, powerful male animal intent on possession. His gaze met hers in the mirror, his gray eyes nearly black, his expression tight, the skin stretched tight across his high cheekbones, the fight for control blatantly evident.

She felt the breath lock in her chest at the image he presented. Boldly, unapologetically male. Possessive. Dominant. He held her and meant it.

"Such a pretty little bad girl," he whispered then. "Do you know what happens to bad girls, Raven? Bad little girls who refuse to admit what they see staring them in the face?"

She almost came from the sound of his voice alone. She felt her womb convulse, stealing her breath and her senses as his hands smoothed up her waist and cupped her engorged breasts in a firm, heated grip. Devilish thumbs rasped over the peaks, sending flares of brilliant heat washing through her.

The sight of those broad, darkly tanned hands cupping the swollen mounds of her breasts was highly erotic. He was so strong, yet his grip was firm, gentle. There was no pain, no sense of force, just pleasure and hunger and need that spread from those hands to her body and left her trembling in arousal.

"You really are a pervert." Unfortunately, it was turning her on more than it should.

"Oh baby, you have no idea," he whispered, his eyes, so filled with emotion and lust, meeting hers in the mirror as he loosened the catch of her bra. "But I intend to show you. I'm about to let you get very well acquainted with every perverted fantasy I've ever had about you."

The bra dropped to the floor.

Raven gasped at the sight of the bare skin as his fingers, the backs of his fingers only, traced the curve of her breasts, rasped over the hard points of her nipples. Electric pleasure sizzled through her nerve endings, sending pulses of sensation whipping over flesh. She could feel her juices easing past her vagina, dampening the bare folds of her pussy as she pressed closer, rubbing her buttocks against his erection.

He wasn't the only one who could tease. She might not have his experience, but her arousal made up for it. She needed him, needed his touch, his kiss, the flames of pleasure that surrounded her and struck into the core of her being as he held her.

"Vixen," he growled roughly, pressing his cock tighter against her rear. "You keep teasing me with that little ass and you'll get more than you bargained for."

Her eyes widened as she blinked at his image in the mirror. He looked serious.

"You wouldn't." She arched against him as one hand slid down her stomach, his palm cupping the heated contours of her pussy through the lace and silk of the thong that seemed more a tease than any actually covering.

She stared at the image they made—sexual, hungry. His hand cupped her possessively, his fingers curving between her thighs, rasping against the material of the panties over her swollen flesh.

"Don't bet on it," he growled at her ear. "But first, I have to show you how I punish bad little girls."

She had only a second to gasp in shock as he lifted her from her feet, backed to the bed and sat down heavily before pressing her over his legs.

"You wouldn't! Dammit, Reno!"

His hand landed on the upraised flesh of her butt, sending sensation shooting to her clit. She jerked, shocked, amazed. She had known, that first time he spanked her so long ago, that a little pain could be an incredible turn-on. But this was different. His bare hand applied to her naked ass sent her flesh blooming with heat, and her pussy spasming in pleasure.

"Beautiful," his fingers trailed over the rounded flesh before his hand lifted, falling again on the opposite cheek with the same devastating effect.

"Reno, this isn't a good idea." Her pussy was creaming furiously as she shuddered in his grip.

He slid his fingers slid under the silken strap of material that ran between the cheeks of her rear. "Are you sure, Raven? I think it's a very good idea."

Raven groaned as she felt the silk of the thong rasping over her cunt, caressing the swollen nub of her clit as she writhed on his lap. Just when she thought he must have surely forgotten his previous intentions, his hand rose and landed on her bare butt again, causing her womb to convulse as she felt her juices flowing from her pussy.

She was quivering, shuddering with a fiery pleasure as he spanked her with an erotic precision that had her screaming out with each strike against her flesh. The pleasure whipping through her body seared her from the inside out and left her gasping, nearly screaming in arousal.

"Reno, this isn't fair." She moaned, jerking against him as one blow nearly threw her into orgasm, the pleasure-pain was so intense.

"No, Raven, what isn't fair is your denial." His hand landed again, making her burn as she screamed out beneath the fiery lash. "What isn't fair is aching for you, loving you and having to fight you every damned step of the way—" Smack! "—when we both—" Smack! "Know—" Smack! "Exactly how you feel..."

She was arching back to his hand and begging for more, so close to climax, she could feel it shuddering through her, clenching in her womb as he suddenly lifted her, tossing her to the bed as he rose to his feet.

Rolling to her back Raven came to her knees aggressively, baring her teeth in an arousal so deep, so hot, she knew it was burning her out of control. Before he could loosen the first metal button of his jeans, her fingers were there, pushing his out of the way, loosening his jeans until the rigid length of his cock jutted through the open fabric.

Thick and heavily veined, the flared head broad and ruddy, it was a treat Raven couldn't refuse any longer. Her eyes lifted, meeting Reno's stormy gaze as her head lowered, her tongue swiping over the small pearl of liquid that collected on the tip. His fingers threaded through her hair as her lips parted, covering the hot flesh with greedy hunger.

Her lips and mouth moved on him as her fingers enclosed the silken length. He was like iron encased in silk, hot and heavy, an erotic weapon of such sensual destruction that she was left helpless in the face of their combined needs.

Her mouth enclosed him, tightened as her tongue flickered over the sensitive head and she began a smooth, firm, sucking action that had a harsh groan ripping from his throat as his fingers tightened further in her hair.

A sense of power filled her, a heady feminine thrill that she held such a sensual, sexual force in the very palm of her hand. It was exhilarating, shattering, more arousing than anything she could have imagined.

Her mouth moved on him in ever increasing demand, feeling the hard throb of blood just under the flesh, feeling the thick erection pulse and throb as he groaned her name in a thick, guttural tone.

One hand moved to the heavy sac just below the straining shaft, her fingers cupping the taut flesh as her other hand stroked the length that her mouth couldn't consume. She moaned around the fullness that thrust demandingly between her lips, hungry for the heat and taste of him.

"Enough," he suddenly growled, his hands tightening in her hair as he pulled back.

But not before he spilled a few precious drops of semen on her tongue. Hot, salty, male, the taste sent her senses spiraling as she fought his hold, eager for more.

"That's not fair," she gasped as he held her out of reach, his hands catching her wrists to keep her from tempting him further.

"Of course it is." He turned her quickly, pushing her upper body to the bed as he raised her hips, coming to his knees behind her. "Especially when I intend to do this."

In one smooth, fierce stroke he filled her. Raven arched, a strangled scream escaping her lips as she felt his cock fill her to overflowing, powering into her with a force and pleasure that left her helpless.

He filled his hands with the smooth flesh of her rear, separating it as he began to move, creating a brilliant shaft of electric sensation as he parted the entrance to her anus. His thumbs smoothed down the crease until he reached the point where he filled her. There, his fingers slid in the slick cream that flowed easily from her body. He smoothed it back, dampening the little hole over and over again as she bucked beneath him, the pleasure so intense, she wondered if she could survive it.

One hand held her buttocks spread as the other began to spread more of her juices back along the crevice. Below, his cock thrust slow and deep inside the sensitive, hot depths of her pussy. He was making her crazy, moving so slowly, teasing her with alternate deep, fast strokes, then slow easy ones. All the while his fingers played at the tiny entrance above, relaxing her, easing her.

"Do you want to throw this away, Raven?" The question was delivered in a hard possessive voice. "This as well as everything else we've ever shared?"

"No!" She couldn't stop the protest, the need that filled her. Not just sexual, not just the hunger for the biting pleasure of having his cock fill her. But something more, something that went deeper, that grew more intense each time he touched her. It wasn't just sex, no matter how desperately she wished it were.

"Good girl," he whispered, thrusting harder inside her, thrusting against delicate tissue and nerves as she cried out at the pleasure.

She was gasping, crying, begging for more when she felt his hand tighten on her hip. The thumb massaging her anus paused for just a second before it began to push inside with slow devastation.

Raven's back arched, a strangled scream escaping her throat as the piercing pleasure-pain shot up her back before arrowing back down to strike the core of her womb as he began to fuck her in hard, deep thrusts. He stretched her, filled her, thrusting inside her in counterpoint to his thumb as it raided the tender entrance of her ass.

The dual penetration broke the last threads of her control, both physical and emotional. A shattered wail escaped her throat as she clamped down on him, exploding with a force that drew every muscle taut as it shuddered through her body in hard, heavy pulses of release.

Behind her, she heard him groan, felt him swell inside her, then felt his explosion, the hot splash of his semen filling her, branding her. She collapsed beneath him, groaning heavily as his thumb slid from the tight grip of her anus. Seconds later, she heard him breathe in heavily as his cock slid free of her wet vagina and he collapsed on the bed beside her.

"Hell, we're going to kill each other at this rate," he panted as he pulled her into his arms, one hand smoothing back the perspiration-damp hair that fell over her brow.

Raven opened her eyes, dazed, relaxed, knowing she was losing the emotional battle she was fighting, and fighting to make sense of it. He wasn't giving her a chance to think, to consider, to come to terms with the emotions tearing through her heart.

"It hasn't changed anything," she whispered then, watching his eyes darken with emotion. "How am I supposed to deal with this, Reno, when you keep clouding my mind with sex?"

"I'm not clouding your mind, baby." He then pulled her closer in his arms as he sighed deeply against her hair. "You're clouding it yourself. Either you want there to be an 'us,' or you don't. Think very hard before you make that decision, Raven. Fear can be dealt with, but you have to face it before you can defeat it."

She frowned.

"I love you, Raven." He tilted her head back, staring down at her, his eyes dark, filled with emotion, with a savage intensity that clenched her chest and brought tears to her eyes. "That won't change in a day, a week, or a century. But I won't destroy myself chasing after you. You have to decide what you want, and once you do, you have to stick to it. Either way it goes, there's no going back."

Chapter Eight

"We really should get out of bed," Raven muttered drowsily the next morning as Reno smoothed his hand over the rounded curves of her rear and watched her quietly.

She lay on her stomach, her head turned away from him, the long tangled locks of her dark hair flowing around her. Reno trailed his hand from the rounded flesh of her buttocks to her back, his fingers tangling in the rich mass of curls. She looked so delicate, small and tempting as she lay beside him, exhausted from their lovemaking.

This was the picture he would keep in his mind of her. Her beside him, tired and replete, her hair fanning over her back as he touched her, stroked her.

He kissed the curve of her shoulder, allowing himself to breathe in deep, to fill his senses with the scent of her.

"Did you hear me?" she mumbled as she lifted her shoulder against his lips.

Reno smiled at the irate drowsiness. He could hear the threat of laughter in her voice, despite her tone. She liked to play at being tough, unemotional, but he could hear the threads of feelings that she tried to

hide.

"I hear you, grouch." He raked his teeth over the flesh he was caressing, smiling at the faint shiver that gripped her body. "You're just a coffee hussy. You think you're going to convince me to fix you some."

Soft laughter greeted the accusation.

"Guilty." She rolled to her side, dragging the sheet around her as she glanced up at him.

Something in his chest expanded, threatening to steal his breath as he stared down at her. Her angel's face staring up at him, those dark, sleepy eyes staring at him from the flushed expanse of her face. She had the power to steal his breath, and often did.

He held her close, his arms tightening around her as she cuddled against him hesitantly. He could feel her breasts pressing against his chest through the sheet she had pulled around her like a shield. But at least she wasn't running.

"I really need that coffee, Reno." Her voice was languid, as lazy as the hand that played almost unconsciously through the mat of hair on his chest.

"You gotta pay for it first." He grinned as she sighed with exasperation.

"You should be tired," she grumped. "I'm tired. You didn't even let me sleep last night."

"Of course I did." He smiled against the top of her head as he pushed the sheet away impatiently. "You slept between two and seven while I made some calls and reenergized with a snack."

"You eat too much." Her casual tone was spoiled by the tensing of her body when he mentioned the phone calls.

He wasn't going to let her ignore who and what he was. That wasn't going to help when the next assignment came up. That, unfortunately, he knew would be sooner than he had expected.

"I have to keep up my energy," he whispered as he pressed her to her back, pulling the sheet away from her as she watched him, her eyes darkening with arousal.

"How pretty," he sighed as his hand smoothed down her stomach, feeling the muscles ripple beneath his fingers as he moved unerringly to the heat between her thighs.

Her breath caught, her eyes widened as he cupped the damp, bare flesh there. He loved that look, surprise and arousal, a hint of confusion, as though she hadn't yet figured out why the pleasure was so intense.

His head lowered to capture the sweetest lips he had ever kissed as his fingers played erotically in the hottest, silkiest folds of flesh God had ever made. Raven just felt different from any other woman. She tasted different; she smelled different. Everything about her was so unique, so soft and sweet and spicy that it sent his senses spinning. She was addictive. She made his head spin, made his heart pound out of control and his hands ache to hold her forever.

For now, his fingers parted the swollen folds between her thighs, caressing her gently as she gasped beneath his kiss. Her hands clenched his shoulders, dragging a groan from his chest as pleasure whipped through him. He tightened against the surge of lust that nearly overwhelmed his senses.

She arched beneath his hands, her hips pressing closer, the swollen bud of her clitoris rubbing into his palm as she tensed beneath him. Reno raised his head, staring down at her intently, seeing the wash of heated hunger suffusing her face as she stared back at him in bemusement.

He slid a finger slowly past the tender opening of her vagina, watching her mouth open as a cry escaped them. God she made him crazy.

His cock twitched in anticipation as he thrust his finger inside the heated depths of her cleft, massaging and caressing the silken tissue that rippled beneath his touch. Her breathing was harsh now, thready little moans escaping her throat as her head tilted back, her eyes closing while her hands moved down his chest, her nails raking over his flesh.

"What are you doing to me?" she moaned, writhing beneath him as he slid another finger inside her, working her muscles slowly, easily, feeling the slick cream of her arousal coating his fingers as she clenched around them.

"Loving you," he whispered as he read the dazed pleasure consuming her expression. "Do you feel me loving you, Raven?"

He thrust in harder, deeper, finding the ultrasensitive mass of nerves, so that when his fingers pressed into it, rotating subtly, she cried out with sensual abandon, arching closer, her hips pumping against his hand as the muscles of her cunt convulsed around his fingers.

"There you go, baby," he whispered, forcing back his own driving hunger to watch hers. "Let me love you, Raven."

He twisted his fingers inside her, sliding nearly free before driving deep again. He watched her face, relished the ecstasy that consumed her even as his own hunger bit deep into his loins. He was dying for her. He would die for her.

Filtering the overpowering lust was the incredible love he had always felt for this woman. She was so much a part of him that he could never imagine life without her now. Couldn't risk that she would turn away when the job became a reality rather than a distant thought.

Gritting his teeth, he quickened his fingers inside her, pushing her over the edge, watching her dissolve as he pulled free and slid quickly between her thighs. She was still convulsing, the muscles rippling and clenching as he positioned the straining length of his cock and pushed inside her.

"Oh God, Reno," she cried out beneath him, her legs raising to circle his hips, her arms wrapping around his neck as her eyes opened, the deep blue burning with emotion and pleasure as she stared up at him. "Don't let me go. Please don't let me go."

"Never, baby. I'll never let you go," he swore deeply as he lowered himself, bracing his weight on his elbows as his hands clasped her head, staring down at her as he began to move inside her with quick,

long strokes that sent frissons of sensation shooting up his spine.

She was so tight, so hot. Clenching around his flesh with rhythmic strokes that had him groaning roughly as his hands clenched in her hair.

"Reno..." Her nails bit into his shoulders as she stared up at him, her expressive face filled with confusion, with love, with such arousal, it had his scrotum drawing up tight as warning tingles of release began to sizzle at the base of his spine.

"Yeah, baby?" He was fighting for control. Just a few more seconds, he thought desperately. He could feel her tensing further beneath him, her own explosion nearing. "Tell me what you need, Raven," he said, panting. "Anything you want, baby, it's yours. Anything you want."

He watched her eyes turn liquid, tears filling them, but never spilling over as the emotion in her gaze intensified.

"I need you." Her legs tightened around him as the words whispered from her lips, hesitant, filled with longing. "I need you, Reno."

He lowered his head again, his lips whispering over hers as he felt her rising, felt the impending explosion moving through her.

"You have me, Raven," he whispered against his lips. "Forever, baby, you have me."

He pushed inside her harder then, deeper, his strokes increasing until he was jackhammering inside her, exploding with her, his soul dissolving and merging with hers until he had no idea where Raven ended and he began, all he knew was that he would never, could never, let her go.

Raven walked into the bedroom that afternoon, coming to a slow, careful stop as she caught sight of Reno packing the duffel bag that had lain nearly empty since the first night he had spent with her.

He was dressed in the camouflage fatigues, black boots and dull green shirt that were trademarks of his job. As she watched, he lifted his holster and the deadly weapon it contained and packed it carefully.

He was leaving. No warning, no time for her to prepare for it. She stared at him, fighting the building dread that rose within her.

He flashed her a strained smile. "I should be back in about a week. Command called about an hour ago. There should be a car to pick me up soon. I'll be at the base tonight, before we head out first thing in the morning. I left you a present in the kitchen."

She swallowed tightly, shoving her hands into her jeans pockets as she pushed back the emotions roiling inside her. Fear, pain, desperation. They hadn't had enough time together, less than a week, not even long enough to build up the memories to hold her through the long, empty nights.

"Sure." She smiled back, certain she came off as perfectly relaxed as if he had told her he was heading to the corner store. She would not be like her mother. She would not send him away, worried, stressed, uncertain about her state of mind. "Be careful."

She leaned against the wall memorizing his face. The curve of his lips, his dark stormy gray eyes, the strong arch of his brows.

He watched her carefully, his expression concerned. Tense.

He shrugged his shoulders as though shifting some invisible weight.

"I'll be back," he said again.

She smiled back at him. "Of course you will."

He seemed to relax then, at least marginally, the smile on his face curving more naturally. This was who

he was. He was a warrior. You can't tame the wind, and you can't housebreak a warrior. She had to accept that.

"I love you, Raven," he said then.

I love you, Raven. I love you, Raven.

The words rebounded through her soul.

She drew in a hard, deep breath. "Did you get everything packed?"

She moved quickly to the dresser, opening and checking drawers. "Clint is always leaving his stuff strung around the place when he visits. I swear, he's a slob. I pick up after him for a week after he leaves."

Nerves were jumping beneath her skin as she fought to hold on to her composure. She wasn't going to cry, she wasn't angry, but she was suddenly realizing how much more she stood to lose than she ever had.

"Raven." His hands landed on her shoulders, holding her. "I love you."

She stilled, then turned to him, staring up at him desperately as he watched her. Something inside her was splintering, fragmenting. What was it? She wasn't angry as her mother had been when her father went on assignment. Raven had been through this too many times with both Reno and Clint. Admittedly, she didn't have as much to lose then as she did now, but this part she knew how to handle. Didn't she?

"Don't you go and get yourself hurt, Reno," she fairly snarled up at him. "I won't be happy."

His off-center smile had her heart clenching with love.

"I'll make sure of that," he whispered, his voice quiet, almost saddened as he watched her.

His head swooped down then, his lips catching hers as her breath caught in her throat. Her throat tightened and something in her chest exploded as his kiss consumed her. Her arms went around his neck as she lifted to him, helpless, aching, as his arms jerked her closer, his hands nearly bruising as they roved over her back and shoulders, imprinting his touch into her soul forever.

A horn blew outside. Once, twice.

He pulled away from her, turned, grabbed his duffel bag and stalked from the room. Seconds later, the front door slammed and he was gone. Raven stared at the window across the room, the shards of sunlight cut across the bed, small motes of dust dancing in the air.

The silence was oppressive, heavy.

She forcibly held back her tears, the pain. She could survive this. She wasn't angry, but God she missed him already.

As she stared at that bright swath of sunlight, a memory broke free, surging past her defenses. She had been young, so young. Barely ten as she lay on her bed that weekend, listening to her parents scream at each other. Her father had to leave again, another mission, another fight. Her mother was crying, begging him not to go. His voice had echoed with his frustration, his own anger. He had to leave. It was his job. No, her mother had screamed, it was his mistress, and she wouldn't share him. He might as well not even come back.

He hadn't come back. A black car and two military counselors had arrived instead. Her father had died in an unknown country, and he was never returning. He wouldn't come home. She wouldn't hear her parents arguing ever again, or sit on her father's lap while he read her stories. He would never tickle her again or call her his dark angel. He was gone forever.

Which was worse? The worry or the loss? She had always wondered that. Especially with Reno. If she let herself love him, which would be worse? Never having him or knowing there would never be another chance?

She moved from the bedroom, down the stairs and to the kitchen. The soft noises coming from the other room warned her of what to expect, but nothing could contain the rush of emotion when she stepped into the room.

The box sat by the door, barely large enough to contain the ball of fluff attempting to break free. Attached to the side was a note, written in Reno's distinctive scrawl.

To keep your feet warm until I return, hove, Reno.

"Until you return," she whispered, staring at the golden retriever pup as it began to howl pitifully for release.

"Well, little guy," she whispered, kneeling beside the box as she touched a soft silky ear hesitantly. "At least we'll have each other."

She drew him from the box and stepped outside, feeling the late summer heat on her face, the breeze whispering over her damp cheeks. But they weren't. She'd promised herself she wouldn't cry.

But the tears fell as she cuddled the pup, staring into the brilliance of the late summer sky.

"I didn't tell him I love him," she finally admitted, the pain exploding in her chest as she realized Reno was right. There was no hiding from it. No hiding from him. She loved him, and she hadn't even told him.

"It's an easy in and out." Reno faced his men in the small conference room, standing in front of the large monitor that displayed the target they were being sent in to hit. "We have two hostages to rescue and a laptop used by the cell commander. Laptop is priority. We'll go in quiet, set the explosives, grab the laptop and the hostages and run. Pickup will be waiting on us here." He pressed the button that switched the picture to an area nearly ten miles from target. "Two Black Hawks will be waiting to fly us out to a waiting ship."

He lifted the stack of files on the desk beside him.

"Read this carefully. We have intel reports on entrances, exits, weak spots and so forth. We'll meet with the assist team when we reach the ship and finalize plans there."

"The cell commander is wanted for war crimes, Major," Ace spoke up, his deep voice echoing in the small room. "Are we just after the laptop or his head as well?"

"The assist team will be in charge of that," Reno informed him. "We'll be going after the hostages. But you don't take chances. The opportunity is there to take that laptop, you get it. We stick with our target op and adjust as we have to."

"And pop the bastard if we get him in our sights," Joker, the explosives expert of the team spoke up. He wasn't joking. This particular terrorist commander was brutal, without mercy. He wouldn't be shown any.

As Reno opened his mouth to dismiss the men, a sharp knock had his head lifting as the door opened.

"Major Chavez, we have a situation that demands your presence," an MP snickered from the doorway. "General says now."

Frowning, Reno nodded to Ace as he handed the files to him to distribute to the other three men and made his way to the door.

"Situation?" he asked warily.

"Situation, sir, of a very delicate sort." The MP nodded, amusement dancing in his eyes. "This way, sir."

As they neared the general's office, a frown worked between Reno's brows at the sound of an irate female voice.

"General, I don't care how busy he is. You were my father's best friend and I'm not above pulling strings.

If I don't see him before he leaves in the morning, I promise you, I'll be making a visit to your wife, your daughter and your son. They like me." The voice was husky, and filled with feminine fury.

He heard the general's voice, low, soothing.

"I'm not in the army, general," she said. "I don't need rules quoted to me. I need strings pulled. I want to see him. Now."

A grin tugged at his mouth as the MP chuckled.

"She's been ripping on the general for an hour," he whispered as they neared the door. "Want to bet he chews on you next?"

Reno grimaced but something in his heart was loosening. He wouldn't bet against the MP, but he would bet it just might be worth it.

He knocked on the door lightly.

"Enter." The general's voice was frustrated and clipped.

Reno stepped in, saluting smartly, then turned to stare at Raven.

She was cuddling the puppy he'd bought her like a baby. Her face was wet with tears, her deep, deep blue eyes filled with misery.

"Raven?" He stepped toward her, pulling her and the puppy into his arms as he stared back at the general. "What's happened?"

"Major, I'll leave you to talk to Miss McIntyre." The general sounded stern, but Reno caught the soft

look he cast at Raven. "We'll talk later."

"Yes, sir." Reno nodded as the general left the room and he turned his attention to the pup wiggling between them.

"Raven? Baby? The puppy is going to be smashed," he whispered as he gripped her arms, pushing her back enough to release the wiggling little mass. "What's wrong? Is Clint okay?"

The tears rolled silently down her cheeks. There were no sobs, just a hitch in her breath as she stared up at him.

"I forgot," she hiccupped then. "You left, and I forgot to tell you..."

She shuddered as her voice broke.

Reno moved to the couch, pulling her to his lap as she cuddled against his chest.

"I love you," she cried desperately. "God help me, Reno. I don't want to lose you. I can't lose you. I can stand anything but you leaving, maybe being... hurt..." her breath caught, "and not knowing I love you."

Reno closed his eyes, his arms tightening around her, his heart exploding with joy. She knew she loved him. That was all that mattered.

"It's okay, baby," he groaned, kissing her forehead gently as her head tilted back, the wealth of long silken curls flowing over his arm. Her hand lifted to his face, her lips trembling as he wiped the tears from one silken cheek.

"You knew all along, didn't you?" she whispered then. "That I loved you."

"All along," he agreed with a smile.

His lips lowered to hers, moving over the soft curves, nibbling at the damp softness as the feel and smell of her sent his senses rioting.

"Hell, if I fucked you in the general's office, he would court-martial me for sure," he sighed, smiling down at the seductive softness in her expression.

"Yeah. He probably would." Her smile trembled, but it was still there.

"Wait for me, Raven," he growled, his voice husky, deep, knowing every day away from her would be hell. "I'll be home. Wait forme."

"Always,Reno ." She kissed him. Her head raised, her lips moving against his with incredible passion and loving heat. "Always."

Chapter Nine

THREE MONTHS LATER

"You are in so much trouble."

Reno tossed his duffel bag to the corner of the bedroom as he stalked inside the room, his brows lowered into a dark frown as Raven reclined back on the bed, her knee bent, her naked breasts thrusting forward in invitation as his hot gaze raked over them.

Damn he looked good. The camouflage pants made his legs look sexy as hell, planted apart as they were, the bulge between his thighs filling out the front of the material.

"Oh really, Reno, it wasn't so bad." She rolled her eyes at his miffed state. "It was just a little present."

She restrained her smile as he dug his hand into his pocket, no small feat with that erection tightening the material. Her mouth watered at the sight of it. He had been gone for nearly two weeks this time. Too long as far as she was concerned, and she was wet and hungry for him. The adult toys he had been so kind as to teach her to use the last time he was home did little to bank the fire that thinking of him caused.

She blinked as the small velvet box landed on the bed beside her. She almost had to bite her lips to keep back her smile.

"Is this a proposal?" She arched a brow as she glanced back up at him.

Oh yum. He was undressing. There went the shirt, revealing the golden expanse of his chest, muscles rippling beneath the sun-darkened flesh.

"I'm going to spank your ass," he grunted as he bent to unlace his boots. "Do you want to know where I was when that box dropped out of my duffel bag, Raven? I was in the middle of communal quarters, sweetheart, with three different teams. Can you imagine the fun those men had at my expense?"

She lifted the box, opening it, and grinned at the sight of the wedding set she had found in his dresser drawer just before he was due to leave. The short letter she had wrapped around it was missing.

Who's hiding now? she had written.

He had been so very careful of their relationship over the last three months, never pressing her for anything, but she had seen how he had steadily cemented his presence into her life.

His clothes now shared space with hers. His guitar was residing under her bed, and his prized trophies from high school and college had made their way to her small shelf downstairs. He even had his own computer desk for the laptop he often worked on. This was his home. He hadn't asked to inhabit it, he had just moved in, just as he had taken her heart, a little bit at a time. But he never mentioned taking it further, never pushed her, though she could tell he wanted to.

She looked up as his pants cleared his hips and his erection sprang free. Thick, the broad head flushed to a near purple hue, it looked intimidating, ready to conquer. She was more than ready to be conquered.

"Turn over," he growled.

He had that intimidating, dominating look on his face now. The one that made her cream furiously and made her blood pressure shoot through the roof. She loved it when he looked like that, and she loved what resulted.

"Do I look crazy to you?" She flipped the box closed as she watched him mockingly. "Why buy the cow, Reno, if you're getting the milk free? I think perhaps you should sleep in the spare bedroom tonight. Better yet, Morganna's not having any parties this weekend. Maybe she can spare a bed."

She moved to get off the bed, knowing the game and loving it. She saw that twinkle in his eye. The happiness that tugged at his fiercely controlled lips and the lust that flushed the hard cheekbones of his face.

Her feet barely touched the floor when she felt his arm hook around her waist, dragging her back to the bed as he flipped her onto her stomach in one smooth, economical move.

She screeched in mock protest, struggling against him as she felt his muscular legs bracket her, holding her to the mattress.

A second later, his callused palm landed on her rear with stinging force. Heat whipped through her buttocks, sizzled along her nerve endings, then down to her clit with vicious force.

"Reno, that's cruel and unusual treatment." She bucked against his hold. "There's laws against this."

He smacked the other cheek, causing her to wiggle fiercely as her vagina began to ripple in desperate need. Damn him, he knew what this did to her.

"Your proposal sucked, Raven," he drawled lazily as another blow landed, making her moan at the border between pleasure and pain.

"It beat yours," she cried out, pressing back, feeling the tip of his erection as it slid against the crease of her damp thighs.

He was hard and hot, and her body was starving for him. She pressed back again, moaning heavily as two more strikes landed on her upraised ass, making her clench at the fire blooming there.

"I was wooing you," he half snarled.

He was always like this after a mission, more dominant, so eager for her that he took her breath away.

"You call that wooing?" She was panting now. His hips shifted, pressing his cock against her eager entrance as she fought for that first hard thrust. "I could die an old maid waiting on you." The next smack landed with burning force on her ass as she felt her womb contract almost violently.

A second later, her back arched as a hoarse scream tore from her throat. The full, heavy length of his cock surged inside the slick, tight confines of her vagina triggering an explosive climax that left her shaking in reaction, shudders of pleasure vibrating through her entire body.

"Oh, you're not done yet, baby." He slid free of her, flipped her to her back and lifted her legs as his head lowered.

His tongue attacked the sensitive folds with ravenous greed, licking around her straining clit as his murmurs of approval hummed against her flesh. Deep, penetrating thrusts of his tongue had her lifting her hips in supplication moments later, only to have him retreat to torture the burning nub above once again.

He was voracious. A sensual, sexual demon intent on draining her of every last vestige of resistance against him. Not that the resistance was anything more than feigned. She loved this side of him, provoked

it often and gloried in his possession of her.

She could feel her heart hammering against her chest as her hands lifted from the bed, her fingers moving for the aching tips of her breasts, knowing he was watching. It inflamed her all the more to know that she could push him over the edge, that she could make him as crazy with need as he made her.

He was her lover, her heart and her soul.

She pinched at her nipple as she heard him groan roughly, tugging at the tender points as her eyes opened, her gaze meeting his as his tongue circled her straining clit. He would make her come again, make her scream for him. He always did.

She could feel perspiration gathering on her body as the heat inside her began to build. Her muscles tensed, her breathing became broken whimpers of agonizing need until his mouth covered the erect little clit, his tongue flickering as he sucked it firmly.

She screamed for him as she exploded. Rocketing into the stars with a force that left her dizzy as she felt him thrust inside her, hard and deep, penetrating her to the very core before his hips began to move with furious thrusts.

It didn't take him long. The need was too great; the absence had been too long. He pushed her into a final, exhausted orgasm before giving in to his own, groaning harshly as he buried inside her, his cock jerking in reflex as he spilled his semen in the gripping depths of her pussy.

Seconds later he collapsed beside her with an exhausted sigh, pulling her to his chest as they both fought to bring their breathing under control.

"I need coffee," she muttered sleepily, burrowing close, her hand going to the scar on the right side of his chest.

The bullet he had taken there could have taken his life if it had been a few more inches toward the center. It had been a close call. A terrifying one, but she had survived it without recriminations. When he came home, she had babied him and loved him, and treasured every day she had with him after that. She

vowed she would never waste their lives as her mother had hers.

"Coffee hussy," he chuckled into her hair. "What do you do when I'm gone?"

She breathed out pitifully. "I suffer,Reno . It's a tragic, horrible sight to witness. Poor Morganna even feels sorry for me."

She shivered as his hands caressed her back, one running low to her hips before smoothing over her buttocks.

"You're marrying me." His voice suddenly hardened. "Notice, I'm not asking. I'm telling you."

"I already proposed, big shot. You dropped the ball. Remember?"

He grunted at that. "Minx. The men are still laughing over that note you left. Don't you know I'm fearless? I never hide."

"Coward." She yawned, unconcerned, nipping his chest as her lips closed. "Do you know how mad I got when I found that box? It's a good thing you were getting ready to leave that day or I might have had to hurt you."

He gripped a handful of hair, tugging her head back as she stared up at him, her legs smoothing across his as she felt his erection growing, pressing against her lower stomach.

"I love you, Raven," he whispered then, his voice no longer filled with amusement, his gaze velvet soft as he watched her. "Forever."

"You took a hell of a chance,Reno ," she whispered. "I didn't know myself how much I loved you. What if I hadn't realized?"

A smile curved his lips. "I would have fucked you into submission."

She rolled her eyes, one hand pressing against his shoulder as though to push him away.

"Get serious."

"Withheld the coffee?" he suggested darkly.

She stared up at him in some concern then. "You wouldn't do that."

"Oh yes I would have," he growled. "But more importantly, I wouldn't have given you a moment's peace. You're mine, baby, and I don't let go of what's mine."

He kissed her then, a kiss filled with promise, heat and magic as her heart dissolved within her chest and flowed into his. It wouldn't do him any good to let her go, she thought, because she had no intention of releasing him.

"I love you,Reno ," she whispered against his lips again. "Forever."

The end