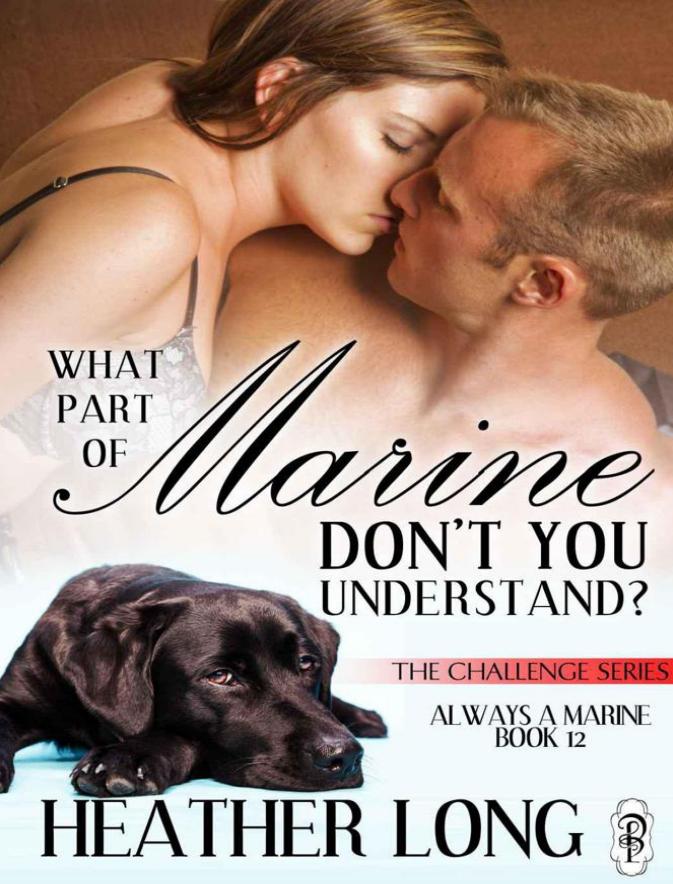




WHAT
PART
OF

Marine

DON'T YOU
UNDERSTAND?

THE CHALLENGE SERIES

ALWAYS A MARINE
BOOK 12

HEATHER LONG



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What Part of Marine Don't You Understand?

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~Dedication~

*For all those who have suffered from
PTSD and the families and friends who
support them.*

What Part of Marine Don't You Understand?

Always a Marine - Book 12

The Challenge Series

**By
Heather Long**

Chapter One

Matt McCall tapped his knuckles against the underside of the table and fidgeted. A bad sign. No matter how often he tried to stop, he couldn't contain his hyperactivity. The apartment was quiet—too quiet. The Beretta M9 sat in front of him. All he needed to do was slide the clip in and pick it up.

Breathing exercises helped. Head bowed, he recited all of his accomplishments in his twenty-four years, from making the varsity football team one year early, to enlisting, to

graduating boot camp and surviving his first firefight. Certainly accomplishments he could be proud of, each and every one.

None mattered a damn when a ridiculous injury—a blast piercing his inner ear drum, shattering it, left his hearing on that side blunted and his balance shaky. The continuous rap of his hand to the hard table hurt, but even that pain numbed after a while.

Returning to Mike's Place shouldn't be like coming home—not when he escaped his family in Ohio to return to Dallas, again.

You have to give it time, Matt. There is no hard and fast deadline on recovery. Some people take days, some

months, some years. You'll be ready when you are ready, and not one moment before then. James meant well with his advice.

His family meant well. Everyone meant well.

All I have to do is pick up this gun, load the clip and....

The knocking stopped and he leaned back in the chair, lifting his right hand. Raw, bloody stripes decorated the knuckles.

A low whimper dragged his attention away. The black Labrador at his feet stared up at him with a pair of soulful eyes. Jethro thumped his tail. Matt's right hand tingled and he flexed the fingers. Jethro nudged his arm and Matt

turned, giving the dog a comforting scratch between his ears. When his cell phone vibrated in his pocket, he didn't reach for it. The buzzing hummed along his nerves.

“You need a walk, boy?” Rising, he packed the gun into the case and put it away, before grabbing the leash. “How about we make it a run?” Leaning against Matt's leg, Jethro wagged his tail.

“Good morning, Matt.”

Fifteen steps, about the length of time it took he and Jethro to get to the curb before he ran into James Westwood. It almost qualified for a record.

“Morning, Doc. You keep lurking out

here every day and people are going to talk.”

The doc laughed and fell into step next to him. Despite his retirement, he still looked like the button-downed Marine he was—far better than Matt, who needed a haircut and had worn the same pair of jeans for the last three days. Jethro wasn't interested in talking and trotted ahead, stretching the leash out. His only concession to their slower pace included pausing to take a leak every five feet.

Better to let the world know he owned the spot. Every spot apparently. Despite the gloom, amusement spread through Matt.

“I called and you didn't answer. So I

thought I would walk over and check on you.”

“Your concern is showing, Doc.” He didn’t want to focus on the concern. “I planned to take Jethro for a run, so maybe we can talk later?”

“Let me change shoes and I’ll run with you. I’m parked right over there.” Not waiting for a response, Doc double-timed it to his vehicle.

The offer surprised him, but it shouldn’t have. Of all the doctors he’d seen in the last eighteen months, James kept in touch. He gave him hell when Matt didn’t show up for group. Maintained the perimeter with a vigilance to remind Matt he needn’t be alone.

He didn't really want to run with the doc. Jethro returned and rubbed his head along his thigh. Stretching his fingers to scratch between the dog's ears, Matt had to swallow a curse.

His knuckles were still bloody.

He could hope James hadn't noticed. But it wasn't likely.

"Guess I'm busted, huh, boy?" Jethro wiggled at the attention and Matt chuckled. Agreeing to keep the dog for a few weeks when he returned hadn't seemed like much of a burden, but the Labrador proved repeatedly to be excellent company.

Matt didn't want to have to give him back.

James returned, having swapped out

his dress shirt and slacks for a green T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants. "Ready?"

"Do you always strip in parking lots?" Matt grinned. A real smile, and his face ached.

"No. You're special." Doc laughed and motioned. "Let's run."

He hesitated. "Not going to ask me about my hand?"

The doctor gave him a level look. "Do you want to talk about your hand?"

"Not particularly." Flexing his fingers, he enjoyed the stinging sensation stretching across the damaged skin.

"Okay then. Let's run."

The light jog was hardly a run, but he couldn't go all out anymore. Not without risking tripping over his feet when the

world took to playing tilt-a-whirl. But Jethro didn't complain about the pace, trotting right at his side as they hit the trail.

And it felt good to stretch.

He dripped with sweat after the run. With James for company and Jethro eagerly keeping pace, Matt ran harder than he'd intended. He made sure the dog's water and food bowls were full before stripping out of his clothes and getting in the shower. The hot water sluiced away most of the sweat. A hard scrub took care of the rest. His phone vibrated on the counter when he stepped back out. Wrapping a towel around his

hips, he checked the caller ID.

His mother.

Thumbing it on to answer, he dredged up a cheerful voice. “Hey, Mom.”

“Hey, sweetie. I wanted to make sure you arrived in Dallas okay.” Sounding upbeat, if hurried, she didn’t chastise him for not calling her when he’d arrived—the week before—or for avoiding her phone calls since.

Yeah, I’m a bad son.

“Yes, ma’am. Been settling in.”

“Good. I’m running late for a meeting at the bank. They approved the refinancing. Everything is going to be fine.” Tangible relief echoed in her words. With five other children, two getting ready for college and three

spread out through junior and senior high schools, his mother shouldered a lot of the financial burden. Matt sent money whenever he could, dividing a full half of his disability pay so he could help. But she didn't complain.

"That's great." He hesitated. "I got a dog."

The pause on the other end of the phone worried him. Then his mother exhaled. "Really? What kind?"

"A Labrador. His name is Jethro. Some friends were training him, but they're out of town and asked if I'd keep him company." Okay, so maybe he hadn't quite gotten a dog.

He combed his hair and grimaced. He definitely needed a haircut. It fell below

his collar and covered his ears. Mike's Place didn't have a barber per se, but he knew of one across the highway. Maybe he and Jethro could take another walk.

"Send me a picture." Was his mother smiling? "With you in it, too, please."

"Yes, ma'am." He laughed, the rusty sound rattling in his chest. "He's a good dog. I like him."

"I can't wait to see him. Matty?"

"Yes, Mom?"

"Call me later, okay?"

Dropping the comb on the counter, he leaned forward and took a deep breath. His chest didn't squeeze so tight and the request sounded reasonable. "Yeah, what time will you get home tonight?"

"Probably nine my time? Brock's got

a game at six.” His baby brother, the basketball enthusiast.

“Cool. I’ll call you then, and tell Brock I said drive it forward.”

Silence and then a real smile wreathed her words. “I will, baby. Have a good day.”

“You, too.”

Ending the call, he stared at the phone. Nails clicked across the tiles behind him, and Jethro shoved his cold nose against his side.

“Hey, boy. Want to go for another walk?”

Jethro wagged his tail.

“Yeah, me too.” He walked out into the bedroom. First things first, make the bed and clean up. Then dress. “Give me

ten.”

Jethro walked over to flop in the doorway and waited patiently while he squared the room away. It took him a minute to find clean clothes. Gathering the dirty laundry into a pile, he'd wash a load while they went for the haircut.

After the haircut—he'd call the doc and make an appointment.

No more skipping.

“I know to get a diagnosis you need me to actually show up for appointments.” Matt leaned forward. He sat on the sofa in James' office, with Jethro settled across his feet. Doc hadn't minded when he asked to bring the dog

with him.

“Matt, I had your diagnosis five minutes into our first session.”

The information surprised him. “You did?” The haircut helped more than Matt cared to admit. High and tight once more, he felt like himself and not some discarded piece of refuse who forgot he was a Marine.

“You have Post-traumatic stress disorder. You’ve been struggling with it since you came home.” Doc tapped his capped pen on the white legal pad in his lap.

“That’s bad. Right?”

“No, that’s normal. Matt, you can’t remember what happened without reliving it.” It sounded so utterly simple

and reasonable.

“But I’m fine....” He held up his hand at James’ skeptical look. “Okay, I’m not fine. But I thought this was about my balance and my ear and feeling like a failure.”

“Why do you feel like a failure?”

“I’m a Marine, Doc. It’s what I know. But I can’t get my legs under me again. I pick up speed, start really running, and I get dizzy. The world turns upside down and then I’m on my ass. I have my legs. I have my arms. I have my wits. But I don’t have my balance.”

“Inner ear damage does that. Are you still going to your physical therapy?”

“For what?” He blew out a breath. He didn’t mean to be combative. But he

wasn't Jazz having to learn how to walk again, or Joe who needed to build up the strength in his back, or any of the dozen others working to overcome debilitating physical injuries.

“To work on your balance, to work on your physical fitness, to learn techniques to compensate when the world tilts.”

A bitter taste flooded his mouth. “I’m physically fine. I just can’t do my job.”

“You can’t return to active duty in a combat zone, no. But you aren’t impaired.”

Jethro whined and Matt stroked his head automatically. His heart thudded in his chest. “Every time I think I can do it—I can’t. How do we fix this?” The acrid taste retreated and he swallowed.

He should have brought a bottle of water with him.

“We have to talk about what happened. You have to remember and not relive it.”

“I’m not reliving it.” *Am I?*

Shouts echoed in the hallway and feet thundered past. He jerked to a stand and started forward three steps. Jethro butted into him, the leash rubbing the cuts on his knuckles. Matt stopped, disoriented and looked at James.

No feet echoed in the hallway. He wasn’t in Iraq. He was in Allen, Texas.

“Holy hell on a biscuit.” He sat down before he fell down, and Jethro shoved his head under his hand. He couldn’t make it stop. “How do I make it stop?”

“Breathe, Matt. Look at Jethro. He knows you’re upset. Breathe.” If only James’ calmness could flow from the psychologist to him. Matt heard the words but couldn’t quite process them. “You haven’t hurt anyone, and you haven’t hurt yourself.”

“Why does my mouth taste like ass?” Sweat trickled down his neck. Oxygen burned in his chest with every breath he took.

“That’s the adrenaline. You got upset. You remembered and you were there. The bitter taste is adrenaline.”

“I’m getting short-changed here.” Amusement and disbelief warred with the craziness swirling inside him. Everyone thought his issues stemmed

from a helicopter accident, including Matt. He survived the first, recovered, and his first night back on duty came the attack.

“No, it’s normal. With a lot of veterans, you start cooking and after a while, you can’t stop it anymore—that’s when you snap. You keep bringing yourself up to the boil and then retreat.”

“What gets me cooking?” And why hadn’t they talked like this before? The blood pounding in his skull eased and his heart stopped trying to pound its way out of his chest.

“With veterans it can be a car backfiring, a twig snapping, or a box dropping off a shelf. The sudden, explosive noise reminds them of....”

“Gunshots.” That made sense. He could actually wrap his mind around that.

“But that’s not what sets you off.”

“So what is it?”

“I know this will sound like I’m telling you that five plus five equals a pile of hay, but it’s people yelling or laughing or running. Large movements of people. It’s what set you off in the bar. It’s why you didn’t stick it out at Damon’s restaurant. It’s why going home —”

“Is hard. Everyone comes to see me. The house is always full of people, family, neighbors, kids....”

James nodded slowly. “Kids are loud. They yell. They run. What happened that

day in Iraq, Matt?”

“Insurgents came through one of the perimeter gates. They rammed it in with three SUVs...one detonated at the gate. Killed four men and the driver.” The bitterness swam through his mouth again, but he kept petting Jethro.

“Where were you?”

He shook. “In my bunk. It was the middle of the night....”

“And what happened?”

Matt closed his eyes. Yelling erupted in the darkness, the alarm sounded. Booted feet hit the floor, and he jumped up and ran. Floodlights filled the yard and dazzled his night vision. Somewhere between the room and the courtyard, he'd armed himself. The truck came at

them—the insurgents fired—Matt and the others fired back.

It exploded.

The world floated around him, everyone ran.

The shouts came intermittently like the volume being turned up and down.

He wanted to vomit.

Opening his eyes, he met James' solemn gaze. "I'm seriously fucked up."

"No. You're only a little bit fucked up. But you're talking about it now."

Exhaling a shuddering breath, he scratched alongside Jethro's neck. The dog appreciated the attention and leaned into the affection.

"Why now?" He swallowed the urge to be sick, the cold sweat leaving him

fevered and chilled at the same time.

“Because you’re ready now.”

“Is that going to be my reaction every time I hear a big group of people?”

“No.” Doc shook his head. “Because we get better and I can help you.”

Chapter Two

“Naomi, call for you.” The shout from downstairs intruded through the fifteenth audition tape she tried to review. Grateful for the interruption, she hit the spacebar on the laptop and bounced off the bed. Her roommates wouldn’t have interrupted if it wasn’t someone important.

She glanced at the caller ID on the cordless and laughed. “Hello, Congressman Pain in the Ass, how is Washington today?”

Her eldest brother graduated

Annapolis, served three tours in Iraq, returned home a wounded veteran with one leg, and threw himself into public service. His recent election to the House of Representatives added another kudo in a long line of damn-isn't-my-brother-awesomeness.

“Good morning to you, Sassy Sparks.” He would never let her forget her obsession with the Spice Girls.

“I’m busy, government stooge, what do you want?” But she grinned and stretched onto the bed. Checking her list of songs, she sighed. A dozen more to review and none thrilled her. She really wanted her first album to touch people and not be the same tired tropes rehashed over and over again.

“I need a favor, brat. So stop staring at your computer or plucking on your guitar, and listen to me.”

“Of course you do and I do not pluck on my guitar. I play it.” But she rolled onto her back obediently and stopped staring at the song list. It made her crazy anyway. “Whatcha need?”

“You remember Luke Dexter?”

The name sounded familiar.

“Nope.”

“Captain. Marine. Tall.”

She snorted. “Brent, you do realize that most of the Marines I know are taller than I am, right? You included?” Four brothers, her father, three uncles, two cousins, and all of her grandfathers were Marines. She couldn’t turn around

without tripping over one.

“Luke Dexter, the guy who started Mike’s Place in Dallas? You went with us to the grand opening ceremony.”

“Okay. I remember Mike’s Place.” The facility sat on a gorgeous campus that mingled military and civilian in a seamless blending. The swanky party to celebrate its opening for veterans and their families had been pretty fun, too.

“Great. They’re planning some fundraising events over the next few months, and I am scheduled to attend, but....”

“You can’t?” It was a guess.

“Unfortunately, it’s just a matter of bad timing.”

“You know they have golf courses in

Texas.” He’d never cancel if he could help it, but she liked teasing him.

“Actually Ryleigh might be ovulating and....”

“Oh. Stop!” She let out a squeal. “Too much information.”

He laughed and she scrubbed a hand over her face, the idea permanently burned into her brain. She would need bleach to get it out. “I will go. I promise. Just never mention why you can’t again.”

“You are the best. I’ll have my office book your tickets and make all the arrangements.”

“No problem. Really happy to help.” They chatted for a few minutes more and then he had to go to a meeting. Sitting up, she tossed the handset onto the bed and

looked at the song list again. Her producer sent a wide variety of songs and themes available. But none of them touched her. Hitting play on the next one, she grimaced.

Yeah, she definitely needed to find something different for this album.

Trailing after the dozen others touring the facility, Naomi absorbed the information the guide provided. She admired the fact that despite the escort, they didn't intrude on any of the group therapy sessions. A scarred veteran named Logan Cavanaugh led the physical therapy tour—she wrote the name down on the pad of notes she

compiled for Brent. A position paper she planned to write in trochaic tetrameter, it would drive her brother nuts and fulfill her promise at the same time.

A win-win in her book.

If the idea of Mike's Place impressed her during the opening ceremonies, her current visit left her floored.

"Miss Sparks?" A woman beckoned her away from the group. "I'm Rebecca ____"

"Ranier, I remember." They shook hands and Naomi smiled. "Sorry, I was a little caught up in the guide's story. He's got a great voice."

"Who, Damon? He can tell stories all day, but it can't compare with his

cooking. If you'll come with me?" She motioned to a side hallway. "Luke sends his apologies, but we've had some issues with the new construction across the highway and he had to discuss it with the foreman."

"Not a problem. I actually think the tour was a great idea. I'm sure Brent will be sorry he missed it." Naomi followed her into a well-appointed office.

Decorated in dark woods, the room screamed masculinity. A floor-to-ceiling window overlooking an atrium offered a tremendous amount of light. Rebecca bypassed the desk and led her back to a comfortable sitting area.

"Would you like something to drink?"

“No, I’m fine, thank you. We had coffee down in the mess and a chance to talk to some of the veterans. You have an amazing facility here.” Naomi crossed one leg over the other.

“Thank you, I don’t do much more than handle our publicity and fundraise, the credit goes to Luke and his men. They work tirelessly to make this place better every day. They know what to do and how to help—and when they don’t, they know who to bring in.”

“I’ve never been one to beat around the bush, Ms. Ranier—”

“Rebecca, please.”

“Only if you call me Naomi.”

They shared another fast smile.
“Done.”

“What can Congressman Sparks do for you?”

“You come from a family of Marines, don’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am. We’re all born and bred. I grew up on Marine bases around the world. My brothers are all in service, or just out like Brent—Congressman Sparks. So I have nothing but the utmost respect for those who serve and want to, you know, push my sleeves up and get involved. Tell me what he can do, and I’ll do my best to push it through.” Brent could have sent an aide to do the tour, but he’d asked her.

This is personal.

He wanted her take on it.

“House Resolution 2663 will be introduced during the next session. It calls for a reduction in funds for discretionary spending. One of the areas earmarked is veteran’s services.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“A new study was released that found the efficacy of veteran’s services at federally funded hospitals to be significantly less when compared to private hospitals. Because of attrition to our armed forces, they want to reallocate money to keep more people in the service, but they have to find the money somewhere.”

“So they’re targeting veteran’s services.” The thought made her feel vaguely ill. “It won’t pass.”

“We hope it won’t. I know Congressman Sparks is not on the Armed Forces subcommittee—but he could....”

“Talk to people who are. Okay, I will mention it to him. What else can we do?”

Her easy acceptance of the task seemed to surprise Rebecca and the woman laughed. “We’re going to increase our own fundraising activities, we need to get the word out and bring in prominent veterans to endorse Mike’s Place....”

“Done.” Brent wouldn’t hesitate. She could talk to her father, as well.

“I’d also like a pony.” Rebecca grinned.

“I can’t do anything about the pony,

but maybe there's something you could do for me." The idea began as a bit of an itch in the back of her mind, but the longer she spent on the property the clearer it became.

"Name it."

"Would you mind if I spent a few days here at Mike's Place? Really have a chance to get to know the people...."

"To roll up your sleeves and get involved?"

"Yes."

Rebecca didn't answer immediately, but finally nodded. "I think that will be fine. Do you mind if I run this by Luke first?"

"Not at all. Out of idle curiosity, how did you two meet?" Her brothers

described her as pathological in her ability to ask pointed questions, but Naomi was genuinely curious.

“That’s a long story.”

“Well how about I buy you lunch and you can tell me as much as you’re comfortable with?”

“I’d like that.” Rebecca rose. “But only if you let me treat.”

“I never say no to a free lunch.”

“That’s pretty much it,” Naomi said into the phone while hefting the guitar case onto the table. She flipped the locks open. Checking the Gibson after every trip was mandatory. She’d saved up every dime she earned over three

summers to afford her beauty.

“You really like the place, don’t you?” Brent must have shut himself away in a quiet office, because the background noise faded.

“Yeah, I really do. It’s—they’re doing some amazing work here. I asked if they would let me hang out for a few days, really get to know the staff and some of the patients—you know those who are willing.”

She would need to retune the guitar since she always loosened the strings before she flew. Satisfied, she set it aside and pulled out her laptop to set it up.

“Aren’t you on some kind of deadline for the album you wanted to record?”

Score one for big brothers who actually paid attention when she spoke.

“I’m still looking for the right songs and we don’t have our studio time booked until the end of next month.” She’d written two pieces, but neither was that powerful—they didn’t capture the soul, and she wanted something big. With just six weeks to put together the songs she wanted, she couldn’t afford downtime. “I have samples to review, but I can do that here and you will get a very thorough report.”

Brent chuckled. “Just not in Dr. Seuss rhymes? One Marine, Two Marine, Red Marine, Blue Marine was enough.”

“That will teach you to fail to read what I send you before you walk into a

meeting.” She’d almost forgotten she’d done that when she’d gone with their father to tour the Green Zone in Baghdad. “But I promise, I will not plagiarize Dr. Seuss this time.” Not when she could use rhyming meter from another century.

“Uh huh. Thanks for doing this, kiddo.”

“Anytime, Mr. Congressman. Now go earn a paycheck, us little people have real work to do.” He laughed and said goodbye. Accessing the Wi-Fi, she started her search for the *INight Stand* service.

Who knew such a thing existed?

Chapter Three

Matt ran the trail with Jethro bounding along next to him. In the previous two weeks, he felt like he'd made more progress than in the whole two years he'd bounced in and out of Mike's Place. He didn't break into the long mile runs he indulged in against advice during his first stay, but followed orders to manage a steady pace. At the mile marker, he slowed to a walk. Gulping oxygen, he walked off the burn. The nausea in his stomach ebbed. Breathing exercises helped, but nothing replaced

the heat of feeling his muscles flex. He missed workouts that pushed him to his limit.

The therapist insisted on a walk-run-walk regimen. Impatience curled through him, but he fought the urge to ignore her and run again. Retired sergeant Candy Jefferson might look like someone's grandmother, but she cowed the most belligerent of her patients with a stern eye. He didn't feel like testing her to see if she could back up her attitude.

She probably could.

"Hey, man," Damon rounded the curve ahead of him, walking in the opposite direction. Sweat soaked through his gray-green sweatshirt.

"Hey. I thought you were in Los

Angeles.” He and his girlfriend were a firm item, though rumor had it Damon had asked her to marry him and she’d said no.

Twice.

That had to sting.

“Next week. Helena’s court case moved up the docket. So she’ll be tied up for the next couple of days.” Damon pivoted, falling into step with him. “You want to get a beer tonight?”

It sounded good, but that meant hitting a bar. He wanted to avoid those triggers, particularly since he’d been doing so well. “I’m good. Maybe we can hang out when you get back later? Catch a game here?”

“Sure.” Restaurant owner, chef,

Marine and regular volunteer at Mike's Place, Damon was also one of his best buds. "You okay?"

Matt winced at the absolute caution hovering in the question. Tired of being the quirky, difficult friend, he needed to get his shit together. *You can't get upset at the questions. They ask them because they care.* The mantra helped, but only a little.

"I'm actually pretty good." *Discuss your healing process. It's natural and nothing to feel ashamed of.* "Up to a full mile on the run, getting out more because I'm not holing up in the apartment when I can be outdoors. Still not so good with large crowds of people."

He waited for awkward discomfort to

stilt the conversation.

“Cool.” Damon rolled his head from side to side and extended his arm behind his head, gripping the elbow for another stretch. “Glad to hear it. If crowds are the issue, how about I swing by with a six-pack this weekend and we just watch the game?”

The knot of tension in his shoulder blades loosened. “Sounds good.”

“I gotta jet. I’m on opening today and I want to get the kitchen set up.” Damon gripped Matt’s shoulder. “Keep fighting the fight, man. We got your back.” He gave Jethro a pat and turned to jog toward the parking lots.

The easy acceptance stunned him, a solid kick in the ass to his confidence.

“That wasn’t so bad.” He glanced down at the Labrador and laughed at the dog’s tongue-lolling grin. “Not bad at all.”

“So what makes this week so different?” Doc sat forward, his notepad resting untouched on the thick, upholstered arm of the chair. Their once weekly sessions had turned daily for the past three weeks.

“I’m actually looking forward to our sessions.” He counted them off on his fingers. “I’m sleeping better. I’m running again. My balance is improving—it’s not perfect. It may never be perfect and....” He hesitated, uncertain of how to phrase it. “And I’m okay with that.”

“That’s better than okay. That’s great.” Encouragement and acceptance were readily available in James’ office. “How about crowds? How are you doing getting off campus?”

He grimaced. “Still not my favorite thing. But...I hung out around one of the tour groups yesterday. You know the ones Rebecca is bringing in as part of the fundraising? About a dozen people, lots of noisy shoes.” He’d sweat right through shirt and thought his heart would explode in his chest, but he didn’t lose it and when it was over, he experienced relief and something more.

Satisfaction.

“I’m familiar. She’s doing some excellent work getting the message out

there. We've had several inquiries about openings over the last few weeks. How did you feel about the tour?"

"It was a tour, bunch of people listening so they weren't that noisy. You know the crazy thing is, Jethro helps." The dog always seemed to know when he was about to have a nutty and distracted him. It helped that he genuinely liked Jethro, an uncomplicated companion whose only demands included taking him for regular walks and scratching between his ears.

"How did you feel about it?" Apparently he wouldn't let Matt evade a direct response.

"I didn't like it. I kept hearing boots on the ground running, but I didn't—I

didn't taste it in my mouth as much. Bitter, but not sickening. It seemed easier to remind myself it wasn't real."

James nodded slowly. "Tell me what happened in Iraq."

"Again?" Didn't James ever get tired of asking the same questions over and over?

"Yes, again. It will get easier."

"Soon?" Or was that too much to ask?

"Eventually." James didn't sugar coat it and as unwelcome as the news might be, Matt preferred the truth.

Acrid bile coated his throat and Matt swallowed. "It was the middle of the night and I was in my bunk...."

Naomi chewed the end of the pencil

and stared at the blank sheet music in front of her. Her producer had called three times that week and she abandoned the cell phone in her borrowed apartment to escape outside with her guitar and her thoughts. None of the songs he sent her were right. Phil accused her of being a diva, and he might be right, but she wanted her debut album to be special—the first songs anyone would hear and they would either discover her or change the station.

Not that people really seemed to listen to radio stations anymore, but they did have Pandora and Spotify and a number of other ways to get music. Her chances of getting attention without a truly outstanding track were slim to

none. She would rather miss her studio time entirely than record some half-assed piece of music that sounded like everything else out there.

Doing it well meant doing it right. She didn't need to wait around for inspiration. Mike's Place overflowed with powerful, compelling stories beckoning to be told. Sliding the pencil behind her ear, she unlocked the guitar case and set the Gibson in her lap. It took only a few moments to tune it. Stroking her fingertips across the chords, she concentrated on emptying her mind and played.

The music came slowly and she relaxed into it. The sun warmed her face and a light breeze tugged at her hair.

Losing herself in the moment was a skill perfected over a lifetime of moves from Marine base to Marine base across the country and around the world. Being alone in her own head provided the sanity check frequent relocations and new situations demanded.

Maybe that's why she liked Mike's Place so much—it reminded her of all the bases she'd grown up on, but without reveille and troops of men working out.

Although there is definitely something to be said about a unit working out.... Humor flooded through her. Her father caught her staring at a particularly green batch doing pushups one day and forbade her to go anywhere near the training fields after that. He

didn't buy that her very healthy interest in members of the opposite sex was natural or that having four older brothers discouraged potential suitors.

The music changed with her mood and took on an upbeat, almost folksy quality and she giggled. Four older brothers had been bad enough, four older Marines made it that much worse. She hadn't gone on a real date—one that hadn't included an older brother lurking somewhere in the vicinity—until college. She majored in music and minored in psychology. Somewhere along the way, she dropped the psych and focused on music full time.

Slowing the tempo, she found a particular chord she liked and repeated

it three or four times before she wrote it down. The song crystallized and she paused to title the music sheet.

Growing Up Marine

Perfect.

It took another hour to work out all the notes, bridges, and changes. But she had her first song. She'd just shaded in the last note when the sound of a clearing throat interrupted her. A man stood in the shade a few feet away, a beautiful black Labrador sitting patiently at his side.

Oh, God. How long have they been there?

Undeterred, she grinned. "Hello."

"Good morning." Blond hair, high and tight, broad shoulders stretching his Marine green shirt, and dark sweatpants

hiding his legs—yeah, everything about him said *Marine*—including the perfect posture despite the respectable tree he could be leaning against. “Sorry for the intrusion.”

“I’m sitting in the middle of a park, basically next to a running trail. Not the best place for privacy if that’s what I was looking for.” She set the guitar aside and rose up on her knees. “Hello, puppy, are you friendly?”

The man chuckled. “He’s very friendly. Go on, Jethro, go say hello.”

The Labrador bounded over. His sun-warmed coat was soft beneath her fingers, and he bestowed a slurping kiss on her cheek before returning to his owner.

“What a great name for a dog—tell me you named him after Mark Harmon’s character—please....”

“Sorry ma’am, wish that I could. But he already had his name when I got him.” He shrugged his shoulders and gave her an apologetic smile. “You’re new here?”

“Well, yes and no. I’m spending a few weeks here as a favor to my brother and—for inspiration.” And maybe, just maybe, that crazy service will come through.

“Inspiration?” He nodded to her guitar.

“Guilty.” Rising, she dusted the grass off of her jeans. Her legs protested after languishing cross-wise for the last little

while, but she ignored the pins and needles. “I’m recording an album in a few weeks and I’m putting together a song list.”

“Never really thought about the people who write music—just thought—well—I guess I don’t know what I thought.” A smile warmed his faint grimace. “Sorry.”

“I never knew people wrote them either. I remember listening to all these great songs on the radio when I was a kid and thinking I want to sing like they do. So I would buy their tapes and CDs and practice. I really liked the ones that came with the lyrics. Then I could see the words and sing along. I think I memorized every one and then sometime

around third or fourth grade, I'm at this school in Germany, and the teacher told me if I liked music so much I should write my own. I stared at her and was like, 'you can write music?'"

Laughing, Naomi threw her hands up. "She goes off on this German diatribe and then says, 'where do you think music comes from silly girl?' and I have no idea where it would have come from, but after that I wanted to write my own. Drove my father nuts until he agreed to lessons and well—now here I am." *Babbling like an absolute idiot and this man has a deer in the headlights look. Shut. Up. But, he really has the prettiest blue eyes.*

"Is it hard?"

She drew a blank. “Is what hard?”

“Writing music?” He unclipped the dog’s leash and strung it around his neck. Picking up a stick, he threw it and the dog streaked after it.

“Yes. And no. It’s hard to get the notes on the paper the way I hear it in my head. Sometimes I just have to escape away from all distractions, and play until I hear it so clearly I can write it down.” *Wow, you just can’t shut up, can you?* Chewing her lip, she scuffed a shoe against the grass. Jethro trotted over with his stick and presented it proudly. The man took it and threw it again.

“Well, if it helps, I liked what you were playing. It was—nice.”

“Thank you. I’m Naomi Sparks by the way....” She took a couple of steps forward and held out her hand.

He stared at her for a long moment before taking it in his warm, callused, strong grip—and her insides did a little shimmy.

“Matt McCall.”

Chapter Four

Matt opened the cabinet and his gaze landed on the locked gun case. Nudging it to the side, he reached behind it for the power strip. After rewiring the television and sound system, he still had to relocate his laptop's power strip for the job. It took a while to remember if he had a second one and where he stored it. Locking the cabinet and pocketing the keys, he looked around the apartment. Jethro watched him from his claimed corner of the new sofa.

The furniture had trickled in over the

last several days. He'd talked to Lauren and James about wanting to make the apartment feel like more than a bunk, so Lauren went shopping. He wasn't sure about the lamps or why she ordered different shades than the ones they came with, but he followed her orders to exchange them when they arrived.

The fifty-five inch flat screen he'd picked out for himself. Grabbing the laptop off the table, he set everything up on the coffee table. Grabbing a cup of coffee from the kitchen, he carried it to the sofa and turned the game on. The dog yawned, bored with his fussing and curled up to sleep. Grinning, Matt powered up the computer. He hadn't turned it on in so long, the battery had

died.

The little red light warned him he had to keep it plugged into a power source. Sipping the coffee and watching the game, he left the web browser open, but blank. Every day since he'd met Naomi, he took Jethro past the spot in the park—just to see her. Two days in a row and no sign of her.

He should have asked for her number.

But day three, the sound of her guitar floated down the path toward him and he'd quickened his pace. She sat exactly where he'd seen her the first time. Her head down, guitar in her lap, and alternately strumming the strings and slapping her hand against the wood of the instrument to create a rhythm. He

motioned Jethro to sit and stood listening to her for several minutes before she chided him for hovering.

Accepting the invitation, he found a spot to sit and listened to her for a couple of hours. Unfortunately, she had to run because of an appointment, and he tried not to examine his disappointment too closely. The next several days followed the same pattern, and she was there...every single day.

He wanted to ask her out.

But every time he thought about it, the words stuck in his throat. So he hung out, she played her guitar and wrote down the mysterious notes on her sheet paper, and he threw sticks for Jethro. His favorite part of the day.

Draining half the coffee, he eyed the computer. Like so many other members of his unit, he signed up for the 1Night Stand service, but kept his profile inactive. He didn't trust himself alone much less with some random woman. When he'd broached the subject of enlisting Madame Eve's services with Doc, he received a cautious approval to consider the idea.

Of course, a one-night stand with a stranger is not asking Naomi out on a date. He leaned away from the computer. One night, no strings, some fun and a trial run to see if he could survive an evening out with her. If he completely tanked it with the stranger, then no harm and no foul.

And if he didn't screw it up and got laid, would he be able to look Naomi in the eye and ask her out? It seemed strangely disloyal to be even considering the idea.

You met her a few days ago and can't say more than fifty words to her, so how is it disloyal? He couldn't answer his own question. So he continued to stare at the TV screen and let the game distract him again.

At halftime, he pulled Madame Eve's site up and read through the agreements. He logged into his profile, but after filling in the data, he couldn't hit enter. His heart rate picked up and his breathing grew shallow. Jethro whimpered and crawled across the sofa

and pushed his way into Matt's lap.

Hugging the dog, he chuckled. "Yeah, maybe not ready for that yet, huh?"

Jethro licked his face and they settled together to watch the game, but he didn't close the laptop or the browser window.

He really wanted to ask Naomi out on that date.

Five songs written and she had a theme. She was scoring an album about Marines. And it had nothing to do with the beautiful blond who 'happened' along every time she sat outside composing. *Of course, I'm not going out there every day to see him either.* Unfortunately, steady rainfall trapped

her inside for the day. The constant spatter against the window offered an interesting juxtaposition to the song she worked on.

Her cell phone rang and she checked the incoming caller ID. Hitting answer with one finger, she chose the speakerphone option. “Hello, Charlie, you are live with a dedicated audience of one.” She grinned at her own cleverness.

“Bratling, why aren’t you with Mom in Canada?” The second of four brothers, Charlie was the Batman to her Robin.

“Because it’s cold as hell up there, and I didn’t feel like meeting all of Aunt Josie’s eligible, but completely

underwhelming, brood of possible dates.” She’d made that mistake right after college. Her mother spent six weeks with her sister every year and for the last four, Josie seemed to have made it her mission to marry Naomi off.

Charlie laughed. “I dunno, I thought the botanist had potential.”

“If I were a butterfly, he would have stuck it to me every day. Other than that, I don’t think he realized I was even alive.” She suppressed a shudder and leaned forward to add a notation to the last bridge of music.

“Nice. Brent said you were in Texas. What’s in Texas?”

“Mike’s Place—the recovery center? I came down to do a report for

Congressman Lazy Bones, and it's pretty damn inspiring. They let me take an apartment for as long as they don't need it for a real person. I'm trying to score this album. What's up?"

"You're really going to do it then? Release an album?"

"No, I'm going to record one. Regina Records is fronting the studio time and a producer so I can record it." Her stomach erupted with nerves every time she thought about it. Dreaming of getting her songs out there and being heard on the radio had long been reserved for wishful thinking. If her dream actually happened—she had no idea what she would do.

"You're going to be great, brat, you

don't know how to be anything else.”

Pride flooded her at the encouragement. “Thanks, Charlie. Let me ask you something—”

“No, you cannot have my Mustang. When I get home, I want it in one piece.”

She stuck her tongue out though he couldn't see her. “I don't want your stinky, old Mustang.” Such a lie, the '66 hard body classic was to die for, but she couldn't let him tweak her without returning a volley.

“Well all right then, what do you want?”

“What would you say if I met a Marine that I actually liked?”

“I'd ask why the hell you don't like the rest of us?” The playful retort was

the verbal equivalent of tugging her braids when they were kids.

“No, I mean, like...liked. The I-wouldn't-mind-dating kind of like.” She held her breath waiting for his reaction. Her brothers backed her father up when it came to the no-dating-on-base rule, and since she lived on base most of the time, it really limited her dating pool. Sure, she experimented in college, who hadn't—but not with any Marines. There had been the Navy Corpsman, but what her family didn't know wouldn't hurt her.

“Hmm, what unit is he in?” The silky question made her laugh.

“No, you don't get to beat him up. He doesn't even know I like him, like I said,

I'm just...curious."

"Curious enough that you're bringing it up to the one brother over three thousand miles away in Afghanistan. I see how you are."

"True. And you like my care packages, so you'll keep my secret."

"Five boxes of Girl Scout Thin Mints and you're on."

"That's blackmail."

"Cost of doing business, sis. Besides I'm supposed to check in with Dad tomorrow morning. I could just mention to him...."

"Fine. Done." But she grinned. *Where the hell do I find Girl Scout Thin Mints in the summertime?* She'd figure it out.

"Seriously though, trust your instincts,

Nay. You have good ones. You like him, go for it.” And thus Charlie proved why he earned the title of her favorite brother.

“So I can ask him out?”

“Hell, no. You make him do it. If he isn’t Marine enough to see what a fine catch you are, he can suffer.” Pride and affection mingled in his voice, but he relented. “Just let him know you wouldn’t mind an invitation and then go out with a dozen other people. I gotta go, someone else is waiting to call home. I just wanted to check on you.”

“I love you.” She picked up the phone. “Be safe, okay?”

“You, too.”

The call disconnected and she sighed.

Ten years and she always had a brother serving in a war zone—sometimes more than one. She never let them know how worried she was, or how grateful for their calls, or how terribly she missed them. They needed her bright, cheerful, and keeping the home fires burning. She played her part so they could play theirs....

And the song she wrote crystallized for her.

Playing Our Parts.

He rearranged his schedule to meet James early and skipped his workout. Damon came through with a lunch delivered to the apartment, so all he had

to do was carry the picnic basket with its cold salads and hot sandwiches down to the park. He might not be up for activating his profile at the 1Night Stand service, but lunch—lunch he could handle. Jethro waited patiently next to the door, leash in his mouth. The dog knew his schedule better than Matt did.

Fidgeting, he hesitated to rush out to meet her and fought the eagerness vibrating through him at the same time. Wracked by the indecision, he paced away from the door and sat down on the sofa. Closing his eyes, he focused on his breathing exercises. The Labrador abandoned his post and came over to lean against his leg. The combination of contact and deep breathing eased the

constriction in his chest.

“It’s just lunch, right? We’ve gone to hang out with her a few days now, so why is lunch hard?” He stared into Jethro’s eyes, but the soulful mutt didn’t offer up any ready answers. “Food. Company. Easy stuff, right?”

Maybe he wasn’t ready. He didn’t want to leave her waiting. *Like she’s expecting me? I’m the one going all stalker on her composing spot....* Still, it didn’t stop her from showing up day after day. If she didn’t want him to listen, would she bother?

Clenching his fist, he rose. Breathe in. Breathe out. *Pick up the basket, get Jethro’s leash, go for a walk. Offer to share lunch with her. Talk about her*

music. Talk about the weather....

Pulling his phone out of his pocket, he stared at it. He didn't want to bother James with this, but maybe...he scrolled through his contacts and hit call on Logan's number before he could over-think it.

“Hey Matt, what's up?” Logan Cavanaugh was the type of Marine Matt always imagined being, the ideal he wanted to live up to. Despite his injuries—or maybe because of them—Logan remained one of the toughest men Matt knew. In addition to his job as a counselor for incoming vets at Mike's Place and a volunteer therapist, he worked on finishing a degree specializing in everything he already

did.

The man didn't stop and didn't allow anything to stop him.

"I need a favor."

"Name it," Logan said.

Noise echoed in the background, weight machines, muted voices offering encouragement and the faint thrum of music. The clanging rattled Matt. Closing his eyes, he forced another noisy exhale.

"Hey, Matt...just breathe through it, man." The noise faded. Logan must have moved away from it. A door thudded closed and cut it off completely. "In for four and out for four. You know the drill."

"Yeah." Dammit, he *was* better, why

couldn't he act it?

“You know there was a guy once who fell in a hole and he shouted for help. This doctor comes by and writes a prescription, throws it in the hole. The guy is still down there and he shouts again, and a priest comes by. The guy asks for help and the priest writes him a prayer and throws it down. He even promises to light a candle for him.” Logan’s voice took on an easy cadence, and with every word, Matt’s breathing grew easier. “But the guy, he’s still in the hole and he’s getting hoarse from shouting. His buddy comes by and the guy yells up to him. His buddy jumps down in the hole with him. The guy can’t believe it, he clenches his fists and

demands to know why his friend did something so stupid, now they're both stuck. His buddy tells him, 'but I've been down here before and I know how to get out.'"

Matt's heart rate slowed.

"I've been in this hole, Matt. I'm down here for as long as you need me to be and we'll walk out together, okay?"

"I like this girl." He blurted the words out before he could think too hard about it.

"Yeah?" A smile rolled through the single syllable.

"Yeah. She's—her name is Naomi. She's a songwriter. I keep running into her practicing and we've hung out."

"Okay." He didn't push, he didn't

prod, only waited.

“Damon sent a lunch over and I wanted to take it with me today, you know—surprise her with it.” He pushed past the hesitation. “Am I insane?”

“Because you want to take her lunch?”

“No, I want a whole lot more than lunch.”

“But you’re just taking her lunch, so that’s not crazy, and if she keeps going to the same spot to practice, you’re not bugging her. Is this Sparks? Congressman Sparks sister?”

Her last name was Sparks, but he hadn’t drawn the connection to any political figures. “Maybe? I don’t really keep up on that stuff.”

“Jazz mentioned her. She’s been doing

some fact finding for her brother while she's here. He's one of our bigger supporters. Look—take her lunch. Eat food. Talk about the weather. It's okay to enjoy yourself.”

Really?

Logan added, “I know it doesn't seem like that and you're probably feeling guilty for enjoying yourself. But you don't have to. In fact—let's make this an order. Go spend a couple of hours and forget everything but having a good time.”

Oddly enough, that helped. “Yes, sir.”

“You good now?”

“I think so.” More than a little. His breathing relaxed and the shake in his hand eased. The thought of the

sandwiches made his stomach growl.
“Thanks, Logan.”

“Like I said—I’m in the hole. We’ll go when you’re ready, it’s right this way....”

“Yes, sir.”

He hung up and looked at Jethro.
“Let’s do this.”

The dog bounded up and raced for the door. This time, Matt didn’t slow. He clipped the leash on his collar and grabbed the basket. Hopefully she would be hungry.

He sure as hell was.

Naomi worked through another series of bridges and chords. The blank sheet

music and pencil sat ignored next to her. She couldn't really focus on composition when she looked at the trail every other minute. Every day she sat there and Matt showed up with his dog. They chatted for a few minutes and then he threw the stick while she played.

And today he's not here...and I'm not writing. Music and the arts were not a career path her father encouraged. In her particular situation, Naomi agreed with him. Whether by accident or design, over half the songs she scored and wrote focused on life in the service—or the family life of someone in the service.

As if with a will of their own, her fingers switched chords to Toby Keith's, "Made in America." She loved the song,

and the meaning behind it. Closing her eyes, she played the music and hummed along until she got to the red, white, and blue and the Semper Fi on his arm—raising her voice, she sang about King James and Uncle Sam.

Throwing her arm up after the last chord, she clenched her fist and exulted in the feeling of the song's message. Quiet applause brought her back down to Earth. Matt stood there, in T-shirt and jeans rather than his usual running gear. He held a basket in his right hand and Jethro's leash in the other.

Her face warmed. "Hey."

"Hey. Don't suppose you know 'Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue'?"

Grinning, she adjusted the guitar and started playing the fitting tribute to soldiers. Matt closed the distance and sat down to listen. His head bobbed in time to the rhythm and he joined her in the bridge.

“Brought to you, courtesy of the red, white, and blue.”

She loved the guitar movements, slowing the chords as she warned of what happened when you rattled the big dog's cage, because they would put boot to ass for messing with the U.S. of A. Matt's grin grew, but deeper shadows clouded his beautiful blue eyes. He sang with her, but he wasn't in the moment until Jethro rubbed his head against his shoulder. His gaze cleared and he

exhaled a strangled laugh on the last note.

“Damn. You’re good.”

The vehemence of the compliment floored her. “Thank you.” She bit her tongue before she asked if he was okay. She’d seen that distant look in Brent’s eyes—in Charlie’s, in Toby’s and in the eyes of every man who served. For the briefest of moments, Matt had been back on those front lines. It answered her unasked question of what he did at Mike’s Place, though she’d had her suspicions.

Pushing past the cloak of concern, she nodded to the basket. “What’s that?”

He glanced down as though he’d forgotten. “Lunch.” The corners of his

mouth curved. "I figured I always got the better end of the deal listening to you play so...I brought lunch to say thank you...." The words trailed off and he looked vaguely uncomfortable. "You know, if you're hungry."

"Starving." She set the guitar into its case. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Shaking off his distraction, he unclipped Jethro from his leash. The well-trained dog didn't take off. Instead, he stretched out between them within easy reach of the Marine.

Is he a PTSD dog? She wished she could see his tags or dared ask, but she didn't want to make Matt any more uncomfortable. She'd heard such amazing things about the program. It was

actually on her list to learn about as soon as she finished recording the album. Maybe she could donate a portion of her proceeds to the funding. Too many veteran recovery programs needed money to stay operational.

“Naomi?” He said her name as though repeating it and she blinked.

“Sorry, composing in my head.” She said the first thing that came to mind rather than point out her internal speculation. “What do you have for lunch?”

“Salads—looks like pasta salad, some hot roast beef sandwiches and iced tea.”

Her stomach let out a vociferous growl and her face heated. “Sounds

tasty.”

They divvied up the food and conversation lagged as they dug in. She couldn't help but watch him as he ate. The lack of a healthy appetite was a lingering symptom of PTSD, along with nightmares, jitters, and a pathological avoidance of things that might remind them of what they desperately wanted to forget.

She read all the brochures.

“This is excellent.” She mangled the gratitude around a mouthful. “Thank you so much for bringing this.”

“You're welcome.” The words garbled in his mouth too, and they both laughed.

“Can he have some?” She gestured to

the dog and Matt shrugged, pulling apart his sandwich and feeding some of the roast beef to the Labrador. Jethro didn't question the etiquette and gobbled it down. The smart animal swung his gaze to her and she obediently handed him some as well.

“Okay, now I feel like it's a picnic. Doesn't seem right to eat in front of the dog and ignore him.”

“No, ma'am,” he agreed. “Though he's pretty good about not begging.”

“He's a good dog.” Wiping her hands on a napkin, she studied Matt. “Thanks for coming out here every day—seriously. You inspire me.”

He hesitated, one hand on his Styrofoam cup. “I do?”

“Yeah, composing can be kind of lonely, but you show up and give me someone to play for—an audience is always inspiring.” Dodging the more obvious answer proved the right choice when the tight lines around his eyes eased.

“Well, I’m sure you’ve performed in front of people before.” Matt packed away the trash, stacking it neatly in the basket then stretched out to lie on his side. Jethro crawled forward until he could sprawl against Matt’s chest. Jealousy admired a dog who took what he wanted and tried not to envy him.

“Yes and no.” She cleared her throat. “I’ve sung for my friends, played on the quad at college—played for my family.

Stuff like that. But not for people I don't know and definitely not my own material."

"You're recording an album, I thought." Puzzlement wrinkled his brow.

"Yeah, that's 'cause I made this recording with my computer—played some songs, recorded myself, and sent the MP3s to a producer. He liked what he heard. Had me record a few more things and then offered me an opportunity to play for him." She grimaced. "He's giving me the chance to record something for Regina Records and you know—go with it from there."

"So you're a performer."

"Yeah, one who gets flop sweats when she stands in front of large

crowds. I prefer a more intimate setting.” She debated how far to push it, but Matt’s interest felt genuine and showing her own vulnerability might make him more comfortable about his own. “Honestly, I wanted to be a songwriter—not a performer.”

“So why are you recording something then?” To his credit, he didn’t give her the look her brothers did—the one that said, *So, stupid, why are you doing it?*

Owing him a reward for the bemused question that didn’t insult her intelligence, she lifted her shoulders. “Honestly? Because if I record it, then I get a say in how the songs are used and maybe—just maybe, I can help. My dad always told us, ‘he who gives the order

should lead the charge.’ I want my music to matter, I want my songs to help. I can’t—I can’t dodge bullets or wear a uniform. I grew up Marine, but that isn’t for me. I’m too much of a chicken when the big guns are out. I’d rather run and hide than run and face them. And that’s okay because I have four brothers who run into those fires for me. So I want to do something for them.”

Had she rushed it? Had she said too much?

“You *do* do something for them.” The soft drawl of Matt’s voice pulled her forward. “You give them something to fight for and defend.”

Tears pricked her eyes, but she was too long accomplished at burying that

emotion. Her brothers earned her respect, and her tears, and deserved to be shielded from them. “Thank you. I want to do the same for them here at home—protect them, defend them, champion the causes that help.”

“What happened?”

She glanced away, studying the trees. The day’s warmth was about perfect. Pleasant without being hot and a breeze to keep them cool despite sitting right in the sun. “To who?”

“Who got hurt?”

“My oldest brother.” She pulled out a blade of grass and twirled it around. “Stupid accident. He was in a ’copter, it took fire, went down. He banged his leg up bad, but...took too long to get

medical care and it got infected.”

“He lost the leg?” Quiet, soft and steady. Naomi hadn’t imagined the shakiness in him earlier, but he stared at her quietly, one hand on Jethro’s back. The intensity in his gaze sent a shiver of awareness through her.

Comforting you, not trying to turn you on. Down girl. “Yeah, he lost his right leg from just above the knee. He wears a prosthetic and never complained or got upset. His only focus getting well and returning to duty in the field.” She shook her head. “Poster boy for the Marines. We have this deal—he plays tough, strong, and wise older brother, and I’m the oohing and ahing, impressed baby sister—who

occasionally tweaks him for being so all-knowing and wise.”

Matt laughed. “My sister does that. Only she’s a brat.”

“Oh, I can do that, too.” She enjoyed studying him. He was a really handsome guy. His square jaw said tough, but the dimple in his right cheek told her sweet. And the blue eyes didn’t quit—they were pure sexy. *And I have it bad... stop!*

“I bet. Okay, so I brought you lunch. Time for you to pay for the meal.” He raised his brows and heat flushed through her. He couldn’t possibly mean with sex.

Dammit.

He nodded to her guitar and heat

scalded her face. Yeah, he definitely didn't mean sex.

“Absolutely—what do you want to hear?” She fought for composure and retrieved her guitar.

“I want to hear one of your songs.”

Oh, hell....

Chapter Five

They walked back together, Matt insisted on carrying her guitar and she allowed him the privilege as long as she got to hold Jethro's leash. The Labrador trotted happily between them. Matt chose the longer route to the apartment complex, delaying the goodbye. Lunch turned into an afternoon together and it neared dinner.

He considered asking her if she wanted pizza, but the right thing meant taking her out for dinner. Out meant crowds and people and noise. Out meant

leaving himself open to a nutty and that wasn't fair to her. She had an apartment in the C complex, about a quarter of a mile from his own and one of the furthest from the medical center. Made sense, she wasn't there for medical treatment.

"You hungry?" She took the lead, following the sidewalk around to the far side. Her apartment faced the greenbelt with its sparse woods rather than the running paths or the parking lot.

"We just had lunch." Jethro sat when they reached her door, but she pushed it open without reaching for her keys. It wasn't locked. Matt frowned and blocked her sailing through the door with the guitar case. "Why is it open?"

"Because I didn't want to carry the

keys with me, so I left it unlocked. Have you seen the security around here?”

Her easy smile and offhanded attitude bugged him. Staying in the apartment alone, she shouldn't be leaving it unlocked. Mike's Place may seem like base—but it wasn't.

“Stay.” He went through the door first, tension ratcheting up his spine.

Like so many of the pre-furnished apartments on the property, done in earth tones, with the standard sofa, television, coffee and dining room tables. A jacket lay folded over the back of a chair, a laptop occupied the center of the coffee table, and the remote sat next to the television on the stand.

Open window blinds admitted the late

afternoon sunlight, dappling the room in homey comfort. A single coffee cup sat next to the sink. He set the guitar case and basket down and completed the walk-through, including a glance in the bedroom. The double bed was made, the sheets and blanket tucked tightly.

Pleasure curled through him. Only one toothbrush in the bathroom and a hint of apples clung to the air—likely her shampoo or conditioner. Returning to the living room, he found her leaning against the doorframe, Jethro wagging his tail beside her. They wore similar expressions of patient waiting.

“It’s clear.”

“Thank you.” Her easy acceptance surprised him. She didn’t comment on

the search or the fact that he took the lead. Jethro trotted in ahead of her and she closed the door. “So, dinner? It’s almost six.”

He hesitated.

And then she sweetened the deal. “We could order pizza.”

He could do pizza. “Okay. I’d like that.”

She grinned and waved him over to the sofa. “Make yourself comfortable. I usually do a meatlovers. That work for you?”

He started to sit and Jethro leaped up onto the sofa next to him. “No, sir. We’re guests—”

“It’s okay. I like dogs, he’s more than welcome to sit up there.”

Matt didn't share her graciousness. He'd rather she sat next to him, but he could nudge Jethro down when the food got there. She grabbed the phone and the information card staged next to it. Every apartment had them—a list of local services that delivered. So many of Mike's Place guests were out-of-towners. Placing the order, she disappeared into the kitchen.

“Beer?”

“Sure.” He could handle one and then switch to water afterward. Fortunately, his medication was only on an as needed basis so he didn't have to decline. Sheet music stacked next to her laptop and the blank screen had him curious, but he didn't tap the space bar to see what

she'd been doing the last time she sat there. "So how many songs are typically on an album?"

"Depends on the album," her voice floated back, the pop of a bottle top underscoring the words. "Ideally, I'd like ten or so." She walked over to the sofa and handed him his beer and set her own on a coaster on the table. "I have seven so far, so that's three more to write. I may listen to more of the samples Phil sent and see if I like them. But so far, none he's sent over have matched the theme. Excuse me for just one minute?"

"Of course." He bit back, *who's Phil*, and ignored the brief surge of jealousy flavoring the thought. She vanished into

the bedroom. Restlessness raced through him and his right leg began to bounce. He took a swallow of beer and concentrated on breathing through the mild surge of panic. Jethro rolled over and laid his head on Matt's leg, quelling the bounce.

“So—what’s the theme?” he called.

“Marines.” She reappeared on the heels of the words and he was glad he wasn’t drinking or he might have swallowed his tongue. She’d changed her clothes, swapping out jeans for a pair of shorts and a USMC T-shirt. Without a trace of make-up on, she looked edible. Plopping down on the opposite end of the sofa, she scratched Jethro’s back and propped her bare feet

on the edge of the coffee table. Bright red toenail polish teased him—along with the sexiest little toe-ring he'd ever seen.

“What?” He blinked and dragged his attention north, focusing on her cheerful brown eyes rather than the pert breasts framed beautifully behind the lettering on her shirt.

“I said my theme is Marines—Marines, their families, growing up Marine, Semper Fi, and goodnight.” She locked gazes with him and heat pulsed from his head to his cock and up again. He couldn't be certain if he was relieved or disappointed when her shy eyes ducked away. Her cheeks were pink and flushed and damn gorgeous.

“I liked the one you sang earlier—about Leatherneck Brothers.” He could barely remember the words, but the playfulness in her voice had captivated him, the shine in her eyes and the way she bobbed her head to the rhythm she’d created reminded him of boot camp, to hard work, pride, and hope.

“That’s totally about my brothers.” She laughed. “All four of them.”

“You mentioned Brent earlier.”

“Yep.” She retrieved her beer and crossed one ankle over the other. “Brent, Charlie, David, and Toby. Toby’s my twin. Brent’s retired, but he still teaches, and he just got elected to Congress last year. Charlie’s overseas in the 5th Expeditionary Force, he does recon and

communication set up. David's in Egypt, and Toby's somewhere in the South Pacific doing a float."

Four older brothers—the thought might have discouraged him a few years ago. "And all Marines?"

"Every single one of them." She laughed. "I miss them like crazy, but they're all doing what they want to be doing. There was only ever one true downside to their calling...."

"Yeah?"

"Have you ever tried to date with four brothers who intimidated the hell out of anyone asking you?" She grinned. "Or worse, had a crush on a Marine who knew your brothers and your father and dropped you squarely into the off limits

category?"

Despite his reservations, he couldn't help but grin. "No, ma'am. My brothers let me date whomever I choose."

"Funny." She made a face and took another drink. Everything fascinated him, even the movement of her graceful throat when she swallowed. It awakened a whole new level of need inside him. *Eyes front, Marine.*

"Of course, I don't know your brothers."

Delight and relief twinkled in her eyes. "I know."

"Or your father." The ledge got closer. She drifted her fingers across his hand where it rested on Jethro and awareness stormed through his system.

“Are you asking me out, Matt?”

His gut tightened and he took the plunge “Yes.”

“Okay.”

“Yeah?” Surprise and delight surfaced above the anxiety and the fist squeezing his heart eased.

“Oh, yeah. I love hanging out with you.”

Love.

Present tense.

It took every ounce of restraint not to give a fist bump. He turned his hand over, catching hers and holding it. “Me, too.”

They talked about all the movies they could watch, but neither turned on the

television. Instead, they ate pizza and switched from beer to water, and talked. The conversation wandered over a dozen different topics from music, to Marines, to moms at home, and plans. Matt brought up the possibility of going to school, using his benefits to finish a college degree. His hesitance warned her he might be playing with the idea, but didn't have a lot of confidence in it.

It neared midnight when he finally rose. "I should go."

"It's still early," she protested with a yawn.

"That's the fourth time you yawned and you're tired." Once he pointed it out, she noticed the shadows under his eyes but she didn't want him to go. Rising,

she grabbed the plates and he helped her clean up. It bought a few more minutes.

“I had fun tonight.”

“Me, too.” He stuffed the empty box into the trash and pulled the sack out, sealing it closed.

He's going to take it out for me

“You don't have to do that.” Putting a hand to his chest, she tipped her head to look at him. Up close, he was so much taller than she.

“I want to.” He covered her hand with his and her belly quivered. A few days of spending time together and then an evening and she didn't want it to end.

“I had fun tonight.”

“You said that already.” Indulgence softened the tease in his voice and heat

warmed her face.

“I guess I did.” *Let him go....*
“Tomorrow? Same time in the park?”

“Yeah, I’d like that.” He squeezed her hand and let her go. She backed away and he circled around her. “Come on, Jethro, let’s let Naomi sleep.”

The dog stretched his way off the sofa and trotted over. Matt clipped his leash on and glanced at her. “Lock the door, okay?”

“Yes, sir.” She laughed.

“Thank you.”

It closed softly behind him and she leaned against the wood. They shared pizza, but the reluctance to say goodnight didn’t pass even with his exit. *Just go to bed, you silly girl.* A knock hit the wood

before she could turn the deadbolt. Glancing through the peephole, she saw Matt waiting on the other side. She reopened the door with a questioning look.

“You didn’t lock it.” He frowned.

“I was just about to. Did you forget something?”

“Yeah.” He slid a hand around to cup her nape, tugged her forward, and his mouth slanted across hers. Closing her eyes, she sank into the kiss, delight shooing the surprise away. Rising on her tiptoes, she fisted his shirt. His lips were soft and firm, and the kiss started out sweet and quickly turned hard and wet when his tongue demanded access. Opening to it, she sighed at the delicious

invasion.

The rasp of stubble on his cheeks grazed her, but she leaned into the kiss. Shivers raced up and down her spine, and she moaned a little when he broke the kiss. He rested his forehead against hers. His pupils appeared dilated in the low light, and his harsh breathing matching hers.

“Tomorrow?”

She swallowed. “I’d really like that.”

“Okay.”

Dizzy with the passion in the single kiss, she exhaled and pulled her hands away slowly. He was so warm beneath the cotton shirt. How much warmer would he be if he weren’t wearing it?

“Lock the door,” he reminded her and

she nodded.

“Okay.” But neither moved. Would it be so bad to invite him inside?

He preempted her invitation. “I want to stay. But that’s not a good idea.”

“No?” Disappointment deflated her.

“Not yet.” He caressed her cheek. “You are so beautiful.”

Her heart flip-flopped. “Maybe tomorrow?”

“Maybe.” He grinned. “Go to bed.”

Biting back a groan, she retreated a step before she did something foolish and threw herself at him. “Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow.”

She knew a promise when she heard one. Hating herself, she let him go and sagged against the closed door. *Holy*

hell on a biscuit....

“Lock it,” he ordered from the other side and she laughed.

“You’re pushy.”

“Uh huh. Lock it.”

Flipping the deadbolt, she peeked through the peephole. He winked at her and left.

Blood still pounding, she grabbed her guitar rather than go to bed. She wanted to write about that kiss.... *The Long Kiss Goodbye....*

No. Not goodbye.

The Long Kiss Till We Meet Again....

“It needs work.” She licked her tingling lips, giddiness swirling through her. “*I kiss you hello, you kiss me goodbye, our bliss denied...okay...*

yeah....”

Chapter Six

“You’re pretty calm today, Matt.”

They sat in James’ office for their daily session. Thirty minutes in and he hadn’t started pacing. But he didn’t feel the need, amazingly enough. Only managing about six hours of sleep the night before—but they were the best six hours he’d slept in months.

“I’m good today. Really good. Actually finished my application for courses at UTD. They have quite a few that I can do through the distance program.” He glanced at his watch. “I

have a call with the admissions counselor later to go over any questions they have.”

“What courses are you planning to take?”

“Engineering. I used to have a knack for it and I like building. They just need to go over my grades from high school. I’ll probably have to take some refresher English classes. Papers were never my strong suit, but I have the math cold.”

Engineering as a career path came from a long conversation with his mother in the recent weeks. They talked by phone every other day or so. While the chats had begun as stilted, they’d relaxed into them faster with each opportunity.

His mom had some pretty good ideas

about what used to interest Matt and they compared notes. Engineering fascinated him in high school, but putting it aside, he'd enlisted. It was definitely time to dust off the old ideas and explore them.

"I don't imagine you can take a full course load through distance learning for engineering." James' tone asked for caution, but Matt waved it away. He'd thought about that.

"I know, but most of the core courses for the basic part of the degree—English, history, math—those I can do. I can also brush up on language skills. It's amazing what they have in the course catalog. That also gives me time to work on my issues and be ready for on-site instruction in a few months." He was

leagues ahead in his progress. By next semester, he'd be ready to go on campus.

"We can't put a time table on this...."

"Doc, it's good. I know. We have to take each day one step at a time, we have to talk this through, and I have to remember without reliving. I'm doing great. These daily sessions, my workouts, Nao—" He coughed. He hadn't planned to shake the cat out of the bag. The chances of diverting Doc's attention were pretty slim.

"I heard you were spending time with Naomi Sparks." No censure seasoned the statement, just an observation.

"I didn't know you were a fan of gossip." Other than Logan, he hadn't

mentioned Naomi to anyone. He paused to consider that. Well, Damon asked when he called him about the lunch and Jazz gave him a high five at physical therapy. They were the only people he'd told and of the three, only Logan knew of his actual interest.

"I'm not, but women talk." At his blank look, James continued. "Jazz and Lauren are friends."

"Oh." He shifted forward and rested his elbows on his knees. Jethro lay sprawled on the carpet between them. The dog glanced up, but when Matt stayed seated, he set his head down again. Matt wasn't certain how to respond to the Lauren comment. He liked James' lady. Their quiet engagement the

previous month had to be the worst kept secret on the campus, but everyone held the line because they didn't want to spoil whatever surprise the couple planned.

"You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to. You're still allowed a private life, Matt." James gave him a graceful out, but he didn't really deserve it.

"No, it's cool. I just—I kept it quiet because I didn't really know where it was leading and I...." He sighed, wincing. "I didn't want you to tell me I'm not ready."

"Do you think you might not be ready?"

Yeah, and hadn't he walked right into that question. Tension knotted between

his shoulder blades, but he didn't shy away from it. "I don't know."

"Okay. What do you know?"

"I like her. She's funny, she's sweet as hell and she's pretty. I like how I feel when I'm with her." The corner of his mouth curved. "I like how I feel when I think about her."

"How does she feel about you?"

"She hasn't kicked me to the curb yet." And she hadn't wanted him to leave the night before, either. He might be rusty on the whole dating idea, but when he kissed her—she responded. God, she went up in flames in his arms, and he'd wanted to go right back into that apartment. But they weren't there yet, and he hesitated to push faster than

the kiss.

Hell—the kiss had been pushing it, but he was ready to test that envelope again later that day.

“Where did you meet?”

“Jethro.” Matt grinned down at him. Best damn dog in the world. He hoped the owners didn’t return any time soon, he didn’t want to turn him over. “Took him out for a walk and she sat there, playing her guitar in the park.”

“So you met a girl in the park?” The doc’s patient façade cracked and allowed some good humor to shine through.

“Yeah. She’s—she’s special. I don’t know if I can do her justice. She’s great.”

“I’d love to meet her sometime.”

“Duly noted.” No, definitely not ready for that introduction. But not impossible either. Chances were Doc had already met her.

“So let’s talk about how you’re sleeping....”

“Okay.” He held onto his good mood. “Some bad dreams, some not. More in the not category over the last few days.”

“Excellent. How’s the balance?”

“Spotty. If I push it, mostly good. Logan gave me the go ahead to add a second mile to the running regimen. We’re going to see if I can push without the puke.” He glanced at his watch again. As soon as they wrapped up there, he’d call the counselor and then grab

some lunch. The weather seemed to be holding off the weather forecaster's predicted storm. If the sun stayed out from behind the clouds, he and Naomi could eat in the park again.

“What happened in Iraq?”

“What?” The question pulled him back to the room.

“What happened in Iraq?”

His good mood diminished, but it didn't disappear. “I got hurt during an attack.”

“What happened during the attack?”

Matt sighed. He didn't want to talk about that. “Insurgents hit the base in the middle of the night. Suicide bombers. They took out the guard post. Came through the gates. I was asleep and....”

The joy in him faded. Boots hit the ground, shouts echoed, and beyond them screams. He grabbed his gun and raced out the door....

“They want to move up your recording time, Naomi.” Phil Donovan called while she packed up her guitar to head to the park.

“How soon?” She still had another couple of weeks.

“Thursday.”

She grimaced. “That’s a couple of days.”

“I know, but if you want to fly out early, you can stay with me. We’ve got a band lined up. I just need you to get

some of the music here so I can get them ready to go.”

Gut tightening, she blew out a hard breath. “I don’t really have a choice, do I?”

“No, not really. Look, you’re in Massachusetts....”

“Actually, I’m in Dallas. It’s a two-hour flight.” She checked her watch. “Let me book some tickets and I’ll text you the flight numbers. How long are we in the studio?”

“We have twelve hours. I’ve listened to what you have so far—I like it. But I’ve only got seven, what are you doing with the last three?”

That was the rub. Pinching the bridge of her nose, she wrestled a few ideas

mentally. “I can write two more before then. Just get the studio time. I’ll get the tickets. I like the theme I have and I want to stay in that wheelhouse.”

“Military themes are strong and you’ve got the right jacket story for it.” Phil agreed swiftly enough to tell her she was on the right track. “You need anything?”

“No, but I don’t want to stay over. You mind if I just fly out that night?”

“If I need to pick up tracks, we’re going to have to have you back.”

“No problem.” Frankly, she had more than a few problems. But she could make it work. “I’ll see you in a couple of days.”

“Great. Get me the rest of the songs by

tomorrow. And scan in that sheet music....” He listed off a few more items before ringing off. Naomi chewed the idea around and glanced at the clock. She was usually in the park by noon at the latest. She didn’t have a lot of time to get the sheet music scanned in. Gathering her things, she called Luke Dexter’s office.

Hopefully they didn’t mind doing her a favor.

It was almost one by the time she found her way to her favorite spot. Her heart did a little skip—Matt waited for her. Relief spread through his smile when he saw her.

“I’m so sorry I’m late.”

He rose and caught the guitar case,

and she gave him a quick, fierce hug. The gesture seemed to startle him, but he slid one arm around her and gave her a firm squeeze. “Is everything okay?”

“It’s great. My producer called and they moved up my recording time.” Stepping away, she dropped down to give Jethro a greeting. The dog held up his stick to her, and she threw it across the common area where he streaked after it.

“You have to leave?” His expression grew troubled.

“Thursday.” She settled on the blanket he’d spread out. She didn’t usually bother with a blanket when the grass was so soft, but he’d brought lunch again. Pleasure fluttered through her at

the thoughtfulness. “But just for the day.” She hated the disappointment creasing his face. “I’ll fly out first thing in the morning. I have a four-thirty flight to Nashville. I’ll be in the studio by seven-thirty, we have twelve hours, so I should be able to make the last flight out at nine-fifteen and get to Dallas before midnight.”

It took some arm-twisting and pleading with the booking agent—not to mention cashing in more than a few of her points to get the same-day return at a price that didn’t rival the deficit.

“Thursday...wow.” Matt set the guitar next to her. “Are you going to be ready?”

“Just need to write two more songs and I’m golden.” Her words carried a

lot more confidence than she felt. “Do you want to go with me?” Instantly regretting the impulsive invitation, she held her breath.

His expression shuttered. “I’d like to.” He joined her on the blanket, took the stick from Jethro, and tossed it again. “But I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

Of course it’s not a good idea. Time to throttle back the desire to blitz through his defenses. “Okay, how about I bring a copy for you? I’m sure I can bribe the technicians to give me a sample....”

A smile eased through the stress tightening his jaw and he nodded. “I’d like that.” He went silent while she unpacked the guitar and settled it in her lap. Watching him from beneath her

lashes, she tried not to stare. For the most part, Matt was an upfront guy, but the quieter side of him held a certain appeal. She wished that he didn't look like someone had just taken away his dog.

Jethro returned with his stick, but instead of offering it, he curled up next to Matt and shoved his head on his lap. The Marine began to pet him automatically, the hard line of his mouth softening with a faint curve of a smile.

“We should probably let you compose—without distraction.” He didn't sound like he wanted to go.

“No, you're exactly the kind of distraction I need.” Did she dare tell him? Oh, what the hell. He deserved to

know. “You inspire me.”

Surprise rippled across his face. “I do?”

“Oh yeah. I even wrote a song about you last night....”

Wariness creased his brow. “Oh?”

Grinning, she started playing. If only performing in front of the world was as easy as singing for Matt. By the second refrain, he relaxed and by the last he laughed. The song detailed their kiss and exposed her vulnerability, her growing affection for him laid bare in every note. When the song ended, she held her breath and waited.

Matt leaned forward, rested a hand atop hers and brushed her mouth with the lightest, sweetest, and most heart-

wrenching kiss. “Thank you.”

Her pulse jackrabbited. “You’re welcome.”

The bubble of tension wrapped around them burst with his slow grin. “No, I mean it. Thank *you*.”

“I didn’t do anything—I completely blame you for the song. You knocked on the door.”

He chuckled. “You opened it.”

“But you kissed me....”

Slanting his mouth across hers, he silenced any further words. He brushed his thumb across her knuckles, sending tingles racing across her nerves until she hummed like a guitar strung too tight. Every time she thought the kiss would end, he tilted his head to the other side

and darted his tongue in and out, teasing her.

Nose to nose, he finally let her come up for air. “You kissed me back.”

“Yeah.” She laughed. “You kissed me again.”

“I did.” He nodded, brushing their noses together, whispering another kiss on her cheek and again to the corner of her eye. “You don’t mind, do you?”

Her laughter rode on a shuddering breath. “No, not at all.”

Catching her guitar, he pulled it away and then she straddled his lap, arms wrapped around his neck. He kissed her with a singular intensity and the whole world faded—until a cold nose pressed against her belly and she jerked.

Somehow her shirt had ridden up. Glancing down, they laughed at Jethro, who stared back with bright curiosity in his dark eyes, his tail thumping.

“Hmm...I should be writing....”

Matt curled a lock of her hair around his finger. “I’ll help.”

“Yeah?” She lifted her eyebrows. Music was the last thing on her mind.

“Uh huh.” He kissed the soft spot behind her ear and need bubbled through her. “I’m trying to inspire you....”

And how....

Chapter Seven

Watching her create music and songs from scratch amazed him. Matt left her composing and jogged with Jethro to the mess for sandwiches, chips, and soda. They ate and she wrote some more. The process—*her* process—defied description. She strummed notes, played them over and over while she hummed to them, then jotted them on paper. Eventually she added words.

Her last composition became a personal favorite. They walked, side by side and he insisted on carrying her

guitar. The sun set. Hungry, he offered to order pizza for both of them, but she suggested Chinese. He called while she packed up her music.

“So what happens next?” Jethro trotted to his right while she walked on his left.

Naomi smothered a yawn. “Sorry, um...” Her game smile waffled between embarrassment and shyness. “I will swing by Captain Dexter’s office in the morning and borrow their scanner so I can scan it in and send it over to my producer. He’s already got the early sheets. The backup players he has will have a day or so to familiarize themselves with the music before I get there and then I fly in, rent a car, drive to

the studio and sing. Hopefully they let me play, too. But that's not a guarantee."

At her door, she held up her keys and unlocked it. He nodded his approval. Unclipping Jethro's leash, he set her guitar on the floor. She walked into the kitchen and got a bowl of water and a small bag of food. "I picked this up this morning—it's what you said he ate, right?"

Pleased that she remembered, he grinned. "Yes, that's exactly what I said he ate." She filled the bowl and Jethro dug in eagerly then slurped water. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. I like him." She slid off her shoes and picked them up. "Almost as much as I like you." With a

wink, she waved him to the sofa. “Make yourself comfortable. I want to change.”

He slid his hands into his pockets and stared after her. The urge to follow her into the bedroom and pick up where their kisses in the park left off raged through him. He’d canceled his one-night stand that morning, after leaving James’ office and before talking to the admissions counselor. The agreement with his unit was they all signed up for the dating service, but his inactive profile wasn’t going anywhere, and he didn’t want a faceless, nameless one-night stand with a stranger.

Naomi. He wanted her.

But what the hell did he have to offer? He didn’t have a job. Couldn’t take her

out on dates—well he could try—but she didn't deserve a brutal, public meltdown. *Why am I even here? I should go. I walked her home. She's leaving in a couple of days. She has a life—a decent one. All I have is a lot of broken pieces to finish gluing together.*

Jethro padded out of the kitchen and rubbed his leg. The dog had a sixth sense about his moods. The moment a spiral started, he distracted him.

“What’s wrong?” Naomi’s quiet question floated across the room, and he found her leaning against the doorway separating the living room from the hallway to her bedroom. She’d changed into a T-shirt and yoga pants. The casual clothing, along with her hair pulled back

in a ponytail and the gentle expression on her face, eased some of the panic brewing in his gut.

“Not sure why I stayed.” An honest, if not particularly kind answer.

“We haven’t had dinner yet,” she teased.

“No, I mean this—with you. You’re amazing and I’m not.” Self-deprecation was simple. He was damaged. She deserved so much more than he could offer.

Folding her arms, Naomi studied him. “Thank you.”

The lack of argument surprised him. “Thank you?”

“Thank you.” She shrugged, still smiling. “You think I’m amazing. It’s

okay if you don't think you are. I like you just fine."

"But didn't you hear what I said?" Patting Jethro on the head, he crossed the room to look down at her. He wasn't sure what closing the distance would do but give him a better look into her eyes.

"I heard you. I would be more worried about you if you said you were the catch of the century and I'd be a fool to pass you up." Her nose wrinkled. "Truth shouldn't be smarmy."

Okay, I'm missing something here.
"You—I would never say that."

"My point exactly." She straightened and patted his chest. "You're a fun guy. You listen to me. You listen to my music. You're thoughtful, you're

protective, and you're honest. These all qualify you for someone worth my interest. And even if you were none of those things, you've never treated me with anything less than respect."

The weight of her hand in the vicinity of his heart eased some of the constriction banding his lungs. "You are not hard to be with."

"Thank you. Again."

He touched his fingers to her lips to silence her. "Naomi, I'm a mess. You need to know this about me. I'm—"

She stopped his words with a kiss to his fingertips. "Matt, I'm going to stop you right here. You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to. Okay?"

But I do want to.... "I think that's

exactly why I want to tell you. You haven't asked me for anything—for answers—for more. I want to tell you.”

“Okay then. Take your shoes off and get comfortable.” She pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Dinner will be here in a few minutes and I will listen.”

She disappeared into the kitchen and he glanced at Jethro. The dog walked over to the sofa and flopped down next to it. Apparently he liked telling her, too. The knot in his gut returned, boots echoed in the hallway and he shook his head. It wasn't a hallway out there, it was sidewalk and grass and apartments—not Iraq, not Marines racing to meet the enemy—and no explosions splitting the night in two.

The doorbell rang and he jerked around.

“It’s the Chinese food, Matt,” Naomi soothed, walking over to the door. She waited for his nod before opening it. Exhaling, he let her pay and accept the food. When the door closed, he motioned toward the hall separating the living room from the rest of the apartment.

“I’m going to wash up.” *Wash up and clear my head. I’m not in Iraq.*

He could tell her without reliving it—he *could* do that and he *would* do it.

In the bathroom, he stared in the mirror. “That’s an order, Marine. Be upfront. Let her know everything, and if she doesn’t kick your ass to the curb,

well...we'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

He really hoped she didn't kick him to the curb.

The lost look in his eyes sucker punched her in the gut. Brent had looked the same way when he'd come home—only his outbursts had been far more violent—and usually ended with him throwing she or their mother out. They took his temper, they took his apologies, and they didn't let him cut them off, no matter how hard he tried.

Matt didn't know enough about her history to understand she wouldn't let him push her out the door nor would she let him cut himself off unless that's what

he wanted. She set up their food—sweet and sour chicken for him, moo goo gai pan for her—and carried the plates out to the coffee table.

He rose and took them from her. The gentleman in him wouldn't stay seated when she walked in the room.

Another reason she adored him.

She grabbed water bottles and while she wouldn't mind a glass of wine, Matt was on edge. He opened both and they ate quietly. She didn't push, preferring to let him work it out in his own head. Quelling the urge to tell him it didn't matter turned out to be harder than she would have liked. Of course it mattered. But Naomi didn't live in a glass bubble, war was hell, and coming home harder

still. She devoted many volunteer hours at veteran's centers, actively raised money and awareness, and recording her album would help with both.

"I served in Iraq." The sentence sent a shiver of apprehension through her. "Just a grunt, doing my job and securing the areas we were ordered to secure." Sweat beaded along his brow. Jethro shifted below them and laid his head across Matt's foot, the weight offering some comfort because he blew out a long breath.

"I always wanted to be a Marine. I grew up in a small town, my mother works two jobs and she's—she's raised all five of us the best she can. But I am the oldest."

Naomi's heart squeezed. Brent was also the oldest—which meant he put tremendous pressure on himself to excel and be there for his siblings. He believed in demonstrating how it should be done.

“So enlisting was a no brainer.” Matt pushed the rice around on his plate. “I loved it—still do. There’s—there’s no real description for being a part of a unit that gets you, appreciates your strengths, challenges you to do better and guards your back every step of the way.”

Spearing a mushroom on a fork, she gave him her full attention and swallowed any probing questions. He needed to tell his story his way.

Clearing his throat, he continued,

“Anyway, I was good at my job and I liked it. One night—one night we had insurgents break through the gates. They set off some blasts and we had to kill the driver in another of their vehicles, but it still detonated. The—um—the explosion damaged my hearing.” He tapped his right ear with two fingers. “I’m not deaf, but impaired on this side. It also affects my balance, but I’m working on that.”

Putting the plate on the table, he reached down to pet Jethro. She’d noticed he did that whenever his discomfort level rose. The dog basked under the affection, returning solace to the wounded Marine. She didn’t mistake the idea that the hearing loss was his only injury. Soul-bleeding wounds

weren't always obvious.

“So I took the medical discharge they offered, but it's not just about the physical issues. I still have my arms and legs, I can still run and work and function—except—” He grimaced. “Except sometimes I can't.” Swallowing hard, he clenched his jaw. “I'm here at Mike's Place for treatment.” The words were barely a whisper and she had to strain to hear them.

“Doc diagnosed it as PTSD. I can't remember what happened without reliving it. I can't go places where there are a lot of noises—bangs or even heavy crowds, because they take me back there. I can't hold a job because most of my training is in areas that all set off my

triggers. In a nutshell, I'm a pretty poor prospect for anyone." He sighed, shoulders slumping briefly as though exhausted from giving voice to the darker thoughts inside of him.

Judging that point to be the right time to speak, she set her plate next to his and turned sideways, her knee brushing his thigh. "Okay."

Puzzlement filled his eyes. "What?"

"Okay."

"I just told you why I'm not a good prospect for you."

"I know. You think I need big dates in noisy crowds and someone who hasn't seen how hard life can be." Taking a risk, she caught his hand and put it to her throat, pressing two of his fingers to her

pulse. “Feel that?”

He grazed his thumb over the pulse point. “Yeah.”

“I’m human, too. I’m sorry that bad things happened to you and continue to happen, but do you know what I see when I look at you? What I hear when you tell me that story?” *Make it good, Nay. He’s opening up and you have one shot to get this right.*

“No.”

“I hear a good brother who cares about his family, a good son who respects his mother, a tough Marine who honors his unit, and a strong man who is facing his own demons. You’re exactly the kind of guy I want to see.”

“But I can’t take you out and do all the

things you deserve—real dates, real romance—”

“I don’t need all those trappings, Matt. I just need you.” She wasn’t sure which of them moved, but she went from sitting next to him to sitting in his lap, and his mouth closed over hers. She loved kissing him, even when he exerted so much care.

Wiggling until she straddled him, she cupped his face in her hands. Aggressive wasn’t usually her style, but he rewarded her efforts and slid his hands under her T-shirt. The glide of skin-on-skin sent tremors through her.

“Naomi...?” The breathless question sent another frisson of awareness jolting up her spine.

“Yes,” she answered between kisses, “I know what I’m doing.”

He caught her hair in one hand and tugged her head back. “I—want you.” The admission clearly cost him something. “And the last thing I want to do is hurt you.”

Grabbing the bull by the horns, she settled more firmly, teasing herself with the length of the erection straining against his jeans. “Stay with me tonight—just you and me—let’s see where this goes. No strings, no demands, no expectations....”

“I have expectations.” He caressed her side, the stroke of his fingers sending delicious ripples through her, winding her up tighter than a watch.

“Okay.” She rested her forehead to his. “What expectations do you have?”

“I want to be better for you.”

“You don’t have to be better, you just have to be you.”

“I meant—”

Silencing him with a kiss, she fought to keep her libido in check. The urge to get naked and wild with him warred with her desire to make it better for him.

“I know what you meant. I also know that you’re working on you, and if a relationship with me hurts that progress, then absolutely—say ‘thanks, ma’am, but no thanks.’ We can eat our Chinese food and watch some bad comedies together. But I’m a big girl, Matt. I grew up with four brothers who are made of boot

leather and determination. I get it. I want *you*, not some perfect, idealized version of you—but the *you* sitting right here with me. If you can believe that, then I'd recommend nudity is no longer optional."

He said nothing for so long she thought he would tell her no. Bracing for that disappointment, she wasn't prepared for the shock when he slid his hand up to cup her breast, or the teasing stroke of his thumb through the fabric of her bra. "If nudity isn't optional—then we better get naked."

Matt allowed Naomi to lead him into the bedroom. Despite his bravado, when it came to stripping her clothes off, he

didn't trust his control. Jethro watched them go with solemn eyes, but made no move to follow. Apparently the Labrador trusted Naomi even more than Matt did.

Good to know.

Naomi aroused an unpredictable array of feelings in him. She thought him respectful and compassionate—but damn, she was drop dead gorgeous with a beautiful voice and the sexiest mouth he'd ever seen. Every single time he listened to her sing, he watched her mouth—imagining all the things he might do with it and then pushed the thoughts back down.

In a way, she belonged to his larger family—his Marine brotherhood—but

damned if he felt remotely familial toward her. Coming back to her door the other night and kissing her left him humming, and he'd carried that good mood throughout his day. His session with James diminished it, bleeding the color from the joy. But seeing her again in the park, it returned full force and flooded him.

He hungered to touch her, kiss her, and make love to her until she couldn't walk. But Naomi would never be a fuck or a casual lay—she was the real damn thing. Standing next to her bed, she must have sensed his hesitation. Sitting, she patted the space next to her.

The invitation sent his blood racing. She tilted her head to the side, her eyes

dark and mysterious in the muddy puddle of light cast by the low wattage bulb in the nightstand lamp. Her lips were full and just a little swollen from their earlier kiss, color flushed her cheeks, and her hair spilled in loose curls around her shoulders. Ripe, perfect, and every bit the girl next door type he favored most of his life—only she wasn't a *type*.

Those other girls were just pale imitations of her—understudies because she hadn't arrived in his life yet. *God, I sound like Lauren...I am spending way too much time around the actress.*

Shuttling thoughts of everyone else away, he cupped Naomi's cheek and rubbed his thumb across her lower lip.

“You really are the most beautiful woman I have ever met.”

Hands down. No contest.

“Keep saying things like that to me and I can’t be responsible for my actions.” She caught his thumb between her lips and teased the tip with her tongue. The sensual gesture caught him off guard and captivated him.

Sliding back on the bed, she caught the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head. One by one, she shed her clothes and he forgot how to think. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth, and he didn’t dare say anything for fear of babbling like an idiot. She possessed an athletic and trim build, but her curves were distinctly feminine. He knew from

experience how wonderfully soft and firm her body was. She finally knelt on the bed, wearing only her bra and panties.

Rooted to the spot, he stared, his brain fizzling. But he stood silent for too long and her expression wavered, uncertainty darkening her eyes.

“I’m sorry...,” she murmured, reaching for her discarded shirt, but he snatched it and threw it aside then joined her on the bed.

“Don’t be—I just couldn’t take my eyes off you long enough to respond.” But he planned to rectify that. He crushed his mouth against hers, and she opened to the invasion like a flower soaking up the spring rain. Her skin

scorched him until heat danced across his nerves. He made quick work of the bra and panties. The rise and fall of her chest sucked all the oxygen out of his lungs, and he nearly strangled on a moan.

Rosy nipples, sweet like strawberries, stiffened under his gaze. He kissed his way down to them then indulged in one of his favorite fantasies—sucking one turgid tip between his lips. The moment he grazed the nipple with his teeth, she dug her fingers into his shoulders, the sweet, sharp sting of her nails rocking his insides. His cock stiffened painfully, reminding him he was still fully dressed.

Unsure who he tormented more as he played with her breasts, he was torn

between wanting his clothes off and continuing to tease her sweet flesh. Wanting what came next won out. He slipped away, and she objected with a very audible groan. Laughter bubbled up through his intensity and he grinned at her. "I'm feeling very overdressed...."

Pulling off his shirt, he toed off his shoes before stripping out of his jeans. She rose up on her elbows and stared at him with hunger, her naked, wanton look a powerful thing. The raw desire in her face demanded action. His erection thumped against his stomach, and he fumbled in the pocket of his jeans for the condom in his wallet.

Always carry a condom. Always be prepared.

God bless his training.

She reached out and stroked him, her attention on his cock and he groaned. The action sent all blood flow south and shut down everything but the most basic thoughts in his brain. Wanting her was a powerful thing, wanting to make this good for her even more. He caught her wrist in a light grip and stopped her caress. Her gaze rose to meet his, a frown wrinkling her brow.

Oh, she didn't like that. For some reason, the objection in her all-too-willing expression amused the hell out of him. "You keep doing that and we're going to be over before we even get started, and that's not how I want this to end."

“Oh.” Her eyes lit up and her smile grew. “Oh.”

He didn't let her repeat a third time, tumbling her back on the bed and kissing her soundly before nipping and licking his way down her body. He allowed the indulgence of teasing her nipples before settling between her legs. Spearing his tongue between the seam of her sex, he didn't hesitate to taste her.

Divine honey, sticky and sweet.

Every lick elicited another gasp or soft cry until she writhed and he gripped her hips, pinning her to the bed. Damn she was so responsive. He sucked on her clit until she let out a little scream. Satisfied with the pleasure he delivered, he eased away and looked up.

She beckoned him with glazed eyes. More than willing to fulfill the slightest request, he sheathed his cock and settled again between her legs. She didn't act like a virgin or respond like one, but he hesitated, poised at the entrance to her sex. "You okay?"

"Oh, yeah." She rubbed her palms across his chest then up over his shoulders. Even the slightest contact of skin on skin sent electric shocks through his system. Primed, he expected to blow any second—and wanted to be inside her when that happened.

"I don't want to hurt you." He dug his fingers into the bed covers next to her, fighting to maintain the last slender threads of his control. The urge to thrust

damn near bowed his spine.

She hooked her legs around his hips, and arched her back. He slid in an inch and surrendered to the desire to thrust inside of her with one, long stroke. They groaned in unison and fierce laughter burst from his chest. It felt so fucking good to feel her clamping down around him.

“Don’t stop.” She whispered, the small bit of encouragement before biting down on his earlobe. The light pressure, the encouraging brush of her nails on his ass, and he pulled out slowly before driving his cock home again. Far from put off by his hard thrusts, she encouraged him. Their mouths collided in a hot, wet kiss that stoked the tension

gathering in his balls.

The bed rocked with them, and she rose to meet his every thrust. She let out a soft cry and her legs locked around him. The orgasm stormed through her expression and she screamed. Her convulsions drove his and he came in a rush of pure, blinding pressure, crying out her name.

Chapter Eight

He wouldn't stay the night. She wanted to argue, but something in his eyes when he talked about going to sleep arrested her words. Fear. A genuine concern, tinged with shame, when he murmured he had to leave.

"It's okay." She walked him to the door, holding his hand and leaning on his arm. She was soft and warm all over. Equal parts erotic and sweet, his lovemaking took her breath away. Burying the longing to sleep in his arms, she kissed him softly. "I'll see you

tomorrow?”

“Wild horses couldn’t keep me away. Lock this door.” He clipped Jethro’s leash on and kissed her again. “Thank you....”

She smiled and indulged in a quick hug and then he left, closing the door behind him. Turning the lock, she rested against the door and sighed. No matter how much she understood his declining her invitation to stay overnight, his exit stung.

Get it together, Naomi, it’s not a rejection. But it certainly felt like one. Her body still tingled, pleasantly sore and tight in all the right places. Walking into her bedroom, she inhaled the sweet musk of sex still hovering in the air. She

slid onto the bed, pulled the pillow close that he'd lounged on for the little while, and breathed in the hint of his scent. He hadn't been there long enough to really leave a mark.

I said I could handle this.... Intellectually, she got it. The PTSD diagnosis sent her back years—to Brent's homecoming—to the brutal conversations and outbursts of temper. Her tough, fierce, older brother reduced to tears and later, loathing at his own inability to function. Fighting his way through it, he got the help he needed—hell, he was a Congressman now, married and working on having a baby with his wife.

I can handle this.... But

understanding all of that, educating herself, attending support groups for families of returning veterans, and dedicating her time and efforts to the cause didn't quite cover the current situation. Intellectual knowledge didn't cut it where her heart was concerned. She wanted to go to sleep in his arms, wanted to wake up with him and not reduce their moment to a slam, bang, good night ma'am.

Matt didn't trust himself to sleep next to her. She'd seen it in his eyes and heard it in his voice. Did he suffer from night terrors? Did he lash out in his sleep? Not having the answers to those questions, but suspecting both to be true, didn't do much to assuage the emotional

wound of sex followed by a swift exit.

Wow...it took me less than thirty minutes to go from afterglow to emotional Fruit Loop. He's still the same guy. He's got issues and he's working on them. I can handle this.

God, what if she couldn't? The sobering thought cut through her. What if she couldn't handle a relationship on his recovery's terms? One fear after another tumbled in her head, like a cat chasing its tail. Inconceivable and painful, because she wasn't even sure she wanted to catch the tail.

Rolling to her side, she stared at the clock. It ticked a little after midnight. Hours and hours until they would see each other in the park.

I like him...he's wonderful, but he hasn't lied to me once about what's going on with him. Telling me about his PTSD took courage.

Her phone rang and she eyed it.

The landline.

She answered on the third ring.
“Hello?”

“So....” Matt’s voice washed over her and the knot in her gut loosened. “I walked Jethro home and realized I don’t even have your phone number.”

“Hey.” She sank into the pillows, warmth rushing out to heat the chilled places formed in the few short minutes since they’d said goodbye. Never a high maintenance, needy girl—she certainly didn’t want to become one.

“Are you okay?” Worry colored his words.

“Much better. I was having a silly woman moment.” Biting her lip, she swallowed a rueful laugh.

“Hmm, be nice to my girl. I like her.”

He said *my* and shivers raced over her skin. “She likes you, too.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t stay—I....”

“You don’t have to explain.” He really didn’t. “I get it and I-I respect that you recognize your own limitations.” She grimaced at the word. “That didn’t come out right.”

Soft laughter met her embarrassment. “No, it came out exactly right. It’s what I’ve been working on...recognizing what I can do and when I push myself too

hard. Sometimes...sometimes I push and I want more than I am capable of—it would be really, really easy to push with you, Naomi. I want to be there, but I can't, and I won't, risk you.”

His raw vulnerability and utter openness did her in. “I won't risk you either, Matt. It's okay.” She snuggled down in bed, hugging the phone to her ear and his pillow to her chest. “But can you do me a favor?”

“What?” He sounded as relieved as she felt.

“Can I have one of your shirts?”

“Sure...can I ask why?”

“Cause I like the way you smell.” Heat rushed to her cheeks and she barely managed to whisper the words.

His soft groan sent tingles of excitement racing through her. “You can have any shirt of mine you want.”

“Hmm, thank you.” If she couldn’t have him in her bed all night, she could wear his shirt and have his scent. The disquiet in her soul settled.

“You’re welcome. Now, go to sleep.”

As if conjured by his words, the yawn cracked her jaw. “Okay....”

“Don’t hang up.” The firm order wrapped around her like an embrace. “I’ll stay on the line until you’re asleep.”

“Okay,” she repeated, and he chuckled.

“Do you know what I hear when you say okay?”

She yawned again and her eyelids

drifted closed, almost too heavy to stay open. “That I love you?” The sleepy question escaped before she could stop it. Her heart squeezed. *Too soon?*

“Yeah.” He whispered. “Okay?”

Biting her lip, she smiled so hard her face hurt. “More than okay.”

“Good night, Naomi.”

“Good night, Matt.”

Dawn found him waiting early for his appointment with James. He wanted to get in and get out. After sleeping well, he’d woken, wishing Naomi had been within arm’s reach. Leaving her the night before turned out to be harder than he expected—but he wouldn’t subject her

to his nightmares or risk injuring her if he lashed out.

No. Unacceptable.

“Hey, Matt.” James opened the door.
“You’re early.”

“I can wait.” He didn’t look at the clock. An hour early was more than just being prompt.

“You can come on in, you’re my first appointment of the day.”

Jethro trotted ahead of him, seeming even more relaxed than Matt. Despite the niggling doubts and worry nibbling on his insides, he felt good.

Real good.

Doc offered him some coffee, and Matt carried a mug over to the sofa and sat. “So, ask me how I’m feeling.” He

couldn't quite keep the grin off his face.

"I don't really need to." James settled in his chair and set his notepad to the side. "What happened?"

"Naomi." The simple act of saying her name filled him with a giddiness he hadn't laid claim to in years. Fresh, new, simple—fantastic—she was perfect.

"So things are moving forward with you two?"

"You could say that—and while we're on the subject, I canceled my 1Night Stand plans—officially. I know I forfeit the deposit, but I don't care." Sipping the coffee, he rubbed his foot along Jethro's side. He sprawled on his back, belly up, tongue lolling—the picture of bliss.

“Are you rushing this, Matt?” The therapist leaned forward, studying him. Despite the bland expression, concern crinkled the corners of his eyes.

“No. Maybe. I don’t care.” He’d thought about it a lot after leaving her—struggled with it before falling asleep. Hearing the soft sound of her breathing over the phone soothed him in ways he couldn’t define. He liked her, liked spending time with her, liked listening to her. Already half in love and no matter how terrifying a prospect, it thrilled him, too.

“That’s a very definitive answer.”

“Falling in love doesn’t have a definitive answer. Isn’t that what you told me?” They’d had a similar

conversation months before, not long after James and Lauren rescued him from an outburst at a Plano bar. The psychologist and the movie star—a chick flick pairing if ever there was one—but they fit each other.

“No. It doesn’t. But is she aware of your issues?” Ahh, that’s what concerned him. At least in this, Matt could set his mind at ease.

“Yes. I talked to her about it. Told her about the diagnosis and about being in counseling. I also told her about my plans to go for school.”

She’d taken both pieces of information so well, he couldn’t figure out why he hadn’t mentioned it sooner. The younger sister of four Marines, she

likely had her own experiences to share with him when ready.

“Good. How did she take it?”

“She understood.” Met his admission with compassion and acceptance, not pity. He knew the difference, had seen it in different people. PTSD scared people because they didn’t understand it. Not that he was an expert, but he learned and would continue learning. Limited didn’t mean incapable—it meant he needed training and experience and coping mechanisms.

“Matt, this is a process...I don’t want to discourage you from a relationship that obviously makes you happy, but it’s a process. It’s not something that will happen for you overnight. You’re going

to have good days—”

“And bad days. I get that.” Exhaling, he came to his second bit of news. “I also realized something about Jethro this morning. He’s not a loaner dog, is he?”

“No.” James offered him a quiet smile. “He is a gift.”

“Why give me a specially trained dog and not tell me what he really is?” The only puzzle piece he hadn’t fit into place.

“That’s a fair question. Your anger issues made it hard to tell you what help you required. Part of healing is recognizing what you need so you can ask for it first.” The answer made a certain amount of sense.

“But why now?” He rubbed his chin.

“I’ve been here on and off for two years.”

“What did you say to me when you came back this time?” James challenged.

They’d had so many conversations over the last few months, much less in the last few weeks.

“Think about it and ask me again when you remember. For now, Jethro is yours. I think you two are great together.”

Matt laughed. “It’s funny, you have more of a comment for the dog than the girl. Not sure what that says to me?”

“Stay honest with yourself, stay honest with her, and you have nothing but my best wishes.”

“Fair enough.” He nodded. “Thanks,

Doc. Time for the brutal memory portion of our day?”

“No.” James shook his head. “I think today we talk about how it felt to tell her....”

Naomi left her guitar at the apartment, confirmed her flights, and packed her overnight bag. Choosing shorts and a tank top, she actually took time with her hair and added a touch of lip gloss. She'd already sent the new music sheets to Phil. The rest of the day stretched out in front of her and she planned to make the most of it with Matt.

He appeared around the corner of the path as if conjured by her thoughts. She

couldn't keep the grin off her face or her heart from playing Ping-Pong with her ribs. "Good morning."

The answering smile on his face lightened his sober expression. He closed the distance between them and wrapped her up in a fierce bear hug. Inhaling his scent, she sighed and returned the squeeze. "I missed you." The confession came easily.

Matt chuckled. "I missed you, too." Jethro gave them a moment before butting his head between them and demanding his share of the attention. Pressing a fleeting kiss to Matt's lips, she slipped away to crouch and give the dog a good scratch.

"Where's your guitar?" The frown in

his words echoed to her.

“I left it at the apartment—and yes, I locked the door.” She tugged the key out from beneath her top where it hung with four dog tags—one for each of her brothers.

Matt helped her up. Tracing his fingers down the chain, he gave her an inquiring look. At her nod, he turned the tags over and read them.

“They’re my brothers’. Each time they deploy, they give me one of their dog tags to keep for them. Brent’s home now, but he said I could keep his. We’re kind of scattered all around the world, but they’re always with me.” Sappy sentimentality, but she treasured the tags. She hadn’t worn them since arriving at

Mike's Place, but that morning she'd wanted to feel her brothers close.

"They're not going to like you seeing me, are they?" Honesty hollowed the teasing from the question.

"Well, Charlie knows that I like you." She looped her arm through his. Touching him came naturally, and for a physically affectionate person, maintaining her distance for the last several days had proven harder than she imagined. Happily, she didn't have to anymore. "I get to talk to him every few weeks...so I thought breaking the news about a potential boyfriend when he was a few thousand miles away seemed a good plan."

"Very sassy of you."

“I try. Matt, they’re going to love you. They’re pains, and will probably tell you how obnoxious I am and that they’ll break your legs if you break my heart, but they really do mean well.”

His snort of laughter relaxed her. Her brothers would love him. She thought Brent in particular would like him, but they would cross that demilitarized zone when they came to it.

“I told James about us this morning.” The simple declaration surprised, and pleased her.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, I’m working on a policy of being as bare-bones honest as I can during sessions. If I don’t run away from what bothers me, maybe I can fix it. You

know?”

Her stomach wavered. *Bothered him?*

“Not that you bother me.” He paused to slip his arm around her waist and pull her closer. “You make me a little crazy, and I’m currently wondering how many people come through this part of the park, but you don’t bother me.”

“Come through here? Why would you...oh.” Desire shivered through her. “We can go to the apartment....”

“We could, but talking is better—for now. And Jethro needs a walk. He’s a specially trained dog, did you know that?”

Unwilling to muddy their potential with even the slightest of lies, she nodded. “I guessed—he reacts to your

moods so beautifully, and I've read about the work they've done with service dogs. Didn't you know?"

"Nope." His expression turned rueful. They came to the clearing where she'd composed most of the week, and Matt let her go to unclip Jethro's leash. The Labrador bounded away, did his business, and returned with a stick. "I didn't really have a diagnosis before a few days ago. Doc knew, but he didn't tell me."

"That sounds strange...why wouldn't he?" More curious than critical, she grabbed a spot and sat. He joined her and lifted her legs to lay across his.

"I wasn't ready to hear it. I focused on my inability to adjust and kept blaming

myself for the hearing loss. It sounds really stupid now, but I couldn't see the forest for the trees." He sent the stick sailing for Jethro and the dog raced after it. "I went home a few months ago—for the second time—and I've always felt like my family pressured me to be who I was before I enlisted and that I couldn't live up to it. It's like having tunnel vision, and I couldn't see what my triggers really were. When I lost it there, I packed my bags and came straight back to Mike's Place."

He paused, his attention turned inward and she waited. If he wanted to finish the story, he would, she didn't want to push. Jethro returned with the stick, and Matt threw it again, throwing it three more

times before he sighed and looked at her.

“I promised James I would be honest with you. So here it is...I came back this time, and I decided I either got better, or I was done. I wouldn't put my family through that again, and I didn't think I could go through it again. I asked James today why he diagnosed me now, why they got me the dog and didn't tell me about his training, what made this time so different....”

Naomi held her breath, the absolute quiet and certitude in Matt's voice aged him.

“I was suicidal. I'd made the decision this time. No more sitting on the fence, it was over the wall or I was done.” He exhaled the words in a rush. “I sat with a

gun on the table every night for a week.”

The information sent a shock of pain through her. She reached out and caught his hand. “Matt....”

“No, let me get this out or I won’t,” he admonished. “I couldn’t do it. I thought about it, worked it out in my head. Imagined what it would be like, but I couldn’t—wouldn’t—do it. I locked the gun away and took Jethro for a walk... and then I met you. I can’t get better for you, I can’t make my recovery about you, and I’m not doing that.”

Jethro dropped the stick and came over to rub against him. Matt wrapped his free arm around the dog and scratched between his ears. “We’re good, buddy. Almost done.” Squinting at

her, Matt blew out a breath. “I’m damaged. It could take a lifetime to put the pieces back where they’re all supposed to be. You said last night you could handle it, and I believe you. I promise you I’m going to do my best to handle it, too. But we gotta be honest. I have to be honest with you and you have to tell me when it gets to be too much. That way—we do it together.”

She melted. “Okay.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Tugging her hand, he pulled her closer and she crawled into his arms and met his kiss. “Matt—it won’t be easy. Nothing worth having ever is. I like what we have though, and I’m willing to fight

for it.”

“Okay.” And when he said it, she heard the *I love you*.

“Think we can get naked now?”

Naomi laughed and rose, dusting the grass off her bottom. “Race you!” She sprinted, taking advantage of the few seconds he needed to get the leash on Jethro, but he made it to her door before her and as soon as the lock gave, they made it to the bed in record time.

Chapter Nine

By late afternoon, Naomi felt wrung out and limper than an overcooked spaghetti noodle. She poured everything she had into every single song. The band Phil hired proved exceptional. They took her music and turned it into something magical. Breaking for a quick dinner and with only two songs left to go, she begged off eating with everyone—walking down the street to a sandwich shop and finding a quiet place to sit and just be.

Making music was a dream—had

been a fantasy for years—actually making it? Alone for five minutes in her head, her mind whirled with the possibilities. She checked her phone—four messages—all from her brothers and one from her sister-in-law. Hitting callback on Ryleigh's number, she listened to it ring.

“Hello, Guitar Girl, glad you found five minutes to call me. I was starting to feel ignored.” Eight years her senior, Ryleigh became the sister Naomi never had. Brent met her in high school and they dated through junior college, his boot camp, and married before his first deployment.

“I heard tell of ovulation so I really didn't want to interrupt.” She could

totally discuss that topic with her sister-in-law.

“Ahh, yes. We’re safe, I promise. Brent’s got meetings on the Hill for hours yet. It’s almost like he’s deployed, only I get to see him for five minutes each night before he falls asleep on the sofa.”

“Things going good then?” The breeze off the river, the sun dappling the sidewalk, and the quiet murmur of background conversation helped Naomi relax.

“Really good. He likes what he’s doing, but even when he complains, you can see it in his eyes, you know?”

Yeah, Naomi knew. Brent loved a good fight. Win or lose, he thrived in the

trenches and against the odds. “I know you were worried when he decided to run.”

“Yeah, but he won the election and he’s a junior Congressman from Texas, so—give him thirty-two more years and he’ll be leading all those committees he’s battling with right now.”

“Ha, I bet he does it in sixteen.” Or less. Brent didn’t give up.

“Probably.” Ryleigh’s tone was very dry. “But I didn’t call you to talk about your brother. Charlie ratted you out.”

“Of course he did.” As close as the brothers were, Brent probably knew ten minutes after she and Charlie hung up. Surprisingly, Brent hadn’t called her on it already.

“I twisted Brent’s arm to leave you alone.” Saved by her sister-in-law. Yes, Naomi loved her for a reason.

“Thank you.”

“Any time. But does that earn me some capital to ask questions?”

She laughed. “His name is Matt. He’s a Marine, retired. He got hurt in Iraq and he’s coping with some issues, but he’s a great guy—really sweet and so much fun.”

“Sweetie, you know I’m not going to discourage you but....”

Naomi bit her lip. “Ry—I get it, you’ve been here. You were here when Brent came home and you went through hell with him.”

“Yeah. I don’t want you to get in over

your head or get hurt. If his issues....”

“I don’t care. I mean I do, but we all have problems. We all struggle with life and maybe—maybe I haven’t been through the war the way he has, but I’ve been through it on this side, just like you. I want to be there for him, I want Matt to know he has someone in his corner.”

“You never do anything halfway do you?” Indulgent affection softened her tone.

“Do any Sparks do anything halfway?” It wasn’t in their genetic makeup. She was in love, flaws and all.

“No. None of you do—exasperating and beautiful family that you are.”

“Hey now, Mrs. Sparks, you need to include yourself in that, too.”

“Oh, without a doubt.” Ryleigh’s lighthearted tone sobered. “If you are determined and I know you—you are—call me if it gets bad. You don’t have to do this alone...there are a lot of organizations out there for families like us and I want you to write these down.”

Naomi listened intently, and after five minutes she dug a pencil out of her purse and jotted notes onto a pad of paper. Her respect for her sister-in-law used to be high.

By the time the call finished, it was immeasurable.

Airports sucked.

Matt hated dropping her off in the

morning. Hated it even more than the press of people rushing in to make their early morning flights. Naomi insisted he drop her off at the curb, which he hated. But his fluctuating mood and fraying temper warned him against pushing himself any harder.

He kissed her goodbye and watched her disappear inside with her overnight bag. Unfortunately, he couldn't and didn't relax until she'd texted that she arrived in Nashville. His pacing nearly wore a groove in James' carpet. It frustrated him that the act of getting out of the truck proved so difficult. Jethro stayed with him, but even the dog seemed to miss Naomi and looked for her in the park when they went for their

run.

She called at noon but didn't have more than a few minutes to speak. The recording was going well and her enthusiasm bubbled through the phone at him. The dappled sunshine in his day went away when they hung up. He focused on getting the last of his paperwork filled out, had lunch with the guys, and took another run in the afternoon.

The hours between dropping her off and her return flight stretched out interminably. James brought a service vest around for Jethro. The outfit would allow Matt to take Jethro into the airport to wait for her—and he had every intention of being inside when she exited

the secure area.

A sketchy dinner of frozen burritos and another run for Jethro killed an hour. A shower and bad science fiction movie killed another couple of hours. Her text galvanized him.

On flight. Barely. Have to shut off phone. Lots of news. Can't wait to see you.

His phone vibrated a second time.

Okay.

He grinned. He attached so much value to that one, stupid little word.

“Woo hoo. She’s on her way, boy. You want another walk before we drive?” The flight would take a good two hours, but he wanted to be there.

And he would be there when she

walked through those doors.

Late night at DFW airport was thankfully quiet, with curbside check-in closed, as were most of the counters. Airport security spread thin, but present. Matt found a spot near the exit doors for her flight and settled along a wall. Jethro sat sentry next to him and they waited for their girl.

He'd known her a handful of days and she'd become that important to him. It shouldn't surprise him, he'd always been the guy who knew what he wanted. The two-year struggle with indecision about his place in the world faded to a bad memory. He didn't have answers, he didn't have guarantees, hell—he didn't have a job.

The security doors ahead opened and passengers began to exit in ones and twos. Matt straightened. Naomi sailed through the doors, her cell phone in her hand. Their gazes collided and her grin pierced him like a bright ray of sunshine.

What he did have was a future and a plan.

What the hell else did a Marine need?

Epilogue

Six months later....

“Good evening, Dallas,” Naomi spoke into the microphone. The butterflies in her stomach flapped madly, but she pushed through it. Five hundred people filled the ballroom for the fundraiser. “My name is Naomi Sparks. Everyone has met my brother, Congressman Sparks, earlier. Once upon a time, we lived here in the Dallas area and my brother played football with Captain Luke Dexter in high school. Both would go on to join the Marines,

both served their country with distinction, and both continue that service—to their friends, their family, and the Corps.”

Applause rose up to meet her announcement, and she waited for it to calm down. “It’s been my privilege to grow up in a Marine family, to support my brothers and my father—to be amazed by my mother and my sister-in-law....” She glanced at the family table. Her mother dabbed at her eyes and Ryleigh sat, a hand on her very pregnant tummy, Brent’s arm around her shoulders.

“These women—like so many of you here tonight who are members of military families—continually inspire

me with their dedication to their armed forces, to those who serve. They keep the home fires burning, support their Marines, wage every battle by their sides, and fight even more to keep them safe when they come home.”

Another round of applause interrupted her and she grinned. “Mike’s Place was the brainchild of Captain Dexter and is supported fully by every family I have met here in the last several months. It has been a rare honor to get to know the men and women who work here, who come here for help, and who, in turn, volunteer their time. Our Armed Forces family is much larger than we ever realize—we all serve, we all support, we all bleed together—six months ago I recorded an

album for the first time and tonight, the Dexters invited me to perform some songs from this album.”

Her nerves fluttered again and she let her gaze travel from table to table, lingering on her family and on the table next to theirs. The McCalls were there, all of them seated just a few feet from the Sparks save for one. *Her* McCall wasn't there.

“Some injuries we can't see, we can't just put a BandAid on them and make them better. We can only make our way through each day, claiming small victories and celebrating our accomplishments. We can comfort the setbacks and pick ourselves up to meet the challenge the next day. We all know

this, but when I recorded the album, I never imagined how difficult, or how rewarding, this fight can be. I have known the love of so many Marines in my life and tonight I am dedicating these songs to those Marines and to the one Marine that takes my breath away—every single day. He inspires me, he fills me with hope, and he makes me a better person for loving him.”

Swallowing back a clog of tears, she tried to make good on her promise not to cry. “I’m supposed to be telling you that all the proceeds from the album will be going to Mike’s Place to continue the work they do here, but I wanted to say that last night—my Marine asked me to marry him...” Applause roared up and

Naomi's smile grew, the tears in her eyes making it hard to see. At her father's raised eyebrows, she winked. "I told him yes, Daddy."

The crowd's thunderous applause drowned out anything else she could say, and it took another few minutes for them to settle again. Turning her head, she stared at the backstage wing and met Matt's wild grin. He couldn't take the crowd, but he could stand there—two of his friends flanking him and Jethro sitting proudly next to him.

"So this song is for you, Matt."

He mouthed 'okay' and her heart soared. Leaning away from the microphone, she adjusted her guitar and started to play. It was the only song he'd

not heard—the one she re-wrote that afternoon in Nashville.

What part of Marine don't you understand....

~ABOUT THE AUTHOR~

Heather Long lives in Texas with her family and their menagerie of animals. As a child, Heather skipped picture books and enjoyed the Harlequin romance novels by Penny Jordan and Nora Roberts that her grandmother read to her. Heather believes that laughter is as important to life as breathing and that the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy and Santa Claus are very real. In the meanwhile, she is hard at work on her next novel.

You can visit Heather at:

www.heatherlong.net

Combat Barbie

Beauty queen turned marine, Mary Phillips is tired of hearing "you could have been so much more." But running into Kyle Stewart reminds her that not everyone judges by appearance.

Seeing Mary again encourages Kyle to face his one regret, and the millionaire dares to reach for happiness.



Whiskey Tango Foxtrot

Have you ever woken up every day afraid of everything?

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

she's running out of options. When she receives an offer for assistance from Mike's Place, can Melody put her faith in the men her husband called friend?

Have you ever woken up, day after day, to discover your body's betrayal?

Marine Captain, Joe Anderson Cooper, received the Silver Star for Valor when he led his unit through heavy fire to rescue fellow Marines. Despite numerous injuries, the Captain refused medical aid, insisting that the medics attend others. A broken back and shattered bones put Captain Cooper in a wheelchair and every day is a battle to keep his recovery on track and his sanity intact. When a single mom moves in to

the apartment next door to his and he recognizes kindred—damaged—soul, can he overcome her fear and be the man she's always needed?

Can these two lonely souls rise to the challenge or will their scars trap them forever?



A Marine and a Gentleman

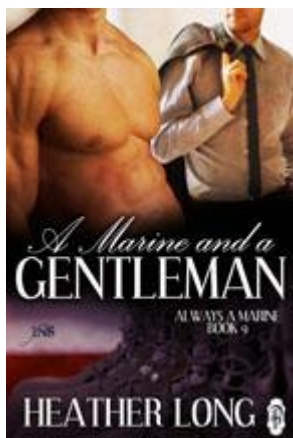
Lieutenant Brenden Fitzpatrick is a dedicated Marine, loyal son, and devoted uncle, but he's lonely. When he went Marine, the rule was don't ask, don't tell. His brothers-in-arms pretty much didn't ask and didn't care. Watching so many friends settle into long-term relationships highlighted the absence of someone to come home to in his life. When his unit encourages him to give the 1Night Stand service a try, he asks for the impossible—a night with the one man he almost gave up the Marines for in the first place. A man he called best friend but let time and distance

carry away.

Liam Gardiner grew up on the same Boston block as his best friend, Brenden. Unlike Brenden, Liam always accepted that he was gay—a fact he didn't mind flaunting to all the bullies and naysayers in school. It got his ass kicked more than once, but Brenden always had his back, rescuing him time and time again, until the day Brenden left for the Marines. He missed his buddy—the crush he never confessed, lest it cost him the precious friendship—so when Madame Eve's invitation to meet Brenden arrived, Liam faces uncertainty for the first time.

Life made them best friends, can Madame Eve help them become so much

more?



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