



*Marine*  
UNDER THE MISTLETOE

ALWAYS A MARINE SERIES



HEATHER LONG



The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement (including infringement without monetary gain) is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

Please purchase only authorized electronic editions and do not participate in, or encourage, the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

## **Marine Under the Mistletoe**

Copyright © 2013 by Heather Long

ISBN: 978-1-61333-623-6

Cover art by Mina Carter

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work, in whole or in part, in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means now known

or hereafter invented, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher.

Published by Decadent Publishing  
Company, LLC

Look for us online at:

[www.decadentpublishing.com](http://www.decadentpublishing.com)

## **Decadent Publishing Recent Releases**

*Cabin Fever by Stephanie Williams*

*The Virgin Madam by Shiloh Saddler*

*Just Right by Krystal Shannan*

*A Dance with Death by Louisa Bacio*

*Bad Luck with Besties by Zee Monodee*

*Saving Kat by Ella Grey*

*The Blog Affair by Alissa Baxter*

*Seal the Deal by JoAnne Kenrick*

*A Marine of Plenty by Heather Long*

*Her Sister's Wedding by Jane Ainslie*

*Hanging by a Moment by Bella Juarez*

*Chelsea's Somebody by Yvette Hines*

*Love Unlocked by Libby Waterford*

*Her Wish Before Christmas by  
Kimberly Quinton*

## **Also by Heather Long**

*Always a Marine Books*

*Once Her Man, Always her Man*

*Retreat Hell! She Just Got Here*

*Tell it to the Marine*

*Proud to Serve Her*

*Her Marine*

*No Regrets, No Surrender*

*The Marine Cowboy*

*The Two and the Proud*

*A Marine and A Gentleman*

*Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*

*Combat Barbie*

*What Part of Marine Don't You*

*Understand  
A Marine Affair  
Marine Ever After  
Marine in the Wind  
Marine with Benefits  
A Marine of Plenty  
A Candle for a Marine*



## Welcome Letter

I never planned to write “military romance.” I didn’t wake up one morning and think, huh, I should write military heroes and the men and women who love them. In fact, it was the last thing on my mind until I wrote about Luke Dexter, a retired Marine, in *Once Her Man, Always Her Man*. He left the woman he loved when he enlisted because at eighteen he didn’t figure on surviving. He was a young man going to war to defend his country—and he grew up to

become a man, a Marine, and an officer.

The level of honor I discovered in this one hero, drove me to explore others. We're a country that has been at war for over a decade. We've an entire generation who has known nothing but this activity and who have seen their fathers, brothers, sons, sisters, daughters, and wives serve overseas in hot zones.

## **Keeping It Real**

As romantic as military heroes are, I like to keep it real. Most of the heroes I wrote at first were retired or no longer on active duty. But for those still on active duty—they don't have control over everything they do because they

have to be on call 24/7 even when they're on leave.

They can't always commit to a lifetime because their lives aren't their own. At the end of *Her Marine*, Brody had to go because his leave was only for a couple of weeks. He enjoyed his time with Shannon and you know that he and Shannon are in touch, but he can't just "quit" and stay with her for a happily ever after.

### **They Don't Get To Pick**

Applying for jobs or assignments in the military can take time and dedication and clearance. So when you get an assignment you've wanted, you can't just change things overnight because you met

someone. The same is true for the potential military spouse—they have to be ready to pick up and move when their spouse gets orders.

The best part of this series is putting a human face on these people who are dedicated to our country and give up what so many of us expect as essential freedoms. I respect and admire those who love them for the sacrifices they have to make as well. At the end of the day, our military and their families are heroes because they go to the places no one wants to be and they do it, knowing they might not return.

The friendships forged, the class walls that collapse, the fact that in the military you aren't a race, or an

economic status or a region—you're Marines—battle buddies, comrades, companions, and their relationships are forged through your shared experiences.

**They are the few and the proud...**

Every hero or heroine I write inspires me. The *Always a Marine* series fills me with an inexplicable hope—because it's these men and women who protect my way of life.

*Semper Fi*

*Heather*

## **A Note from the Author**

The mission of the U. S. Marine Corps Reserve Toys for Tots Program is to collect new, unwrapped toys during October, November, and December each year and distribute those toys as Christmas gifts to less fortunate children in the community in which the campaign is conducted. The primary goal of Toys for Tots is to deliver, through a new toy at Christmas, a message of hope to these youngsters that will assist them in becoming responsible, productive,

patriotic citizens.

This holiday collection of the *Always a Marine* series is dedicated to Toys for Tots and the men and women of the United States Marine Corps Reserve who dedicate their time, their efforts, and their funds to delivering this message of hope. A portion of the proceeds from each of these books will be donated to Toys for Tots to continue that mission. Semper Fi.

<http://www.toysfortots.org>

# ~Dedication~

To hope. Blessed Be.



# **Marine Under the Mistletoe**

*Always a Marine Book 19*

**By  
Heather Long**



# Chapter One

Aaron Fields' naked ass was not the sight Kaiden imagined greeting him at the end of the two-mile-long trek up to the secluded Lake House.

“Well, well, well...G.I. Joe came home.” Aaron's drawled greeting came with a broad smile and he pulled the front door wider, spilling near-tropical warmth out into the chilly December evening.

“So it would seem, and Malibu Ken is missing his tan.” The banter, familiar and yet alien in the same breath, twisted the need to greet an old friend with the desire to withdraw to more neutral

territory. Refusing to run, he caught Aaron's outstretched hand and gripped it firmly.

"I'd offer a hug." Despite the humor in his tone, Aaron's gaze held a measure of caution.

"I don't want to touch your junk." The men had agreed on that issue years before, and Aaron released him to back up and admit him into the house.

Parked at the edge of the lake, sheltered by trees and protected by an extensive privacy fence at the extreme edges of the property lines, Lake House, sounded far more cottage than it actually was—a twenty-one-bedroom estate house occupying nearly one hundred and fifty acres of prime, forested waterfront

property. It defined exclusive and, once past the main gates, skyclad—bare-ass naked—was acceptable to the residents.

At last count, their coven consisted of over thirty active members and their families. The greater Sabbats always brought in old friends, guests, and the occasional curious seeker.

“Your mom and dad aren’t due until tomorrow.” Aaron gestured to the stairs. The main hall was empty, save for the two of them, but sounds echoed from above. “But you have your old room. We always keep it empty for you.”

“Ten years is a lot of holidays to not use the space.” The token gesture however, fit everything he remembered about his coven. Still, he couldn’t shake

the feeling of being a stranger entering an exotic world. A stampede of feet descending jerked his attention upward as three pre-teen boys raced down, pushing, shoving, and laughing.

The blissful ignorance of freedom in their still high-pitched voices aroused protectiveness in him that he'd thought long abandoned. The first boy to notice him slammed to a halt at the last step, teetering when the pair behind him collided with his back. "Whoa—you're Sergeant Nelson."

Bemused by the kid's wide eyes and raw curiosity, Kaiden nodded once. "You can just call me Kaiden. At least here." He traveled in his familiar MARPATS, but he'd take them off as

soon as he made it upstairs to change. Shed them for civilian clothes and all the responsibilities and expectations that accompanied them. There, he wasn't a Marine—he was Kaiden, a son, a priest, and a friend. *Maybe if I say it enough, I'll start to believe it.*

“Do you have a gun?” The youngest of the three pushed his way to the front and swept his gaze over Kaiden as though searching for the aforementioned weapon.

“No.” He'd never bring a weapon there. It flew in the face of what few moral fibers he had left.

“Jensen.” Aaron folded his arms. “Is that how we greet anyone?”

“No, sir.” Jensen shrugged. “But

Sergeant Nelson isn't anyone—he's a Marine.”

“Yeah, and he's been to a real war. I bet he kicked some Al Qaeda butt!” This from the kid who'd stopped first. His red hair and freckled face reminded Kaiden of another, but he couldn't quite pinpoint whom. Odd to think these boys had been two- and three-years-old respectively when he'd last seen them. He hadn't paid that much attention to kids back then, not when he'd been so full of piss and vinegar himself.

“Did you, Sergeant? Were you with the men who got Bin Laden?” Not willing to be left out, the third kid shoved up to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with his friends.



“No, stupid,” Jensen said, obviously attempting to sound wise and informed. “The guys that got Bin Laden were SEALs. The sergeant is a Marine. He doesn’t do what the SEALs do.”

“Yes, he does.” The first kid elbowed Jensen. “Marines are badass —”

“Boys!” Aaron clapped his hands. “Manners.”

“But did you do it, Sergeant? Were you there?”

“Parker. Jensen. Spence.” Lifting, clear, and authoritative, the feminine voice silenced the boys in a way Aaron hadn’t managed. Backlit perfectly at the top of the stairs stood an auburn-haired woman dressed in a body-hugging sheath

of a dress. “Aaron told you that was enough a few moments ago. And you didn’t listen. What have we told you about respecting our guests and Circle members when they arrive?”

Only his training kept Kaiden from laughing out loud at the crestfallen expressions all three boys wore. Old enough to appreciate the woman’s beauty and too young to be more than tongue-tied around her, not a single one could lift his gaze to meet hers. Instead, they shuffled their feet and kept their heads down.

“That’s what I thought.” She smiled and, even from ten feet away, the promise of sunshine warmed him. “Apologize and excuse yourselves. I

think you'll find that the circle hasn't been raked nor has the area scoured for any leftover debris. You will work on that this evening *and* tomorrow morning."

Aaron didn't bother to hide his amusement and let out a faint snicker at the boys' predicament.

"You can have Aaron inspect it when you're done." She tacked the last on as an afterthought because, while Aaron watched the boys, she watched Aaron and seemed to take note of his amusement at their discomfort. Disapproval echoed in the look she gave him.

He grunted but didn't complain. The boys cleared out without further warning

and the goddess in the pale-gray silk dress descended the stairs slowly. He didn't get a glimpse of her feet, but the way the long skirt swirled around her gave her the effect of floating.

“Aaron?”

He parroted her tone. “Rowan?”

The man's nudity hadn't bothered Kaiden when he'd arrived, not really. He hadn't been gone so long he didn't remember the comfort most others had in their skin—hell, a comfort he'd once shared. But when *Rowan* achieved the last step, Kaiden fought the desire to strip off his jacket and throw it at the other man.

Realization dawned across Aaron's chastised expression. “Oh. My

apologies, you two haven't met...I forgot. Rowan Harper—this is Lorraine and Henry's son, Kaiden. Kaiden, Rowan Harper—she joined Blue Circle a few years after you enlisted, give or take.”

“Merry meet, Kaiden.” She smiled, walked straight to him, and brushed her lips to his—the contact a violent shock to his system and he blinked once, going completely still. “It's truly lovely to have you with us this year.”

It took his mind what seemed like a full minute to catch up. “Hello.” The word came out strained and harsh, but either she gave him a free pass as they were strangers or she didn't notice it. Aaron, on the other hand, did and shot an

odd look in his direction.

Rowan gestured toward the stairs. “Shall I take you to your room? I put fresh sheets on the bed and fixed it up when your parents told me you had confirmed coming this year.”

He knew exactly where it was, but his manners finally kicked awake. “Please.” Following her up the stairs, he glanced back at Aaron once, aware of his amused gaze. Kaiden didn’t care for the sensation of being watched. *He’s a friendly. They’re all friendlies. This is home.*

The mental litany didn’t ease the tension winding him up. At the curve in the stairs, she paused to wait for him, and Kaiden picked up the pace. He might

be fucked up, but that didn't mean he had to be rude.

“Sorry, it was a long flight.” Mentally groaning at the obviousness of the comment, he sucked in a deep breath, determined to do better, and inhaled a fruity, deeply feminine, deliciously sensual scent that sent a shiver of awareness through him and his blood plummeted to southern regions.

“Undoubtedly, but you're home now.” She started climbing again, lifting her skirt with one hand. “I meant what I said downstairs—I am very happy to welcome you home this year. Your mother speaks of you often.”

“She'll be annoyed with me.” The effort to make casual conversation came

out rough and jagged. “I got an earlier flight and thought I could avoid anything too elaborate when I arrived.”

“Ahh.” She hesitated and her teeth clenched together in a smile-grimace.

“It’s okay.” He held a hand up, palm out. “I know my parents. They’ve planned something special—especially since I haven’t been home for so long. They can still have it all happen, and I get some time to be here before it starts.”

“I could talk to them, if you like.” It was a kind—if tempting—offer.

“Thank you, but the last place you need to put yourself is between my parents and me.” The sentence came out far tougher than he’d intended. Exhaling



a hard breath, he concentrated on sanding down his attitude. “And by that, I mean I haven’t been the poster child for good son. They’re entitled to react in a way that makes them happy.”

They’d arrived at his door and he found the silence almost as unnerving as the house itself. He’d picked out this room years ago because it was farthest from the others, nestled off a quiet hall that had a storage closet and attic access.

“Rowan, please ignore me. I apparently haven’t been around real people in a while.”

“Oh?” Her too-innocent eyes glittered under the glow from the single lamp illuminating the hall. “And what mythical people have you been spending

time with?”

A rusty laugh worked its way loose. “I deserved that.”

“You did, but only a very little.” She twisted the knob and opened the door, before sweeping out of his way. “Take a shower, unpack—make yourself comfortable. The kitchen is fully stocked and we’re eating buffet-style every night except for the Yule feast. So come down whenever you like.”

She turned and walked away, and he frowned. He didn’t actually want her to go. “Rowan?”

Pausing, she swung around to look back. “Yes?”

He grasped for the first thing he could think of. “How many are here?”

“Only about a half dozen or so. The boys came out with Aaron and Melissa.” That’s right, Aaron was married. Odd how he’d forgotten that. As if she’d read his mind, she added, “Jensen is his nephew.”

“I would have thought more were here.”

“Some of us came out early to ready the house and stock food. But it’s only Wednesday, and a lot can’t get out of work before Friday. So everyone will be here by Saturday.”

Setting his bag down inside the room, he leaned against the doorframe. “You didn’t have to work?”

“The perk of accumulating vacation time that will vanish magically at the

turn of the physical year. I had to use it or lose it. Why don't you get settled and come down. I can go change and then give you the dollar tour, help you acclimate to any changes we've made."

The correct answer was no, but he didn't say that. He didn't say that at all. "Sounds good." Straightening, he stopped when she took a step forward.

"You remember the rules of skyclad, yes?"

"Yes," he nodded, wondering where she was going with her question. "Unless they've changed."

"No, but you seemed a bit uncomfortable with Aaron, and we may very well encounter other braver souls on our tour. At least three of the couples

love to indulge in the hot tub, though we've had to occasionally scold them about taking it too far when the kids are here.”

He didn't need her to define that for him. “I'm fine if you want to get naked.” Biting back an oath, he didn't miss the faint pink flush to her face. But her peal of merry laughter eased the pain of swallowing his foot. “Eventually, I will be fit for human company.”

“If you're not—you can still go for the tour with me. Now, go shower, relax, and change. You're *safe* here.” At her emphasis on safe, a knot in the back of his shoulder loosened. She flicked her hand at him, and he inclined his head to the order, but he stayed to watch her

walk away, practically floating down the hall with a graceful and thoroughly feminine sway of her hips.

In more than a decade, he couldn't remember the last time anything or anyone had surprised him. But Rowan Harper—she'd done it without any type of effort. Intrigued by the prospect of her, he headed into his room and stripped on his way to the shower, barely noticing the furnishings or anything else about the room. He had a singular goal in mind and a very direct path he intended to utilize to achieve it.

*Shower. Change. Find Rowan.*

Rowan couldn't imagine what

Kaiden had been through in the last few years, but the emotion in his voice had been so raw, so powerful, her heart ached. A dozen unasked questions had danced on the tip of her tongue, but beyond the desire to learn more about him came the inexplicable urge to hug him until she could wring away all the sadness coating him like some kind of sticky cobweb.

*You just met the man....* From the stunned bemusement on his face when the tweens questioned him, to the careful way he avoided looking at Aaron directly, to the rock-hard standoffishness in his manner as she walked him to his room. A miasma of *leave me alone* knotted around a deeper, more visceral,

*help me.* The heady tangle of emotions disconcerted her and led to the impulsive offer to show him around.

Getting her respiration under control with a breathing exercise steadied her erratic pulse. Glancing over the railing to the first floor, she heard music drifting out of the sitting room—a modern rock beat, which suggested Aaron had taken it back over. Tim and Lynette passed through the foyer below, their arms wrapped around each other as they conversed quietly. Parker and Spence were their children, and she'd have to mention the behavioral issue later—or perhaps not. If the boys did their tasks, then the discipline had been served and no sense in stirring up any trouble.



Diverting to her room, she changed to a pair of leggings, an oversized sweatshirt, and a pair of sneakers. She'd rather be comfortable while they hiked, considering the temperatures plummeted at sunset. Rising, she caught sight of her reflection and grabbed a brush to tame her wild curls back into a ponytail, then ducked into the bathroom to brush her teeth and add a touch of lip gloss.

*Why am I fussing?* The best part of hosting summer and winter retreats at the lake was the absence of all the corporate-world trappings. She could let her hair be wild, skip the need for cosmetics, and be herself. Making a face, she refused to add anything more than the gloss to her appearance and

went out to find a book. She'd read in the small sitting room that faced the top of the stairs while waiting for him.

*Presuming he doesn't change his mind and still wants to go for his tour.* Ignoring the naysaying voice, she curled up in an armchair and flipped through the books sitting on the side table. They had an open library policy. Anyone could leave a book, and anyone could take a book. Picking one at random, she turned it over to read the back, but barely read the first sentence when she heard the soft creak of a floorboard. She glanced up to find Kaiden, freshly showered. The clean bite of soap and man made for a powerful scent.

“Feel better?” She put the book back

and rose.

“Yes.” He scratched at his chin; he’d taken the time to shave. Like her, he’d dressed for warmth as well as comfort, though his sweatshirt read USMC while hers declared that she did believe in fairies. “It’s dark out there.”

“I’m not afraid of the dark,” she assured him and, following a quiet impulse whispering through her, held out her hand. To her surprise, he took it. “Before we go down, do you want to be social or would you like to just walk?” Because, while they only had a few Circle members present, all would want to say hello and invite him to chat.

“Walk.” He didn’t pause to consider the answer, and she’d more or less

expected the response.

“Follow me.” She gave him a squeeze and led the way. Instead of releasing her, however, he tightened his grip a fraction and easily kept up with the pace she set.

Instead of going down the main stairs, she led him down another hall and past her room to the side stairs leading out behind the laundry room and back door. Their breath fogged in the chilly night air. A yellow porch light cast a golden circle on the deck, a spot popular in summer but safely empty that evening.

Pitching her voice low, she pointed at the two paths faintly visible in the ambient light. “The one on the right goes on down to the lake. We have a fairly

nice beach and it's a lot of fun in the summer. Some of our polar bears will likely do a race down there one night to plunge into the lake. I don't recommend it. The other takes us into the woods. We've done a lot of work over the last few years, keeping the trails cleaned. It's good work for the kids and keeps them out of trouble." *Like he doesn't already know all this, Rowan? He probably knows the area better than you do.*

Kaiden looked upward and didn't respond. She tried to imagine how it seemed to him. The scents of pine, wood smoke, and water lingered in the chilly air.

"This is my favorite time of year,"

she said after he'd been still a long while. "It's cold and crisp and everything seems to be paused—waiting—and you know it will turn and then eventually everything will pick up speed and the temperatures will soar and the bugs will be buzzing, but not right now."

"No, it's quiet."

But she couldn't tell if that he liked the quiet or not. "Do you have a preference?" She asked when he still didn't add anything more to his statement.

"Wherever." He turned toward her and the weight of his gaze warmed her even if she couldn't make out his eyes.

"Hmmm...lake." Maybe the ebb and flow of the water would help relax the

stiffness from his posture and ease the tension in his jaw. He nodded agreeably and she led the way down the path. She knew it well, but that didn't stop her from catching a foot on an exposed tree root or her stumble. Kaiden locked his arm around her like a brace, lifting her up and over the root.

“Careful.” Brusque, he kept a firm grip on her until she patted him lightly.

“I'm fine, thank you for the save. The trail slopes and the tree roots make for great natural steps.” But erosion from heavy fall rains had undercut some of those roots and made for a treacherous walk in the dark. *I knew that—why didn't I remember it?* Probably because she was too preoccupied with the blond

man walking at her side.

“You need a flashlight.” But his curt tone faded to something softer.

“Hmm, flashlights spoil the beauty that’s waiting for you.”

“A twisted ankle spoils it a lot more.” But he didn’t press the argument, instead, reclaimed her hand and took the lead. Fortunately, he slowed his steps, even though he still managed to be two paces ahead of her. She didn’t trip over another root—Kaiden didn’t allow it.

They came out of the woods onto the crushed shell and sand beach, the dark water lapping lazily at the shore and the sky stretching off to eternity. A million stars spread across the cloudless sky and the Milky Way was close enough to



touch.

It was, in every way, Rowan's favorite part of the Lake House retreat. The magic of the universe painted across the canvas of the night sky in endless wonder. It was an experience that never failed to take her breath away. Next to her, Kaiden went completely still, yet his grip tightened.

Chancing a look at him, she wanted to ask him what he felt when he stared up at the sky, but the taut expression and tight jaw warned her off. Threading her fingers with his, she risked leaning her head on his upper arm. The muscle in his bicep flexed at the contact, but he didn't pull away.

Little by little, he relaxed and some

of the tension in the rock-hard muscle pillowing her eased. A long, harsh breath spilled out of him in a sigh. “I forgot about this.”

“No,” she whispered, certain of the truth in his reaction. “You forgot about how it makes you feel.”

After a long pause, he said, “You’re right.” Shifting his stance, he let go long enough to sling his arm around her shoulder and tug her to his chest, until he held her in a loose, one-armed hug. His attention, however, remained riveted on the sky.

Rowan had no idea how long they stood there, Kaiden provided a very warm windbreak. He rubbed his cheek against her hair once and then let her go.

“It’s cold and it’s late. I should walk you back to the house.”

Accepting the suggestion, she pivoted to face him with a smile. “Hot chocolate?” When he said nothing, she led the way to the path and skipped a couple of steps. The darkness hugged Kaiden Nelson, held him far too tightly in its grip, and he needed some lightness, some simple pleasures—and what could be simpler than hot chocolate on a cold night? “If you’re very good, I’ll throw in some marshmallows.”

He turned. “Why are you being so nice to me?”

“Because I can.” That he could even ask that question told her more than he probably wanted to share. “And because

chocolate is the food of the gods....”

Kaiden dropped his chin, but skepticism shimmered in the air like heat rising off pavement.

“Come on, Marine.” She beckoned him with a curl of her fingers. “Let me introduce you to nirvana.” She’d never met a man who seemed to need it more.

Shaking his head once, he caught her hand and let her pull him back up the path—but, a couple of steps later, he took lead, then lifted her up and set her over the exposed tree root when they reached it. The swift act left her breathless.

But he was silent all the way back to the house, and quieter still in the kitchen. He never stopped watching her while

she put together the hot chocolate and added marshmallows for him. The weight of his regard pressed in on her, but Rowan didn't shy away from his directness. Setting the mug of cocoa in front of him, she tapped the side of the mug.

“Drink all of it and you'll have sweet dreams.” Yes, her mother used to tell her that when she was little—and as ridiculous as it seemed, she thought he needed to hear something similar.

Apparently, Kaiden did not. His jaw tightened, and his eyes narrowed. “Do I look five to you?”

“No. But then chocolate doesn't care how old you are.” She leaned forward and pressed a kiss to his lips. “Now

drink it, grumpy, and go get some sleep.” Taking possession of her cup, she padded away and up the stairs. She made it most of the way to her room before her nerves struck. *Why the hell did I do that?*



## Chapter Two

Why the hell had she kissed him again? The first kiss, he got that. It was a common greeting among those in the Circle—usually limited to those who were very familiar with each other. Her second kiss held an element of challenge and he hadn't imagined the spark of interest in her eyes or the way she'd smiled when she fled the kitchen with her mug of hot chocolate.

He'd gotten up before the sun and gone running, his path bringing him right back to the lake. Hands on his hips, he stared out over the water. The sun remained only a thought on the horizon,



staining the eastern sky with pink and purple as the night peeled back. Sounds on the trail behind him alerted him to a new arrival and he turned to find his mother watching him.

Of course, someone had called her. “Hey, Mom.”

“Shh.” She pressed her finger to her lips and studied him with warm, caramel-colored eyes. “I want to look at my baby.”

Heat burned the tips of his ears, but he did as instructed. A tall woman, his mother stood four inches shorter than his own six-foot-plus frame. He’d inherited her dark blonde hair, but everything else came from his father—or so she always told him. It took Mom a moment, her

rapid blinks betraying the tears pooling in her eyes.

The emotional display made him uncomfortable, but he'd learned how to bury the reaction. In slow motion, his mother crossed the pebbled beach to enfold him in a hug both gentle and fierce. "Hey, baby."

Closing his arms around her, he let his eyes shut. The comfort of her embrace blotted out a decade of bloodshed. He heard her sniffle then blow out a ragged breath before she released him to lean away and study him with eyes that saw too much.

"You don't want to talk about it." She knew him—too well.

"No, ma'am." He shook his head.

While he harbored no illusions about the ugliness in the world, or his mother's awareness of them, he would not be the one to share those details with her. "You look good."

"I'm old." She sniffed again and let go of him to pat his cheek. "Don't humor me. I earned these wrinkles. I wear them with the same pride I do my stretch marks."

"And at the risk of sounding like the ungrateful bastard who gave you those marks, can we not talk about them?" The burn on his ears ratcheted up a few degrees. He wasn't a Marine sergeant, home for the first time in years, but her son—embarrassed by her candor.

"Leave the boy alone, Lorraine." His

father strolled down the path, perfect in timing his arrival after his mother's near tears and before she could really turn their reunion into a roast.

"Killjoy," his unrepentant mother replied, but she glided into her husband's embrace and gave him a kiss that had Kaiden shaking his head and averting his gaze. Exhibitionists, the pair of them. "But he seems sad, Henry."

Henry Nelson kept an arm around his wife and gave Kaiden a thoughtful, if assessing, study. "He looks like he's been running." A computer programmer who learned DOS and UNIX through trial and error and earned a degree only after his company insisted he needed one, he knew all about troubleshooting

problems. “Are you sad, Kaiden?”

“Tired, sir.” The answer would mollify his mother and satisfy his father. “Long flight and my clock’s still messed up.” He hadn’t really slept after Rowan’s kiss, either, but unlike his parents, he didn’t feel the urge to over-share.

“I told you that’s why he didn’t call.” Henry winked at him over his mother’s head and Kaiden nodded. “But you know your mother. As soon as Aaron told her you were here, she had to make sure you were okay and nothing was wrong.”

“I got an earlier flight, and took a cab straight out here.” Because if he hadn’t, he might have bypassed the

weekend altogether.

“I am so happy you’re going to be home this year, but I’m also not a complete idiot, Kaiden. You don’t have to attend Yule if you’re not comfortable.” No, Lorraine Nelson wasn’t an idiot. “I know how loud and obnoxious everyone can be, and they genuinely can’t wait to see you. That said, no one will be offended if you want to give it a pass.”

No, they wouldn’t be. Disappointed, maybe—but not offended. One of the true blessings of his upbringing, of sharing his parents’ faith, was the lack of orthodox demand on how one worshipped.

“When’s the party?” Kaiden forced

half a smile and when his mother's eyes lit up, it didn't take much effort to let his smile grow.

“Friday, but we're going to keep it low key.”

“And by low key,” his dad grinned, “she means we'll bring the liquor.”

Lorraine smacked Henry on the chest, but their laughter warmed the air and Kaiden shook his head. His parents hadn't changed. Not one bit.

An hour later, he walked them back to the house. His dad intercepted the new arrivals so Kaiden could go shower off the sweat and get dressed. The scent of breakfast filled the air, and he knew from previous experience the group effort to whip up scrambled eggs,

sausage, bacon, and pancakes. The idea of sausage and bacon had his mouth watering, so he rushed the shower.

How long had it been since he'd had real pork? *Too long*. Dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, he followed the scent of food to the noisy kitchen where a half-dozen people served out plate after plate. Apparently the population of the Lake House had doubled since the night before.

Instead of cooking or serving, Rowan rode herd on the kids—including four new arrivals—setting them up on the porch to eat their breakfast. His mother patted the table next to her, and Kaiden kept his attention on his parents and not on the woman with the wild



mane of auburn, gray-green eyes, and full, luscious lips.

Juggling one plate loaded with a stack of pancakes and a second with a pile of bacon and sausage, Kaiden dropped into the seat his mother saved for him. The vegetarians at the table shook their heads at him, but his dad grinned at the amount of food. “And another reason to be glad you went military. I don’t think we ever fed you enough.”

Kaiden took the good-natured jibe. “If you saw the MREs I eat on a regular basis, you’d know you fed me more than enough.” Tim and John—new arrivals—gave him a quick handshake, while Sandy and Barbara made a point to

squeeze his shoulder as they took their own seats.

It irked Kaiden when Rowan stayed with the kids, instead of joining them. Halfway through his pile of pancakes, and only half-listening to the conversation around the table, he couldn't stop staring at her. His mother tapped his leg. "We all take turns supervising the kids," she said, her voice pitched low.

Puzzled, he looked at her. "Okay?"

"I'm only telling you so you'll stop scowling at her. Rowan's a sweetheart, and she's single."

Had he been scowling?

"Lorraine." Henry chided her in the same low voice she used. "Leave him

alone.”

“I was letting him know he has options, and Rowan is sweet.”

“Stop playing matchmaker.”

His parents’ whispered argument playfully batted his relationship status—or lack thereof—back and forth, but Kaiden stopped listening. Rowan was single. Useful intelligence, he supposed. She glanced up and their gazes collided. The corner of her mouth curved. She held his attention for a heartbeat then slid her gaze to his parents. It wasn’t until she rolled her eyes and mimed talking with her right hand that he realized she knew exactly what his mother had said.

A snort of laughter worked through

him and he picked up his coffee to cover the laughter. Her unrepentant grin amused the hell out of him and he directed his attention back to his food. By the time breakfast broke up, he volunteered to do dishes, but everyone refused.

Tim, Aaron, John, and his dad headed off to build the bonfire for the circle while his mother took charge of the boys. When the other women kicked him out of the kitchen, Kaiden headed for the porch. He didn't mind helping, but everyone wanted him to *rest*.

Friendly, caring, and kind—they wanted to take care of him. The thoughtful gesture shouldn't irritate him so much, but it did.

“Hmm, who pissed in your Wheaties?” Rowan’s warm voice poured over his impatience. He twisted and found her sitting on the railing of the porch, one leg hanging down. Dressed in jeans, a sweatshirt, and running shoes—she was an advertisement for relaxation. The mild breeze played with her curls and he wanted to run his fingers through the wild mass.

“No one. I had pancakes.” He played dumb on purpose, and she crossed her eyes at him again. Leaning on the post opposite her, he raised his brows. “Did they dismiss you from helping, too?”

“Oh yes.” Amusement twinkled in her eyes. “I’ve been subtly informed that you are single and like redheads. And

your mother suggested I take you on a tour.”

Kaiden dropped his chin to his chest. “Ugh.” He wasn’t sure whether he should laugh or be angry. An odd emotion—one he refused to dissect—settled in his chest.

“Easiest way to deal with it is to pretend their plan worked and not argue with them.” Rowan tapped her foot on the railing. “Though I took you on a tour to the lake last night, I could walk you out through the woods today, if you want.”

“I ran the trail this morning,” he admitted with a flicker of disappointment.

“I saw.” Her playful smile widened

a fraction.

“Oh?” He hadn’t seen her.

She pointed up. “My room faces this way. I’m always up early and I saw you head out at a dead run.”

Kaiden shrugged. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“At all?” A frown replaced her smile.

“Wrong time zone. You want to go for a walk?” It was nice enough outside. The temperature hovered in the upper fifties with enough chill to remind him of autumn, but not enough to let winter bite into them.

“We don’t have to. They really won’t notice if we ignore their matchmaking.” Her willingness to let him off the hook earned a slice of his

respect and, for that, he'd give her some honesty.

“I wanted to have breakfast for you, but the three rugrats from yesterday already had your attention.” He tapped her shoe. “So, familial interference aside, come take a walk with me.”

“Okay.” She slid off the railing and circled him to head down the steps, but he caught up to her and took her hand.

*Where the hell did that come from?* He tried not to examine his actions too closely, particularly considering the level of confusion Rowan generated in him. When she didn't pull away, he settled his pace to keep time with hers and watched the trail ahead. He'd noticed a couple of uneven places where



the rain had washed out part of the path.

Fifteen minutes into the woods, the hush of nature fluttered over him. Only the soft sound of Rowan's breathing and the crunch of leaves under their shoes accompanied them. She'd been quiet since they set out, a direct contrast to her behavior the night before.

"I'm giving you your space," she told him as if reading his mind.

"I don't know how much space I need. I'm the one holding onto you." He gave her a squeeze to remind her of the fact.

"You've also been scowling at the trail since we started walking." The observation surprised him and he stopped walking.

“I have?”

“Fiercely, as though you were awaiting an ambush.” She pulled free from his grasp and paced over to pick up a stray stick on the trail and tossed it into the woods.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize I’d been scowling.” He ran a hand over his face. Disheartened by her physical retreat, he couldn’t say he blamed her.

“You don’t have to apologize.” She did a hop-skip step over to another stick and it followed the first one she’d tossed. “I imagine coming home takes some adjustment.”

“I almost didn’t come,” he admitted.

“No?” He had her full attention again. “Your mother would have been so

disappointed.”

“I know. It’s why I did show up. And I have no idea why the hell I’m telling you this.” What was it about this woman?

“Maybe I’m a good listener.” She spread her arms. “Or maybe I’m cute and non-threatening.”

“Maybe. What do you do for a living?” He wanted the focus off him, he knew that much.

“I’m in IT support and, yes, it’s absolutely as boring as it sounds.” She started walking again, pausing here and there to clean up the trail. He paced her and mirrored her actions. “I work downtown and there are five of us to handle about seven hundred people who

work for the company. We do everything from software installs, to hardware upgrades, to loser error troubleshooting.”

“Loser error?”

Her face went red. “User error?”

A grin stretched his mouth and made his cheeks ache. “I know what it meant, just surprised me that you used the term.”

“Well, I don’t do it to their face, but seriously—if you know how many times a day I’ve had to answer what the ‘any’ key is or make sure they actually have their plugs in the right holes—” If possible, her face reddened further, and Kaiden laughed.

“I get it.” The humor rattled through

him, dislodging one of the rocks on his heart. “Sounds frustrating.”

“It is, but I love the look on someone’s face when you retrieve a file they thought they’d lost forever, or the light bulb that goes on when you make something work after they’ve struggled with it.” She gave a careless little shrug. “I’m good with computers and I like working with them, so it’s a good fit.”

They walked in companionable silence and it took him a few dozen steps to realize she hadn’t turned the question back on him. “You can ask me stuff, too.” His willingness surprised him; his desire to share surprised him more.

“I don’t want to bring up bad memories, not when you seem to be

hugging them so closely.” The woods gave way to a clearing and she pointed to the center. “Come on, I’ll show you my second favorite part of winter retreat.”

Following her wasn’t a hardship. Not when she actually skipped across the clearing and tumbled—purposefully—to sprawl in the center. She rolled onto her back and pointed up at the sky. “Look.”

Pausing next to her, he glanced in the direction she indicated. Rowan smacked his calf and he glanced at her again. “What?”

“You have to lie down to really see.” Apparently, he’d missed the important part of the exercise. Dropping

on the ground next to her, he stared up at the blue sky, the rich azure made deeper by a decoration of puffy white clouds.

Rowan exhaled a long, deep sigh. “In summer, you lay like this and you can get bugs on you, but, now, it’s too chilly for most of the insects, yet warm enough we’re not freezing.”

“Or you could bring a blanket out and lie on that.” But he couldn’t fault the view—though he found Rowan a great deal more appealing than the sky. Stealing a sideways peek at her, he found her gray-green eyes studying him.

“When was the last time you simply stopped and stared up at the sky? I saw your face last night, when we made it to the lake.”

He'd come to expect her directness, and appreciated it.

“Not a lot of time for stargazing in the sandbox. I don't spend a lot of time looking back on anything, too busy keeping my eye out for the dangers in front and around.” The admissions jogged loose another stone from the pressure on his heart.

“You're not there anymore,” she said softly. “You're here. You have time—now.”

A simple truth, but he shook his head anyway. “It's not that easy.”

“No, I didn't say it was easy.” Folding her hands together on her stomach, she returned her attention upward again. “I can work eighteen



hours a day and never go outside and see the sun. I can be so caught up in debugging a glitch or trying to get a software program to work, I forget to let go of the problems. After a while, I have a permanent crick in my neck and constant tension in my shoulders. My wrists will hurt—and my ass is so numb I forget life isn't supposed to be about a to-do list, or a job, or the current problem of the moment—life is about the blue sky, the grass underfoot, and a friend at your side. It's about other people and no people. It's about living—not existing.”

“So why don't you quit?” He rolled onto his side, no longer bothering to pretend he had more interest in the view

overhead than the woman sprawled next to him.

Her eyebrows climbed. “Why don’t you?”

“Marines don’t quit.”

“They also don’t leave men behind,” she murmured.

“No, ma’am. They don’t.” The rocks on his chest compressed.

She didn’t turn away from him, holding his gaze long enough he could see the sadness and concern creep into her eyes. “So why did you leave yourself over there?”

Shock rippled up his spine, and his mind locked. “What?”

“You’re still there, Kaiden.” She rolled onto her side, mirroring his

posture, and cupped his cheek with a cool palm. “Something bad happened to you—or maybe a lot of something bads. I don’t know. You can tell me to butt out. I won’t be offended.”

“Are you psychic?” He rejected the question even as he asked it, since it didn’t take a psychic to read his body language. The wariness he’d seen in the eyes of his friends and family—the seemingly unsurpassable gulf surrounding him lent more credence to her words than anything else.

“I’ve been accused of being psychotic before.” Light teasing sprinkled the statement, and she grinned.

Another rusty laugh broke loose. She began to withdraw, but he captured her

wrist and kept her palm to his cheek. It was soft, softer than anything he'd felt in a long time. "I'm pretty messed up."

"Okay." Acceptance, no questions.

"You're not asking me why." He couldn't quite wrap his mind around the concept.

"I think questions might harm you, and I don't need you to tell me anything. But I will listen if you want to." The salve of her kindness soothed the abrasions in his soul. "I'm going to hug you, okay?"

"Why?" Not that he minded.

She smiled and scooted closer, wrapping her arms around him. "So you'll lie down and gaze at the sky and know you're here, and not there. You're

not alone.”

The lean softness of her fit him perfectly and he settled onto his back, curving an arm around her to tuck her in closer. She nestled her head on his shoulder.

“Breathe,” she whispered, and he let out the breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. “And just be.”

The scent of cherry blossoms teased him, and he had to wonder if it was her shampoo or a perfume. Grass cushioned him, the woods surrounded him, the sun warmed his face, and the muscles in his back relaxed. Rowan massaged her palm against his chest in slow, easy circles. Bit by bit, his arms shuddered with the release of tension.

“Are you really single?” he asked, one-hundred-percent sure what he wanted for her answer.

“Yes, I’m really single.” She chuckled and the vibration teased him. “I’m not dating anyone, either. But you need to concentrate on relaxing, not on me.”

The answer satisfied him—for now. “Don’t go away,” he told her.

“I won’t.” And she didn’t. He had no idea how long he lay there, but eventually his eyes closed. Breathing exercises, not so long-forgotten that he couldn’t manage them, helped to steady his heartbeat. Sleep stole over him, and he let it, aware of her head resting on his shoulder and the warmth of her cuddled

to his side.

\*\*\*

Wakefulness snapped his eyes open and Kaiden tensed. He'd slept, but not more than a few minutes. Rowan maintained her promised warmth and she pillowed against him. The sun's height hadn't changed much, so he hadn't been asleep for long.

“Your heart is racing again.” She continued rubbing her palm over his chest in slow, lazy circles.

“Forgot where I was for a moment.” He pressed a hand to hers, stopping her motion. “I need to get up.”

“Okay.” But the moment she rolled

free of him, he missed her nearness.

Sitting, he raked his fingers over his close-cropped hair and exhaled. The violent need to drag her closer again shook his muscles. Too possessive—too soon. He needed to put some distance between the two of them before he spoiled her sensuously beautiful soul.

“Rowan, you’re a nice woman, but this isn’t going to work.” Standing, he offered to help her rise, but she ignored his offer.

“Exactly what do you think isn’t going to work?” Her cool gaze met his without flinching.

“The soft touch approach, the hugging and the kissing. I’m not really good for anyone, least of all a



sweetheart like you. So—” He didn’t really have anywhere else to go with the statement. Retreating a step, he waited for her to head toward the house.

“All right. See you later.” She settled back and gazed at the sky again. The sun glinted off the streaks of red in her spill of hair. The splash of color on the yellowed grass gave it the kiss of autumn rather than winter.

He frowned, because leaving her alone in the middle of the woods didn’t even earn a blip on his radar. “I’ll walk you back.”

“We’re on private land, Kaiden.” She’d closed her eyes. “And I am quite capable of walking myself back.”

His frown became a scowl. “You

want me to leave you here?”

Rising on her elbows, Rowan squinted at him. “Um, grumpy, you were the one having the pissy fit. So you can go or stay.”

*Pissy fit?* Mouth snapping shut, he paced away three steps and stopped. “I am not having some kind of tantrum.”

“Could have fooled me.” Amusement drifted in her voice.

“I merely said I’m not good for anyone.”

“I heard you.” But she remained exactly where he’d left her, watching him from beneath lowered lashes. The sun climbed higher and lit her gorgeously. “I’m not stopping you from going.”

No. She wasn't. So why the hell did he continue to stand there? A headache began to pulse behind his eyes. "What do you want from me, Rowan?"

"Nothing." The simplest of answers and not the one he'd expected to hear. "Did you want me to want something?"

"What?" He massaged his temple and paced back toward her until his shadow blanketed her and she stopped squinting.

"I asked if you wanted me to want something from you." She didn't make any attempt to rise, but he could feel the weight of her gaze as though it were truly taking his measure. He would definitely fall short on even the most reasonable of scales.

“You shouldn’t want anything from me.” No one should. He wouldn’t be good for any of them. “I’m not good people.”

“You realize that begs the question of why, don’t you?” She moistened her lips and edged up into a sitting posture. Pulling her knees to her chest, she wrapped her arms around them, and never took her attention off him.

“I don’t know if I can explain it.” He didn’t regret the choices in his life—or at least he had never regretted them. What he felt currently seemed too hard to vocalize. “I enlisted because I believe in service. I liked the tenets of the Marines and the structure. I also liked my recruiter. He’s a good man—was a

good man.”

Her sharp gaze narrowed a fraction. She'd noticed his slip.

“I still *like* the structure, my brothers, my unit. I can't imagine doing anything else—I serve with *good* people. The best people.” His increased respiration made the last three words fire out like bullets and restlessness invaded him. Adrenaline pumped through his system and he could probably run the whole circumference of the lake if he put his mind to it.

“Who are you trying to convince, Kaiden?”

“You don't understand.” He really couldn't explain it, and hated that he couldn't. “Dammit.”

“Who are you angry with?” Her expression filled with a quiet, almost serene curiosity and unflagging kindness. He deserved neither.

“I shouldn’t have come.” He’d known it from the moment he boarded the flight for the states. When he’d landed at DFW, he could have called friends—he had plenty in the area. Any one of those guys would have come to the airport and picked him up, no questions asked.

“But you did come here—you came for Yule, and that means something to you.” Her argument echoed the one playing out in his soul.

“Rowan, I’ll ruin it for everyone. Mom was near tears twice this morning,

just staring at me. I know what she wants from me—what my Dad wants—what everyone wants.”

“Really? You don’t seem to know what I want. In fact, the only person you can be certain about is yourself. And you’re afraid of not living up to some mythical expectation that you’ve created.” She let go of her knees and climbed to her feet. Combing her fingers through her hair, she tucked the errant curls behind her ears. “I think you’re looking for a fight. I’m sorry, Kaiden, I’m not going to argue with you. If you want to go back to the house—go. If you want to leave before Circle, then that’s okay, too. No one should be here who doesn’t want to be, you know this.”

“I’m so fucked up, I don’t know why anyone would want me there in the first place....”

“Kaiden, perfect love and perfect trust—we accept you for who you are. We love you for who you are and we trust you to be you.”

The unabashed sweetness and open acceptance twining together in her voice ripped him open. “Yeah, how the hell do I do that and follow *an it harm none* when I’ve killed?”





# Chapter Three

After he'd dropped his bombshell, Kaiden shut down completely. He'd stood there, like a sentinel, in the middle of the clearing and waited until she walked to the house to shadow her steps. New arrivals were pulling up the long drive and parking off to the side. Instead of greeting them, he'd cut around and used the back door. Rowan let him go.

Getting everyone settled occupied the rest of her morning and, when Kaiden made no appearance at lunch, she'd put together a tray of food and set it outside his door. She knocked twice, told him the food was there, and left

before he opened the door—if he did.

Lorraine cornered her in the kitchen when she'd taken her turn setting up a dessert. "Rowan."

*Cracker crack* had become very popular with the whole coven from the first time Rowan had brought a tin—now she made tray after tray every year. Everyone would fast beginning the next morning, eating nothing until they broke bread at sundown and lit the fires to maintain their vigil through the long winter night. The real party was set for Saturday, but that would be looser than the ritual on Friday.

"He's in his room." She answered the woman's unspoken question and continued to set saltines onto the cookie

sheet. Once all the sheets were laid out, she'd start on the brown sugar and butter mixture to pour over them.

Lorraine grabbed a package of crackers and helped. "Is he all right? I mean, really all right?"

"I don't know." Truthfully, she didn't. "I've just met him—I didn't know him before, so I don't have a basis for comparison."

"He seems sweet on you." And so the fishing had begun in earnest.

"He's very nice." She didn't want to feed the woman's urge to match-make. "I think he needs time to decompress. We're an awfully noisy and pushy bunch...." And as if to prove her point, the kids erupted into the house riding a

wave of shouts and laughter. Rowan pointed them toward the door as they rushed the kitchen. “Out.”

“Cracker crack!” Jensen’s eyes lit up.

“And if you’re still here when I get to three, you don’t get any....” She didn’t even make it to one before the kids charged back out. Glancing over her shoulder, she met Lorraine’s laughter with a smile. “Works every time.”

“You’re good with them.”

Rowan shrugged. “They’re good kids.”

“You should have some of your own.”

Yes, Rowan had opened the door to that observation and she needed to close

it. “When I’m ready, I’m sure I will.” After adding the last cracker to the tenth tray, she checked the preheat setting on the oven before heading to the fridge to get the sticks of butter. She’d need a lot for all the dessert she planned to make, but she’d brought a huge selection of chocolate from dark, to mint, to white, and even a salted caramel chocolate to see how that tasted once she’d prepped it.

“Rowan...”

Resisting the urge to sigh, she pivoted to face Kaiden’s mother head on. “No.”

“You don’t even know what I was going to ask.” The woman’s rebuke carried a hint of a pout.

“I don’t need to know precisely what you were going to ask, but I’ve seen that look in your eye every time you mentioned your son to me in the last few years. *He’s a lovely young man, Rowan. I can’t wait for you to meet him, Rowan. When he comes home, Rowan, you should come for dinner.* I’d have to be deaf, blind, and stupid not to pick up the hints.” She appreciated the motherly concern and desire, but Kaiden seemed to be exerting far too much pressure on himself as it was. He did not need to have Rowan shoved down his throat. Although he already thought she was doing that. *You’re a nice woman, but this isn’t going to work.*

His presumption irked her.

“I want him to be happy.” Lorraine sighed and Rowan stacked up the sticks of butter and paused to give her a hug. The older woman held her tightly, accepting the comfort. “I worry about him.”

“It’s your right, as his mother,” she assured her. Not for the first time, she wished her mother had been more like Lorraine. But Rowan grew up in a house where feelings were not to be shared and hugs displayed a level of open emotion that made her parents uncomfortable. The closest they came was a literal pat on the shoulder. “That being said, it’s his first time home in years—why not enjoy having him here instead of trying to change something



about him?”

*And if you'd let me off the hook while we're at it, that'd be great....*

But she kept the last part to herself. A creak on the back steps alerted someone else was on them, but when no one entered the kitchen—she didn't call attention to the sound.

Lorraine kissed her cheek. “Message received. Do you want more help or should I go make sure the hordes haven't destroyed anything?” As if to lend weight to her question, a crash echoed from outside.

“Probably a good idea to check on them. They're supposed to make sure the circle has been cleared of any debris for the fire tonight.”

“On it.” Lorraine waved and headed out at a brisk pace.

Blowing out a breath, she set up a sauce pan on low heat and started adding the sticks of butter. “It’s all clear if you want to come in, Kaiden.”

Amusement flickered in his deep baritone. “How did you know it was me?”

“No one else would be avoiding Lorraine, no matter how much she meddles.” And she meddled quite a bit, but with only the best of intentions. It made it difficult to be cross with her when she truly wanted everyone to be as happy as she and her husband were—another relationship that spiked a hint of envy through Rowan.

“Thank you for what you said to her.”

She barely suppressed a jerk at his unexpected closeness. He'd crossed the room and stood nearly at her elbow. “You walk like a cat.”

“Sorry,” he murmured, and looked curiously at the pot as she added one stick of butter after another. “What are you doing?” Apparently he'd put his earlier temper in check, and the nice Kaiden had come down to play.

“Making cracker crack.” When the butter began to melt fully, she measured out the brown sugar and used a wooden spoon to stir it in. “It's my contribution to tomorrow's feast.”

“You make the magic crackers?” The

heat of Kaiden's stare was a palpable force on the back of her neck.

“I suppose some people call them magic, I call them crack because after the first batch—everyone kept asking me to hook them up.” She had to pay attention to the butter and sugar—she couldn't afford to burn it. Shifting gears, she lifted the pot off the stove and carried it over to the first tray. She'd made enough to pour over three more. Setting the pot back on a cool burner, she set the wood spoon aside and picked up the first bag of chocolate. Spreading it over the crackers, she moved swiftly, wanting them in the oven and another batch ready to go when they came out.

Kaiden got out of her way, but he

was ready to help if she dropped anything. The earnestness in his expression arrested her heart and she banged her finger on the hot oven top. Hissing out a breath, she gave herself a mental kick. *You already acted like a klutz. Let's try to keep the emergency room visit off the menu.*

Setting the timer for ten minutes, she started another batch of butter and brown sugar.

“That’s all you do?” He was at her elbow.

“Yep. They bake for ten minutes so the chocolate melts fully, I spread it around, and then they go into the fridge to cool.”

He passed her the brown sugar

instead of getting out of her way. “How long ’til we can have some?”

“I thought you weren’t a fan of chocolate?” She cut a sideways glance at him. He’d given her such an odd look when she’d pressed the hot chocolate on him the night before.

“Didn’t say that, and I am definitely a fan of this stuff. Mom sent it in a care package a couple of years ago. I had no idea you were the one who made it.” He moved along the counter and tapped the different bags of chocolate. “Tell me you’re making the mint chocolate chip one?”

If not for the flare of eagerness in his eyes, she’d have been tempted to yank his chain. “Yes. I’ll even make it next,

but they take about ten to twelve hours to set up correctly, so you can't have any tonight."

"Oh, that's cruel." He'd returned to her elbow and followed her as she began to pour the brown sugar and butter on the next set. "Everyone fasts tomorrow."

"And the treat is so worth it afterwards." She couldn't help but stare at his smile. It transformed his face, eased the lines of tension, and the force of it socked her in the chest.

"True." He held out the bag of mint chocolate chips to her. "What does a guy have to do to get you to hide one?"

Raising her brows, she bit back a grin of her own. He was as bad as

Jensen or any of the other boys. “Hmm... we have rules, you know. You want to eat, you have to work.”

“Name what you want me to do.”

A raw thrill skated over her at the loaded offer. Dismissing the sensual images blooming in her mind—damn Lorraine and planting her ideas—Rowan made a show of considering while she spread the chips onto the next three trays. She’d planned to do only two of the mint chocolate chip, but she’d make a third for Kaiden—especially since the idea of the flavor had warmed the chilly distance in his eyes.

“Rowan?” He prompted her when she’d said nothing.

“Play sentry—the boys try to sneak



in here and steal chocolate when I'm making these." The back door creaked open on cue.

"On it." Kaiden met Jensen before he had the door fully open. "Out."

Biting back another smile at his crisp order, she traded out the melted chocolate batch for the fresh mint ones and took a moment to use a second wooden spoon to spread out the melted chocolate. The rich scents of baking perfumed the air and her stomach rumbled in appreciation.

Chocolate really did approach nirvana. Kaiden held the fridge open so she could load the candied goodness inside. He caught her hand after the last one. "I'm sorry for being a dick earlier."

“You weren’t a dick.” She used his word, not hers. “But I am glad you’re not grumpy anymore.”

“I was a dick,” he argued, following her back to the stove for another round of brown sugar-butter melting. “I have no defense for it, but you didn’t deserve it.”

“You don’t need to defend yourself. I told you—perfect love and perfect trust.” She’d tried to explain that to him in the clearing, but he hadn’t wanted to listen. After his heart-wrenching confession about violating *an it harm none*, she understood his self-flagellation better.

“People like you don’t exist.” He unwrapped the sticks of butter before

holding them out to her.

“Oh, we’re back to mythical constructs again?” Her wrist ached from the constant stirring, but it had to be done.

His chuckle delighted her. “No. Rowan—I wish you’d met me before.”

“I don’t.” The response slipped out before she could stop it and she switched the burner off when she was ready to add the mixture to the last four trays.

“You don’t?”

“No.” She shook her head and used the time while pouring the butter and sugar mixture over the crackers to gather her thoughts. He claimed the pot when she’d finished and returned it to the

stove. “Actually—run some water into that so the sugar doesn’t crystallize inside the pot.”

“Okay.” He switched directions for the sink and she picked out different chocolates for the last batches—a white and dark mixture for one, milk for another, salted caramel for a third and then one death by chocolate—the one she made for herself.

“Why don’t you wish you’d met me before? I was a really nice guy,” he said.

If the charm he managed currently was any indication, he’d been a hell of a lot more than *nice*. Ignoring the taut feeling in her belly, she shrugged. “Because then you’d be more worried about my expectations than you already

are—and I like the Kaiden I met already. Maybe, just maybe, I wouldn't have liked you so much.”

She didn't get to see his reaction to those words because she had to swap out trays. Kaiden waited until she stopped moving to box her into place at the counter, one hand on either side of her. “I wish I'd met you before I went —”

“No, you don't.” In this she could be absolutely honest. “I was an antisocial creature, years ago, and a loner. I didn't get this hugging and kissing thing, and the idea of all these people interfering in my life would have driven me crazy. You wouldn't have liked me at all.”

“Huh.” The skeptical look on his

face sent another electric thrill skating over her nerves. His gaze dipped to her mouth. “So, you wouldn’t have kissed me when you met me, then?”

“No.” She shook her head. “Not even a little.”

“You’ve convinced me.” That seemed too easy.

“Oh?” Dragging her attention up from the firm line of his lips, she met his gaze.

“Yes, I wouldn’t have liked you not kissing me when you met me then.”

“That implies you liked having me kiss you this time....” *Rowan, shut up.* The inner voice cautioned her against impulsive action, but she didn’t want to listen to the better angels of her nature—

not with Kaiden's attention zeroed in on her.

“It does, doesn't it?” He drifted closer, but halted at the ding of the oven timer. He grimaced, backed off a step, and glared at the oven. “I don't like chocolate anymore.”

Laughter bubbled up inside of her at his almost-pout. Patting his chest, she headed over to get the cracker crack out. “Don't worry—chocolate still loves you.”

“Hmm.” But when she glanced up at him again, his attention wasn't on the chocolate.

It was definitely on her.

*Oh boy....*

Sundown arrived swiftly and a dozen new arrivals added to the general chaos. Kaiden leaned against the railing, arms folded as though to ward off the evening chill—the sudden plummet in temperatures earned more than a few good-natured groans. Buffet-style dinner and catching up occupied nearly everyone else, but he'd found the noise a bit much and, when his father mimed going outside, he followed. Henry kicked back in a chair, puffing on a cigar.

“Your mother wants me to quit.” Despite the low pitch of his voice, Kaiden heard him clearly.

“Cigars?” Kaiden raised his brows. His mother had been after his father for



years to give up that particular habit. Henry denied Lorraine very little, in Kaiden's experience, but he'd never given up his once-a-day cigar.

"No. Work." The answer surprised Kaiden. "She wants me to retire."

"Huh." Neither of his parents seemed old enough for retirement. "You don't want to?" It was a guess.

Henry shrugged. "It's not a matter of desire. I like the work. I like going to the office every day. I like being able to work from home when I need to. Not entirely sure what I'd do if I didn't have it."

"What did you tell her?"

"What I always tell her." Henry grinned.

“You’ll think about it.” Made sense, it had been his fallback response to every major decision. He’d think about it and, if he decided it felt right—he’d do it. If he didn’t, well, he didn’t discuss the whys or wherefores, as he continued on the path he’d chosen for himself.

“Exactly. She also wants *you* to retire and come home.” His father didn’t soften the request or try to couch it in gentler terms. Lorraine had likely nagged him to broach the subject, and Henry had done what he’d been asked to do.

“I’ll think about it,” Kaiden replied without missing a beat. The flare of his father’s cigar illuminated his face and the creases of Henry’s smile.

“I’ll let her know.” The silence

following offered a profound statement of acceptance.

“Dad?”

“You have to do what’s right for you, Kaiden,” Henry answered without waiting for him to vocalize the question.

“What if I don’t know what’s right?”

“Then you do what you said...you consider it. You weigh what your conscience wishes against what your soul can bear, and then you make the choice that’s right for you.”

His father’s advice had been far from easy. “I have a contract and I have duty.”

“You have seven months and four days left on your contract.” Acute understanding flared in the words. “You

have to give them an answer to that question when you return, and haven't they begun the pullout? Our forces are leaving Afghanistan and Iraq.”

“There's always another war. Another place that needs us.” Neither brought up the more recent news; they didn't have to.

“Kaiden, you're a grown man. So I'm going to ask you one question and I want the answer not to be about the Marines, or about our country, or even about duty. I want you to answer from your soul...what do you need?”

“It's not that simple.” His needs came second to his unit, second to his country, and definitely second to duty.

“They never are, son. Never. It's the

hardest question in the world to ask yourself what you need—not your family, your wife—your friends. But you. You’re the kind of guy who takes care of others first. It’s why you’re here when it’s the last place you want to be.” Blunt understanding, not judgment or censure, populated his father’s words.

“I didn’t want to come.” And he knew he could tell his dad and it wouldn’t hurt his feelings. “True enough. I didn’t. I don’t think I belong among all of you anymore. But I couldn’t *not* come, either.”

“All right.”

Kaiden had told Rowan he didn’t want to taint them. He couldn’t enter a circle with clear conscience and honest

feeling when he'd broken the cardinal law he'd been taught since birth—*an it harm none*. As unorthodox as his upbringing might seem to others, it was all he'd known before he enlisted in the Marines. It sustained him through basic, through deployment—through nearly everything else. Unfortunately, that changed somewhere along the way, and he didn't know precisely when.

“I am a Marine. It's what I'm good at.” And if he didn't have the uniform, the assignments—the places to be—who would he be?

“Kaiden, you're good at whatever you put your mind to.” Noise inside rose and they both glanced at the house. “You like her.”

He didn't have to ask which her. "I'm only here for a couple of weeks."

"It took me twenty-four minutes with your mother." The Cheshire smile in the words tugged a laugh-groan from Kaiden.

"Dad. Way too much information." Over-sharing—a hallmark of the Nelson family.

"No, our first time took a lot longer than twenty-four minutes, boyo." And the man grinned. "I think it was more like twenty-four hours of...."

"Dad!" Kaiden scrubbed a hand over his face and laughed. "Good gods, man, I do not want to hear about your sex life."

"At least I have one." Henry sat forward, his humor turning sober. "Pay

attention to what your heart is telling you. You like her. Go for it. Life is too short to sit around wondering what you're good for. Or better—who you're good for. Embrace the season—you've been in the dark for a long time. You're home, it's okay to let in the light.”

“And on *that* note—”

“Kaiden.” His father's tone froze him in place and he had to resist the urge to snap to a salute. No drill sergeant he'd ever trained under could elicit the response his father could with the simple vocalization of his name.

“Sir?”

“*Live*. That's all we want for you.” Standing, Henry extinguished the cigar and crossed to put a hand on his



shoulder. “*Live.*”

Accepting the advice and his father’s embrace wasn’t hard. The door opened, letting the rise and fall of a dozen voices spill out into the darkness, and Henry gave him another pat on the shoulder.

“There you two are.” Lorraine shivered as she stepped out and closed the door behind her. Henry slid an arm around her and tugged her close. “I thought you’d try to stage an escape.”

“He wasn’t trying to escape.” Henry chuckled, but another exodus interrupted. “It’s time....” But he drew Lorraine away and tugged off his jacket to wrap around her shoulders.

Kaiden let his father deal with his mother and watched as friends, old and

new, came out in clusters of two and three, but he waited on one person in particular. Rowan followed the stragglers, herding the children out before pulling her jacket closed and shutting the door behind her. Patiently letting everyone else head down the steps and begin the long walk down the path to where they planned the vigil, he caught Rowan's gaze.

She pulled her ponytail out from beneath the collar of her jacket and gave him a questioning look. He couldn't blame her since he'd behaved in a confusing manner since he'd arrived.

"Are you coming with us?" She paused next to him. He liked her height, and her stance. The way she spoke to

him, without demand or heat—yet the liquid warmth in her voice soothed all the cold, cracked places inside.

Curious, he opened his arms. Rowan set her bag down and stepped right into them and gave him a hug. Bracketing her slender form to him, he gave her a gentle squeeze. He wanted to say yes, he'd go with her, but instead asked, "Would you sit vigil with me alone?"

She tightened her grip, and pressed her cheek to his jacket. "If you'd like."

"Really?" Surprise burst through him. He'd half-expected her to say no, they had to join the others.

"You really need to stop that." She drew back, but didn't try to escape his arms.

“What?”

“You’ve decided—in your mind—exactly how everyone will respond to you and what we’ll say and how we’ll say it. Stop.”

Had he been doing that? “Not intentionally.” Still, she rested in the circle created by his hands clasped on her lower back, the weight nearly as comforting as her hug.

“All right. Do you want to sit vigil outside or in?”

He considered the request. The majority of the coven would be at the circle, lighting the bonfire and telling stories through the night. At least the weather had held. Yes, it was colder, but no storm threatened and the bonfire

and blankets would keep the cold away as they waited for sunrise.

“You planned to spend it with everyone else....” Was it really fair to ask her to give up her plans for his?

“And I’m choosing to say yes to you.” She pinched him. “Pay attention.”

“Ow.” Not that it hurt, but saying it was worth her laugh. “All right, I’d like to go make our own camp down by the lake.”

“Grab the bag, and we can go. I have everything we need, except firewood. We’ll have to find some at the lake.”

To pick up the bag, he had to let her go. When he held out his hand, she took it as easily as she had the first night.

“I do have one question for you,”

Rowan said as they headed for the lake path.

“And that is?”

“Why?”

“Why, what?” He wasn’t sure what part puzzled her.

“Why do you want to sit vigil with me?”

Squeezing her hand, he didn’t give himself time to think about the answer.

“Because I want to live.”



# Chapter Four

Kaiden refused to let her help build the fire. Instead, she had to sit, chin propped on her palm, elbow on her knee, and watch him. Not that watching him was a terrific hardship. “You know it would go faster if we were both gathering wood.”

“It will go slower if you wrench your ankle—which you tried to do twice on the way down here.” The man didn’t miss a beat.

“So, you’ve learned my awful secret.” She sighed mournfully.

“Yep, you have terrible night vision. So sit there, nice and safe, and I’ll get



our fire started.” The flash of his smile sent a tingle right through her.

Of course, she might spoil it by pushing. “Kaiden?”

“Yes?”

“Why did you want to come down here alone with me?” In some ways, she was so comfortable with him—he was almost too familiar. And in others, they remained relative strangers. She believed in reincarnation, always had, but she’d never been confronted by such utter familiarity before. Except the first time she’d come to an *Esbat* circle with the coven—but Kaiden hadn’t been there. Of course, mentioning that might make her appear crazy. *Crazier than greeting him with a kiss and a hug and*

*spending time fantasizing about him naked, Rowan, really?*

He paused in mid-stack of wood, and she didn't have to see his eyes to know he stared at her. "Did you not want to come down here?"

"Didn't say that, but I am curious." Particularly after his *I want to live* comment.

Instead of answering, he continued to stack the wood into a triangle with an almost OCD attention to detail. Finally, he sat back on his heels, rested his hands on his thighs and his gaze on her. "I like being with you. I relax."

"Okay." It was a hell of a lot more of an answer than she'd expected to get. A chill wind rolled off the lake and she

pulled her jacket tighter.

He laughed. The low sound, husky and very masculine, sent an entirely different kind of shiver racing over her skin. “And that is why I like being with you.”

“I suppose I feel a little guilty,” she admitted.

A spark and flare of light started the kindling burning. The flickering flames sent shadows dancing over Kaiden’s face. “What do you have to feel guilty about?”

Chewing her lower lip, she considered how to phrase her next words. “I didn’t know you before. Everyone else has been looking so forward to you being here, I feel guilty

about their disappointment.”

“Odd. You told me they didn’t have expectations.”

“Of course they have some, even when they try not to have them. I, however, feel a tad guilty and selfish.” But she couldn’t stop the smile curving the corners of her mouth.

The flames continued to lick over the wood and offered an illusion of warmth. Walking around the fire, Kaiden came over to sit on the blanket next to her, close enough their shoulders brushed. “You have nothing to feel guilty about. But if it bothers you, we can go to the main circle with the others.”

Despite the offer, she knew it was the last place he wanted to be. Leaning

her head on his shoulder, she smiled at the flames. “No, this is fine. But you may have to cuddle so I don’t freeze to death. I don’t really see us dancing rounds out here.”

Sliding his arm around her obediently, he snuggled her closer. “You wouldn’t be dancing tonight, anyway. We’re all sitting vigil.”

“I know I said I wouldn’t ask, but I do have a couple of questions.” Overhead, the scattering of stars seemed to expand, as more and more appeared across the velvety carpet of the sky.

“How about we play a game then?” The cool, playful note in his voice intrigued her.

“All right. Does it have rules?”

“Of course it does.” He traced slow pattern along her bicep with his thumb.

When he added nothing further, she twisted to glance up at him. “Are you going to share the rules?”

“Maybe.” He grinned. “Or maybe one of the rules is you don’t get to know the rules.”

“It’s very hard to play if you don’t know the rules,” she said, delighted with the game he made out of figuring them out.

“Possibly.” His gaze dipped to her mouth and then up again. “How about rewards and penalties?”

“Sounds exciting—unless one of the penalties is ending up in the lake, then it’s just mean.” Still, she couldn’t

suppress a third shiver and this one had nothing to do with the lake or the chill and everything to do with his nearness.

“Damn. You saw right through me.” The note of teasing in the words denied any truth in them. “What do you want to know?”

“We can play.” She nudged him. “But, tell me the rules before we start.”

“All right, answer for answer.” His breath brushed the curve of her ear and she closed her eyes at the contact. “Fair?”

“Very fair. I get to go first, though.” She blew out a breath and watched the flames in front of her.

“Absolutely. Ladies first.”

With the opportunity right in front of

her, she drew a complete blank on what to ask first. The wood popped and crackled as the fire continued to consume the logs. Kaiden leaned away from her and picked up another log and added it to the blaze, blocking the breeze so the heat could build.

“What was it like to grow up with pagan parents?” It wasn’t her first question, but she did wonder. Her Episcopalian family had taken her conversion pretty well—they ignored it for the most part.

“Huh.”

Apparently she’d surprised him with her choice of questions. *Good.*

He settled back into place next to her and drew up the second blanket to wrap



around her shoulders before tucking her under his arm again. “I don’t really have a basis for comparison. Though I knew attending skylad circles and drum circles weren’t the norm for other kids—my parents were my parents. They grounded me when I was stupid. Let me stay up all night to figure out my limits when I fought back on bedtimes. Took me camping a lot more than others—and I know how to make my own soda bread.” The last rode a laugh. “They liked freedom and independence and they believed in leaving a place or a person better than when they found them.”

“No one ever gave you a hard time?” She found that difficult to believe.

“That’s two questions, but I’ll answer anyway. Yeah, they did. We had CPS out more than once, when someone reported them. I learned to keep quiet around people who didn’t know. The trust of the circle lies not only in worship, but in protection and self-preservation. That’s what they taught me, and I couldn’t figure out why my religion would bother other people until I was in my senior year of high school.”

Rowan had her own ideas on the subject, but she kept quiet and let him tell the story.

“I was on the football team....”

“Of course you were.” She laughed. He had that ruggedness to him. He’d probably been a charmer, too, and one of

the popular kids. She might have even admired him from afar, but she wouldn't have been caught dead at one of the games or anywhere near the athletes.

“Hey, it's what you do in Texas on Friday nights.” Amusement lingered beneath the defensive words.

“I know, I've seen the television show.” She nudged him. “Continue.”

“Anyway, in my senior year, one of the guys started a prayer circle and they always wanted to pray before a game. Didn't bother me any—our team was so bad, we needed all the help we could get. But the prayer circle led to some Bible study nights and those I didn't really feel like going to—and bit by bit, the other guys noticed. It became an

issue.”

“Did you make excuses or tell them the truth?”

“And that’s three questions. Don’t think I’m not keeping score.”

“Sorry.” But she wasn’t. “I’m genuinely curious. I didn’t discover that Wicca even existed before I was twenty-two. I mean, I did, but I didn’t—not really. I thought it was just something in a romance novel.” Why, oh why, did she bring up that embarrassing fact?

“I made excuses. It was easier than getting into fights—and not everyone is open-minded. Chances are, the guys would have gotten over it, but their parents? After the CPS calls in elementary school, I couldn’t do that to

Mom and Dad again.”

“That’s sad.”

Kaiden shrugged. “That’s life, Rowan. Do you tell everyone at your office how you worship? What you believe in?”

“No, but they don’t really ask, either.” She didn’t know if she’d deny it, She hoped she wouldn’t. “But we tend to table religion there. In fact, after the last election—politics and religion are taboo topics at the office. Because no two people worship the same and someone always gets their panties in a twist.”

He nodded. “It’s personal.”

“Exactly.” Rowan went to ask the next question, but he pressed his finger to her lips.

“Uh uh. My turn.”

Kissing his fingertip, she acquiesced. “Yes, it is your turn.”

“Why aren’t you dating anyone?” The abrupt change of subject from his childhood to her romantic life—or lack thereof--threatened whiplash, but she rode the sharp curve.

“I work *a lot*. I can be up all night troubleshooting a server migration, or travel to other locations to take care of software upgrades. By the time I leave the office, I want to go home and put on my fuzzy slippers, pour a glass of wine, and knit.” She bit the tip of her tongue and made a face. “Of course, that sounds wildly attractive, doesn’t it?”

“I think it sounds comfortable. I

don't get why you haven't got guys trying to drag you out of your comfy spot though." He paused for a heartbeat. "I know I'd be knocking on your door."

Her heart raced at the admission and she dared a glance to meet his. "I'm more me here than I am anywhere else. Outside of circle and festivals, I'm the girl with a braid, her digital tablet, and a lot of work. I don't flirt well and I don't always know when guys like me—I'm not any good at that."

"Fair enough." The corners of his lips kicked upward. "But in case you're wondering...I like you. A lot."

*Wow.* All the moisture in her mouth dried at his blunt statement. "I like you, too." It took considerable effort to find

the words to respond.

“So, question number two.” He didn’t look away.

“Yes?” The pound of her heart seemed to thud against her ribs.

“What question do you really want to ask me?”

She chewed the inside of her lip. “The last thing I want to do is spoil this....”

“It’s okay. Ask me. What do you really want to know?”

Trusting him enough to believe he really did want to hear her question, she clasped his hand. Rewarded when he wrapped his stronger fingers around hers, Rowan offered him a small smile. “What hurt your soul?”



Despite having made the request for her to ask the question, Kaiden had to still fight the urge to withdraw. The path to the answer had been washed in blood.

Tension tightened the tiny lines at the corners of her eyes. “Kaiden....”

“Shh...it’s okay. I told you to ask and I meant it.” Flickering images of carnage scrolled through his mind. “War isn’t pretty—whether it’s a military police action or an actual, physical battle. Urban warfare is even uglier, if that’s possible.” Hot and cold flash-fired across him and his stomach cramped, but he shoved it aside. “I’ve been deployed on and off for years. We’ve come home, we’ve gone back,

we've come home again.”

He couldn't gaze into the softness of her eyes for this story. To tell it—and he only ever planned to say it once and then never again—he needed the dark. Tipping his chin, he studied the sky and the stars. It wasn't true darkness, but it would do.

“You don't always know who the enemy is—so you trust the guys next to you and the guy in front and the guy in back. They're your team. You rely on their judgment as much as you do your own.”

Rowan stroked her thumb along the back of his hand. The gentle gesture settled him and eased the thundering pound of his heart. One could not be in

two places at the same time, but his soul decried the logic in the thought.

“Because you don’t know who your enemies are. They can look like anyone. Men. Women—children.” He fisted his free hand. “They don’t always look like soldiers. The worst of them look like everyday people trying to eke out a living—they go to their jobs, they go home, they feed their families, kiss their mothers, their daughters, their husbands, their parents—and then they strap on a bomb or plant an IED or pick up a gun —”

Pain shackled his heart, and Rowan rubbed her cheek against his shoulder—the rasping sound of the fabric drawing him back from the precipice.

“I had to kill an insurgent—he was tall, but he couldn’t have been more than eight or nine years old, Rowan. He had a bomb on his chest and he ran straight at us.” If Kaiden lived to be a hundred years old, he would never forget the split second of helplessness as he realized he would have to kill that boy. They’d been hit at regular intervals—lost good men to IED attacks and others to random sniper fire. The suicide bombers weren’t as prevalent, but they happened.

He had a split second to make a decision and his training saved lives that day by ending another—an act that made reconciling these two disparate sides of his soul impossible.

Somehow, he found the words to keep speaking. Blinking rapidly to relieve the dryness in his eyes, he sighed. “He wasn’t the first person I’d ever killed and I’d like to say he was the last, but—I can’t. Killing isn’t the job, but it is a part of it. I knew that when I signed up. I accept it. It’s on me, my choices, my actions—my consequences.”

“And your loss of faith.” The soft whisper brushed over him like a caress.

“Yeah. So—you could say I’m a little fucked up.” He should watch his mouth around her, but instead of pulling away, she nestled closer.

“I wish I had an answer for that. Something to magick away the pain and

the heartache—but I think that you can and do feel it is *your faith*, not your lack of it.”

Wrestling to untangle the words, Kaiden frowned. “My faith says I walk into a circle clean of hidden agendas and false beliefs. That I enter it in perfect love and perfect trust. That it—not harm anyone, no matter what I will. That I leave the world a better place than I found it. Nothing about killing that kid qualifies.”

“Maybe not.” Rowan adjusted her position and he could feel her gaze on him. “But you still feel it—you haven’t forgotten the cost of your choices. Holding onto your pain, barricading yourself with it—that harms you, too,

Kaiden. I can't say that your choices were right or wrong. But a guiding principle is a guiding principle, not a true-or-false test of whether you have the right to feel the way you do.”

He couldn't tell if she wanted to offer him a way out or if she was merely oversimplifying it. “That's not what I meant....”

“No, I know that. I know you feel deeply about your actions. But you're conflicted because, as a Marine, you have to make one choice—protect your men, protect your country, protect your mission. As a man, you have to have faith that the Marine did what was right in that situation, even if he would never have chosen to be put into such a

precarious position in the first place.” The hammer she hit the nail on the head with rang through him.

“Ultimately, I did choose to be there. I enlisted.” He almost hated defeating her argument.

“Only if you enlisted with the desire to kill someone else.” Rowan shrugged. “Maybe it’s just how I see it. But why did you enlist?”

Hopefully she hadn’t wanted something deep and meaningful, because his answer was far more direct. “It seemed like the place I needed to be. It fit me.”

“When you say it seemed like the place you needed to be? How so?”

The breeze off the lake came in little



gusts of chill, but the heat from the fire warmed them and Kaiden didn't really notice the cold. He paused only to make sure she hadn't started shivering again, but she continued to regard him with an intensity that eliminated anything else from her focus.

Oddly, he enjoyed the hell out of knowing the only person she thought about or saw was *him*. "It's hard to explain...." Or worse, she'd think it was stupid. *Or will she?* At no point in the last couple of days had she reacted in a judgmental manner. "I was filling out college applications and an ad for the Marines came on television. I stopped what I was doing and I called a recruiter. I didn't need to go to college, I

needed to go to the Marines.”

“So maybe you needed to be there that day to save your guys. You saved them, right?”

“I like how you see the world.” Clean and unsullied by the seamier things he’d seen and done.

“It’s not about how I look at the world—it’s how I live my life. I spent years trying to be something I’m not. My mom wanted me to get out of the house more, have a social life—*find friends*. I liked reading, I liked working on my computer, but she told me it wasn’t *normal* and how did I ever expect to be happy? So I made myself miserable trying to achieve her definition of happiness. It didn’t work for me.”

Rowan stretched away from him and grabbed the bag they'd carried their stuff down from the house. Opening it, she pulled out the supplies for s'mores and Kaiden let her go, draping the blanket across her shoulders.

“I'm going to grab a bit more wood. Keep talking, I can hear you.”

“My point is, I made myself miserable because everyone else told me what I should feel or should do or what their definition of normal is—you know what I learned?”

“What?”

“Normal is horseshit.”

He'd found the firewood cache the others had made at the edge of the beach under a tarp and paused mid-load to

glance at her. “What?”

“Normal is *shit*,” she called out in a louder voice and Kaiden bit back a chuckle. That’s what he thought she said. “Normal is relative to the person. What makes me happy may not make someone else happy. Using their judgment as a barometer won’t work—so I can tell you think you answered a call, maybe it was a spiritual one, or maybe it was a universal way of putting you in a place you needed to be to help others—but ultimately, you’re the only one who can decide that.”

“So if I wanted to crawl on my belly and cry like a little girl, that’s my choice, too?” He knelt to feed the wood into the fire.

“More or less.” Rowan speared some marshmallows on a pair of metal skewers. “In your heart of hearts, would you ever have hurt anyone if they hadn’t been trying to hurt you first?”

“Self-defense is a legal argument, not a spiritual one.”

“Okay, practically speaking, you can’t worship if you’re dead.” She held out one of the pokers to him. “And I rather like having you alive. So answer the question...would you have done it if you’d had any other choice that wouldn’t have cost lives?”

If he hadn’t—his guys, his brothers would have died. He could have. Accepting the poker, he shifted to sit back on the blanket next to her, but

stared at the marshmallow as he held it out to the fire.

“It’s only the night and me, Kaiden. Neither of us will hold it against you. Yes, you’ve killed. But you saved more lives than you lost. So maybe you did need to be there that day—and maybe I needed to read all those books and work with computers until I knew them inside and out so I could meet Aaron on a call and end up here. Life—life twists and it turns, and we can’t always anticipate where it will take us. We can only control what we do when we get there.”

“Is that your way of saying ‘suck it up, princess’?” When her eyes widened, he let go of the grin he’d been fighting to keep off his face. “Or maybe ‘man up

you little girl and stop whining’?”

“I did *not* say that.” She looked genuinely horrified and a laugh broke loose in his chest.

“No, but you were thinking it.”

“I was not.”

Feeling less sorry for himself than he had in a while, Kaiden squinted at her. “I’m a big ol’ excuse tree, then? Full of excuses? Want to climb me like the excuse tree I am?” Something in his expression must have given him away because Rowan went from wide-eyed and horrified, to simple shock, until she gave way to laughter.

“An excuse tree?”

“That’s what my drill instructor called it in basic. ‘Private Nelson, why

is that sock that way?’ I don’t know, sir, I just got back from duty in the mess. ‘Oh, I see. You’re just a big ol’ excuse tree. You want to be a tree? Be a tree!’”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means I stood there at attention for about thirty minutes after he dumped all my clothing on me until he finished inspection and then ordered me to fold my clothes and put them back.”

Skepticism deepened her frown, but she constructed a s’more for both of them. “I think that sounds positively horrible.”

“In the absolute best way.” he said and watched her add a second layer of chocolate to his. “You planning to kill me with chocolate?”



“It’s the next best thing to sex—and I think you could use all the cheering up you can get if you think being used as an excuse tree is wonderful.” But a smile flirted behind her disapproval.

Sobering, he brushed a finger down her cheek. “I’m fucked up, Rowan.”

“I don’t think you’re as bad off as you do. I think you haven’t figured out how to be home yet. It took you time to be a Marine, took you time to be over there—you have to be patient about being here.”

He shook his head once. “No, it’s not about being home.” Kaiden ran his thumb over her lower lip. The little catch of her breath blew away the hard knot of indecision he’d wrestled with all

day. “It’s about being here with you and all the things I want to find out about you—and do with you. I’m not a good guy. I can’t make you any promises.”

“I didn’t ask you for any.” The tart response tickled him. “But I do want to eat my s’more, so you can kiss me or you can let me have my chocolate.”

One of the shackles confining his heart buckled under her response and snapped loose. “Well,” he murmured, “if you insist—why don’t I give you both?” Taking a bite of the sticky treat, he locked his gaze on her lips and, the moment they parted, he closed the distance between them and sealed his mouth to hers.

She fisted his jacket and leaned into

the kiss, her tongue darting out to sample the melting chocolate. The explosion of sweetness had nothing to do with the treat—Rowan tasted a hell of a lot better than chocolate.



# Chapter Five

They necked like a pair of teenagers for hours. Kaiden, it seemed, had developed a sweet tooth or so he declared in between nibbling a s'mores before kissing her again. The man's kiss and touch were addictive, but he added no caresses to the long, slow, luscious exploration of her mouth—and damn did he know what he was doing.

Cuddled together, they'd talked, made out, and talked some more while the fire flickered and they waited for the sunrise. They sat vigil through the longest night of the year as Yule celebrated the return of light to the

world, the turning of the wheel. From this day forward, the days would grow a little longer, minute by minute.

Kaiden lay on his side, his head pillowed on her lap—sound asleep. He'd drifted off while she'd stroked his hair, and the combination of his position and the rising sun afforded her a chance to drink in the softness easing the hard planes of his cheeks and the relaxed line of his jaw.

Her stomach bottomed out. No, she was not falling for him. She *liked* him. He was an utterly lickable, likeable guy. *Oh hell.* Rowan squeezed her eyes shut. Hormones on overdrive and her heart engaging at full throttle were not what she needed to be facing. He'd said it

several times—he was a Marine. He was on leave.

He's going to go back...no matter how much you're enjoying yourself right now, he's going to pack his things and walk right back out of your life. The sinking sensation in her gut dropped further and she blew out a breath. *I'm being a friend, I'm showing him the same love and trust the circle showed me when I first got here.*

She could probably toss some glitter on that thought and hang it on her own personal excuse tree. A snicker worked loose and she bit down on her lip to keep the laughter contained. Movement against her leg jerked her attention downward and she met Kaiden's sleepy

gaze.

“What’s funny?”

“Nothing,” she lied. “The sun is coming up—we made it through the night.” Unable to help herself, she stroked her fingers across his scalp lightly. Even with the short, tight haircut, what strands he had were soft.

Stretching, he made no attempt to move away. “Sorry I fell asleep.”

“You were tired.” She caressed his cheek with her knuckles and the bristle of his morning stubble rasped her skin. She knew damn good and well she should stop touching. *So why don’t you?* Not that she was remotely interested in not touching him.

“Did you get cold?” He slanted a



look toward the still-flickering fire.

After the heat he'd stoked in her with his expert kisses? Not hardly. "No." She traced the line of his jaw, then the shape of his lips. "I'm fine." A yawn caught her off guard and embarrassment scorched her cheeks.

"Or not." Stretching again, he rolled to his feet with an ease and verve she envied. Her legs were sound asleep. "I'll get this out and—"

"No!" She held out a hand to him to stop him from kicking sand onto the fading campfire. "We don't put a Yule log out, remember?"

"Not technically a *log*."

"Doesn't matter. We sat vigil, we kept the light alive from sundown to

sunup, we let it burn out on its own.” Extending her legs one at a time, she tried to hide the wince as sensation raced on pins and needles down her thigh. By the time it reached her toes, she’d be in for a very uncomfortable time.

“Rowan, most of us—observing doesn’t mean down to the last tendril of smoke. The sun is awake, it’s returned.”

Fisting her hands, she experimented with curling and releasing her toes. Each motion sent a fresh wave of agony up her legs. “It’s not the point.” The words came out harsher than she intended. Tapping the side of her fist on her leg, she winced. “It’s important to *me*.”

“You okay?” He dropped back onto

his knees next to her and cupped the back of her calf and the nettles burst to life, a thousand angry bees stinging her muscles.

“Yes. No. Ow.” She pushed the words out past her laughter. Better to smile and giggle than to cry. Not crying happened to be a skill she’d perfected long ago. “I think I sat still too long.”

“Hang in there; keep wiggling your toes.” He massaged her calf muscle until the spasms of pins and needles decreased and she settled on the blanket. The sun’s continued ascent washed fresh color across the lake and she closed her eyes to block the brightness. Heat draped along her right side and she felt his nearness hovering as he stretched out

next to her. “You should have said something.”

“You were sleeping.” She cracked her eyelids to squint at him. “And you said you hadn’t been.”

He jerked, surprise filling his eyes, then a smile turned up the corners of his beautiful mouth.

*And really, now we’re thinking he’s beautiful. I’m hopeless. Utterly hopeless.*

“Thank you for that.” He brushed away the hair on her forehead. “Really. I haven’t slept that well in a while.”

“Sometimes you merely need a safe place.”

“And that’s what the coven and all of this is for you, isn’t it?” Understanding

kindled in his tone.

“Yes.” Maybe she should play it coy, but he’d been honest with her in the long dark of the night. He didn’t deserve any less in the sundrenched light of morning. “I’m just the mousy little tech girl at home. I like my computers. I like software programs. I like to go home and make sweaters and watch television and read books. But here—here I can be *me*. No one expects me to be anything other than who I am. I can run around in sweats or the dress I wore the night you came in—it doesn’t change how people treat me. I’ve always been a little different from other people, part of it is faith, part of it is personality. But I love every single person in the circle, even

the crazy ones.”

“Don’t call yourself a mouse.” Command crackled on the surface of the order. “You are anything but a mouse.”

“You met Rowan the Pagan, not Rowan the Tech Goddess.” She grinned. “Not that they call me a goddess.”

“Then they’re blind.” Propping his head up on his fist, he mimicked her earlier action and traced the lines of her face. Hard. Tough. Leather. Three words that all applied to him in equal measure. But she’d seen a softer side, a gentler side—one she didn’t imagine he shared with his Marines. “But you go back to work on Monday, right?”

“Yeah?”

“Asking me or telling me?” He

curled a lock of her hair around his finger and tugged her toward him gently.

“Both.” Her insides trembled. Hell, her outsides were trembling, too.

He kept dropping his gaze to her mouth and she felt it as though it were a caress. “You’re shy.” It seemed to be a revelation for him.

Cheeks heating again, she looked down and then back up. “I told you, I’m me.”

“Hi, Me.” He slanted his mouth across hers and she wrapped an arm around his neck. Instead of coaxing this time, his tongue slid across the seam of her lips and demanded access. A demand she capitulated to, nipping and sucking on his lower lip each time he

allowed her to come up for air. Somewhere inside her soul, she purred. Her body softened and she wanted to forget everything else, abandon reality entirely and soak up the moment.

Kaiden lifted his head and glanced at the fire. “It’s almost out.”

Regret bloomed inside of her. She didn’t want to let it go out. Rolling onto his back, he tugged her over to drape over him. Rowan pillowed her head on his chest and laid her hand over the racing pulse of his heart.

“Rowan?”

“Hmm?” She smoothed the fabric of his shirt, enjoying the tactile sensation of soft cotton on a hard, male body.

“I am having a difficult time coming



up with reasons why we shouldn't be doing this." The echo of her earlier internal debate wasn't lost on her.

"Yeah, I have nothing. You're going back." She sighed.

He didn't disagree. "You're staying here."

"We just met." But she didn't care.

"I feel like I've known you forever. I wish like hell I had."

"I told you—"

"I don't care if you think we wouldn't have spoken or gotten to know each other. I know we would have." He squeezed her closer. "The same way I knew I needed to enlist and that I needed to come home this time."

The relentless certainty paralyzed

her objections. Swallowing around the lump in her throat, she rubbed her cheek to his chest. Tears swam across her vision and she blinked rapidly to keep them from falling. “Why this time? You’ve had leave before, surely—where did you go, if not home? Why did you decide you needed to come home now?”

“I was tired and I think I needed to remind myself of what I was fighting for. Most of the leaves I took, I stayed close to base or headed somewhere to fish with the guys. I didn’t think anyone here could really understand—I disconnected from the life I had, to live the life I needed to live.” He cradled her closer and she slid a leg over the top of his. “This time, I got the e-mail from Mom

and knew I wanted to be home. So I had the time, I got the approval, and here I am.”

“I have an idea.” She eased from his embrace and sat, wanting to see his face. He turned his head, keeping one hand on the small of her back. “You need to spend time with your family and your friends tonight, at the circle, celebrating Yule and dancing, and laughing—all the things you would have done.”

“Not liking where you’re going with this unless you plan to be there, too.”

“I do, but—” She stared at him until he halted his objection. “But you’re focusing on me. I’m easy—but I want to know it’s *me* you’re focusing on and not the fact that I’m not *them*. Does that

make sense?”

“In a vaguely insulting way, yes.” Irritation deepened his grumble, but he sighed.

“I’m not going to disappear. But we’re in this bubble—you and I. It’s intense and, yeah, I want to see where it goes. I’d like to kiss you all night long—again—but naked this time.” Bold and brassy as she sounded, her face flushed until she must resemble a tomato. “But I want it to be because that’s where we both want to be and not because either of us is hiding.”

“Are you hiding, Rowan?” Something shifted in his manner, his gaze, seemed to sharpen, become almost predatory. Something told her he sized

up her objections, her ideas, and he was the type of man to come up with a plan. Her practical side worried, but the rest of her—that deep feminine part he made purr sat up and took notice. If she ran...

...he would chase.

“Maybe. I don’t usually disappear for hours at a time with a man I’ve just met.”

His fingers flexed against her jacket. “Only me.” It wasn’t a question or a request.

“Yes, sir, Sergeant Grumpy. Only you. So—do we have a deal?”

“I’ll dance, I’ll chant, I’ll go to the circle and celebrate with my family and *our* friends.” The emphasis wasn’t lost on her. “And then after—it’s you and

me.”

Stomach flip-flopping, Rowan agreed. “You and me.”

The woman tempted him like no other and strained his patience to the breaking point. Since their lazy walk back from the lake side, she'd been *around*, but kept her distance. He thought he could coax her into at least a nap, since she'd been awake all night, but she diverted right into the kitchen to break up her *cracker crack* for the feast later that day and smacked his hand when he tried to snatch a piece.

“You keep scowling like that, your face is going to freeze.” Jensen leaned next to him, mirroring his posture.

Sparing the little man a half-smile, Kaiden shook his head. “Aren’t you supposed to be fixing the damage to the rec room?” He’d heard his mother corralling the children earlier after discovering that they’d turned the big game room in the basement into an unmitigated disaster for “Nerf War” while most of the adults slept off their all-night vigil.

“I didn’t actually make the mess.” Jensen shrugged. “I fell asleep on the sofa. That was the other guys.”

“And you’re not helping your cousins or your friends? Not cool, man. Not cool.” Kaiden shook his head in disappointment.

“But I didn’t do it. Why should I

have to help?”

“Doesn’t matter. You have their back; they’ll have yours. It’s how it works.”

The towheaded kid gave him a skeptical look. “Then why aren’t you helping clean up the circle from the campout even though *you* weren’t there?”

“Damn good question, kid.” Kaiden straightened and hit the top rail with an open palm. “I’ll head down and give them a hand. You go help your friends downstairs. Deal?”

Jensen apparently didn’t care for his bluff being called, but grumbled an agreement. Hiding his amusement, Kaiden left him to it and headed out for



the trail. If Rowan wanted him to spend time with his family and friends, he could do that. His body remained uncomfortably aware of her, and he'd much rather spend the afternoon sprawled on a bed and explore her every luscious curve.

*Work first. Play later.* And yes, he and Rowan would definitely be playing later.

\*\*\*

“Sun’s still up. Fast ’til sundown, remember?” Kaiden eyed the longneck beer bottle Aaron held out.

“Eh, close enough.” He nodded to the orange and red horizon with its

streaks of purple. They'd spent the afternoon scrubbing the circle of all traces of the campout, clearing any sharp sticks or rocks that could potentially damage bare feet, and Kaiden hung out to help him set up the torches.

"I'll wait." Rituals needed observing—it was how they became rituals in the first place. When a person skipped the parts they didn't like, it devalued all of it.

"Fair enough," Aaron set the bottle back into the cooler, flipped the lid shut, and sat. "So, have you heard of Mike's Place?"

"Yes." Everyone he knew had heard of it and the work Captain Dexter and his men had done on the rehabilitation

center. “Did you draw the short straw to find out if I have PTSD?”

The ugly red flush staining Aaron’s neck gave him away before he choked on his beer. Coughing hard once, he shook his head. “I told them you’d see right through me.”

“You’re not exactly subtle,” Kaiden agreed. “You can tell everyone I’m fine. I needed to relax. I’m relaxing.” Surprisingly, he didn’t have to lie about his current state. The night before had eased the hard knot in his gut, washed some of the tension out of his muscles, and the only thing winding him up at the moment was the gorgeous redhead at the house. But he had a solution for that, too.

“We’re here for you, you know that.”

Plain, heartfelt sentiment eased his conscience further.

“Straight up—did it bother you that I didn’t come home?” He didn’t have to like the answer, but he did need to know how badly he’d handled things.

“Yes and no.” Aaron took a long swallow of beer before continuing. “Dude, I’m not going to pretend I have any idea what you do or what you went through. It made your mom sad that you didn’t come home. We *missed* your ugly-ass face. But you do what you gotta do and you’re here now.”

“Thanks for clearing it up for me.” Chuckling, he paced out a slow circle. “Wasn’t sure I even wanted to be here.”

“Sounds pretty normal to me.” Aaron

surprised him again. “Hell, I cut out for four—maybe five years? Didn’t show up for the big stuff, barely there for full moons. Went away to college, came home, got a job. Focused on finding my place in the world.”

Intrigued, Kaiden stopped pacing and faced his friend. “Why did you come back?”

“‘Cause it’s home and ‘cause Melissa was curious.” His wife, and the mother of at least one of the kids he’d met. “She likes it—being in the coven, learning from your mom and the other ladies, getting together for *Esbats*.”

“So why not before though?”

“Hell, I don’t know. I grew up in this life, and so did you. But it’s a lot like

hanging out with your parents. You like them and they're great, but the moment you go back—you're *the kid* again." Aaron belched at the end of the sentence. "And I didn't want to be a priest. I like celebrating. I like the people. But I'm not a teacher. Unless you want to learn how to be a shit and then I got that down."

Kaiden laughed. "Fair point." And one he hadn't considered. Coming home had made him remember being the kid. The kid he couldn't afford to be in the sandbox.

"That said, it's damn good you did show up. Be nice to Rowan, she's a sweet lady." Warning echoed in his proprietary air.

“I’m not planning to hurt her.”

“Good. ’Cause then I’d have to try and hurt you—and you’re meaner than I am.” But that didn’t mean Aaron wouldn’t try. The sun inched down further. “Almost dark. You want that beer now?”

“Hell why not? Let’s get the party started.” *Is she worried that I’ll hurt her? Or is it the leaving part that worries her?* He didn’t have any easy answers, but maybe he didn’t need them.

An hour later, Kaiden regretted the beer because the temperatures hovered closer to freezing than they had since he’d set foot back in Texas. The weather channel issued a snow watch and the

clouds rolled in on an icy breeze. A quick debate convened about whether they wanted to celebrate indoors or out and a compromise was struck. The kids didn't have to go and they put the teens in charge of the little ones. The adults would hold a quick ritual under the cloudy skies and then retreat to the house to feast.

Kaiden kept his eye on Rowan. She'd worn gloves along with her white jacket and white knit cap to cover her ears and stamped her feet as she lined up to wait. The women entered the circle first and then the men—unsurprisingly, his mother and father were leading the ritual tonight. While Blue Circle rarely held someone in the position of high



priest or priestess, the elders rotated the *Sabbats* amongst them, and his mother's two favorites were Samhain and Yule.

She greeted each arrival with the same whispered words and when it was Kaiden's turn, she pressed the, *athame*, her ceremonial blade, to his chest above his breastbone. "And how do you enter the circle, my son?" Her level of drama always added to the ceremony, and he met her gaze evenly.

"In perfect love and perfect trust." He didn't hesitate and the words didn't rattle. He did enter exactly that way and he looked past his mother to where Rowan waited on the eastern side of the circle.

Lorraine chuckled and leaned up to

give him a kiss. “Then enter and be welcome.” Normally she would have moved on to the next, but instead, gave him a hard hug and he returned the embrace.

“I’m here, Mom,” he whispered.

“I know.” She sniffed once and stepped back, then winked and, though her eyes were suspiciously damp, her smile didn’t falter. “Go find our girl.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He followed the circle around *deosil*—*clockwise*—and grinned as Aaron made room so Kaiden could stand next to Rowan. All told, about twenty-seven people stood in a loose circle by the time his mother greeted the last arrival and closed it.

The breeze grew steadily stronger

and colder, guttering the torches set at each of the four quarters. No way would anyone could keep the candles lit in this. His parents called the invocation and they linked hands, the circle ratio nearly balanced in male to female.

“It is the season of the Crone.” His mother spoke in a soft voice, but it still carried despite the wind. “It is the time of the winter goddess, she who oversees the passing of the year and the turn of the dark to the light. The eternal cycle of birth.” Lorraine’s gaze caught and held his. “Life. Death. And rebirth. We have seen the old year pass at Samhain, and the descent to true darkness, and last night we sat in observance of the light’s return—it is time welcome the sun back

to the land and the growth of days even as we shiver in the cold of winter.”

And they were shivering.

“I light this candle to honor the Crone.” It took her a moment and Henry’s help, but the pair managed to light the black candle and set it down in the hollow of where they’d held the fire pit the night before. The makeshift windbreak kept the flickering light alive.

Rowan squeezed his hand and stepped toward the center of the circle and Melissa approached from the opposite direction. Lorraine passed a white candle to Rowan and a red to Melissa.

“As the Crone lies down for the winter, it is the time for the Maiden to

claim what is now hers. The wheel has turned once more.” Rowan’s crystal voice wrapped around him, and it was as though he wanted to lean into the sweetness of the sound. Of course she fulfilled the role of Maiden, and Melissa, the Mother.

Lorraine and Henry helped the two women light their candles and they set them down into the depression, then she removed a pendant and passed it to Melissa. Melissa kissed the necklace and reached over to drape it around Rowan’s neck.

The hair at his nape stood on end and energy sizzled over him. How could he have forgotten the simple beauty of these enactments, of embracing a faith that had

sustained him to manhood?

“The days will grow longer now as the sun returns.” Melissa’s voice sounded deeper, a richer counterpoint to Rowan’s crystal voice and his mother’s aged wisdom. “The Crone’s season ends and the Maiden’s begins. Listen to all that have come before you and be wise in how you make your way—I wait for you at Spring.”

“Thank you.” Rowan kissed Melissa’s cheek and then Lorraine’s. “Thank you for your wisdom and your patience. You have seen the season through to its end and we honor you for all that you do.”

The three women formed a triumvirate with their closed circle

within the circle and bent their heads together. Silence reigned and Kaiden found himself whispering a soft prayer. *Thank you for bringing me home to be reborn with the year.*

“All changes when a new life is born.” Henry spoke after a long moment. “The dead fades away, that which was is no longer. Life is ever-changing, ever-renewing, and we grow stronger for our losses, our sons return to us. Those who left as boys and girls return to us as men and women. Always changing. Always constant.”

Henry paused and swept his attention around the circle, meeting and holding each person’s gaze until he locked eyes on his son. “It is the way of our life.

Thank you, Goddess of the Winter, for casting your eyes upon us this night, thank you for standing guardian against the darkness draping our land and for helping us to nurture the fire until the light could return. Grant us the wisdom to make the right choices, the strength to see them through and the peace of knowing we have done all that we could, and let us give you and each other love.”

“Blessed be,” the three women said in perfect harmony.

The connection snapped the last chain shackling his heart and Kaiden drew in a deep breath. The leaden weight of his choices slipped free and he let them go. What was done was done. Tonight he could mourn the passing of



the light and celebrate its return at the same time.

A chant began on the far side of the circle, one as familiar to him as his own name and, by the time Rowan returned to stand next to him, her fingers threading with his, he had no problem joining in. “We all come from the Goddess and to her we shall return....”

They made it through two more rounds of song before the first fat flakes began to fall from the sky. Rowan tilted her head back to look up at the snow and she laughed.

Yes, the light had definitely returned to his world.



## Chapter Six

The snowfall failed to dampen their spirits, transforming their wooded escape with the kiss of winter magic—each dainty snowflake a chilly brush to Rowan's skin. Laughter bubbled through her soul and she didn't object when Kaiden captured her hand and held on. They danced all the way back to the house. Snow after several warm days in a Texas winter wasn't unheard of, but it never failed to awaken her delight. A delight she hadn't experienced in three years.

Driven by hunger and laughter, the adults streamed into the house, but

Kaiden diverted her when she would have followed and pulled her close. “Dance with me.”

Her breath caught and she went tight with the flush of desire. “There’s no music.”

“So?” He wrapped his arms around her and she had no choice but to put her hands against his chest. The sounds around them faded; it was just the two of them in the gentle falling snow. Even the drifting flakes became a meaningless blur of motion. “I want to dance with you.”

It would be so easy to fall in love with a man who focused all of his attention on her the way Kaiden had the past three days. “I don’t want a broken

heart.”

“I don’t want to break your heart.” He nuzzled her forehead. They swayed together. His grin hit her hard; the softness around his eyes coupled with the relaxed line of his jaw enchanted her. “I’m not going to break your heart.”

“You can’t know that.” She sighed because he wore relief and happiness so beautifully. “I’m not a fling kind of girl.”

“Good.” Pleasure underscored the word. “I’m not looking for a fling.”

Since he opened the door.... “What are you looking for?”

“I’m not looking,” he told her in a low, intimate voice and brushed his lips to hers. “I’ve found.”

Shock rippled through her as he

continued to tease her with his wonderful, clever caresses. “We just met.”

“I know, it’s wonderful.” He chuckled, the sound vibrated along her skin, and her nipples went taut beneath the layers of her clothes. “I have never been so glad of trusting my instincts as I was when I realized that if I hadn’t listened to them—if I hadn’t come home—I wouldn’t have met you.”

Her throat tightened and she had to swallow a painful lump. “Kaiden...”

“Shh.” He cupped the back of her head and urged her to lay her cheek to his shoulder. It wasn’t a hardship, but the close way he held her, the nurturing tenderness housed in his steel strength—

it was too much like pressing her nose against the glass. She could see it and feel it, but how would they possibly ever work out? “Listen, it’s okay if you don’t believe me. I mean, it really isn’t, but it’s okay right now. I know I’m right. I can take the time to prove it to you.”

Blowing out a breath, she leaned back until he loosened his hold and she could gaze up at him. They’d danced around the house, slow, circling steps in the snow and, amazingly enough, the chilly stuff frosted his hair and glistened on his cheeks. “Prove what to me?”

“That I’m the guy for you.” He said it with such conviction, she half-believed him.

“In three days?”

“My dad knew in twenty-four minutes. I’m behind the curve.”

She struggled to keep it casual. “We barely know each other.”

“So? I told you—I have a way of knowing things. The first moment I saw you, I wanted you—physically, emotionally, mentally. I want to shake up your safe little world so I can be a part of it. Think you can make room for me?”

Oh, she wanted to buy into the fairytale more than he knew. “That’s how you feel right now—it’s because I listened. You’re...you—” She stopped at his raised eyebrows. “What about tomorrow?”

“What about it?” He didn’t shy away from her fear. “You’re fearless. You



walked right up to me and kissed me. You didn't back down when I lost my temper and you called me...?"

"Sergeant Grumpy?" A fresh wave of heat flushed through her from head to toe. The unhidden desire in his eyes sparked a longing in her she struggled to contain.

"Hmm-hmm. I like it. Going to have it put on a T-shirt." He caught her lower lip in a gentle nip, and her indecision began to burn away. "You believe in magic and you're one of the reasons why the world can be a better place."

How the hell did one reply to that? She opened her mouth and closed it again.

"Have I rendered you speechless?"

Wonder and delight twisted together in his tone. “Let’s see if I can do it again....” He brought her right up to the side of the house, pressing her to the wood and crowding her until the only thing she could see was him.

“Um...okay.” It had been easy to forget the determined male beneath the hurt she’d glimpsed when they were introduced. But he’d been unfailingly sweet to her—even when he’d been grumpy.

“I adore your strength, your kindness—and even your chocolate.” He rested his forehead against hers. His deep, dark eyes filled her vision. “I love your kisses and your spirit. I guess what I’m trying to tell you ma’am, is that I love

you and it's okay if you don't love me back right away. I'm a patient guy.”

He didn't give her a chance to respond, kissing her thoroughly in a way that claimed her body and her soul. Cupping her bottom, he lifted her until her head was even with his. Hitching her thighs around his hips, she fisted her hands in his jacket and surrendered to him. Her thoughts scattered under the joy filling her heart.

“Kaiden,” she managed when he finally let her up for air. “Don't make a promise you can't keep—please?”

“I'm not.” He flicked his gaze up and she followed to see the mistletoe hanging overhead. “You know what that means?”

“That I’m a pretty girl?” She gripped his jacket tighter, drinking up the heat of his closeness. “Or that we’re safe from evil and harm?” Many legends surrounded the mistletoe.

“Hmm...I sense you want to wake up Sergeant Grumpy.” Mischief transformed him and her breath caught in her throat. “But since I’m in a mood to play, you can keep teasing me.”

Rowan giggled. “I adore you.” And once the words were out, she couldn’t take them back. He went completely still against her, and she couldn’t even hear his breathing. Licking her lips, she jumped off the safe ledge she’d been living her life on. “I do adore you and I felt the same way when I first saw you.

But I promised you no expectations or demands.”

When he would have said something, she pressed her fingers to his lips, silencing him. He nipped at her then drew her index finger and sucked on it. Everything in her lower body went hotter and tighter. Her thoughts unraveled and she exhaled a shuddering breath. “What I’m trying to say—is yes.”

At his urging, she closed the distance and traced the line of his mouth with tiny kisses.

“Yes.” He repeated as though for confirmation. “You did say yes, right?”

“Uh huh.” Maybe she’d regret the impulsive choice some day, but if she hadn’t made it, she’d regret the lack

forever.

“You realize I didn’t ask a question?” Supreme satisfaction stretched his grin wider.

“What?”

“I hadn’t asked you yet, but since you said yes, I’m happy.” Smug. Charming. Rogue. All the descriptions fit. “Think we can sneak upstairs?”

“What about your cracker crack?” Her heart raced. “You know it won’t survive the feasting.”

“Hmm...I don’t need chocolate.” The low, husky words turned her inside out. “I have you. You’re much sweeter than chocolate.” Several soul-searing kisses later, he eased her back to her feet and led her toward the door. Her mind

and heart raced, disbelief and delight warring for dominance.

The noise of so many others laughing, talking, eating, and playing rushed out to meet them as they entered. Disappointment curled through her belly since there would be no way to avoid the welcoming hugs, the inclusive laughter, or the plates of food. But Kaiden stayed a firm fixture at her side, not allowing anyone to draw her off into a conversation for too long. When Lorraine cornered them, her happiness practically radiating off her in shimmering waves, Kaiden ducked his head down to murmur in her ear.

“Of course!” She beamed and kissed his cheek, then turned to kiss Rowan’s.

“Go on, both of you, shoo. I’ll take care of everything.”

He hooked an arm around Rowan’s waist and steered her out of the kitchen toward the stairs. No one followed, though the bursts of laughter and chatter continued to rise and fall. They reached the top of the stairs, and her heart hammered because he continued to guide her down the hall toward his room.

She snuck another peek up at him. “What did you ask her?”

“I asked her if she really was on board with us as a couple, would she run interference so I could steal you away and seduce you.”

Her face had to be going up in flames, and her heart hitched a stuttering



beat. “She’s going to think we’re going upstairs for sex. How do you ask your mother that?”

Kaiden pushed open the door to his room and tugged her inside. “You’ve met my mother, right?” Only one lamp had been turned on in his room, a low wattage one next to the bed that left the rest cloaked in shadows. The door closed and shut out the last bit of sound and they were alone.

“Kaiden.” Rowan’s eyes rounded. How would she ever look his mother in the eye in the morning?

“Rowan,” he said with a hint of wryness. “My mother has sex. God knows she’s told me before that sex is natural, blah,” he kissed her, “blah,”

another kiss, “blah.”

Every touch melted her. “But you still told her.”

“Hmm-hmm. It was that or toss you over my shoulder and carry you out of there. Especially when Aaron brought up the karaoke machine.” As if to punctuate the sentiment, the floor below their feet vibrated with a deep bass beat. He began to unbutton her shirt, all the while tracing a path of kisses along her jaw and down her throat.

“Over your shoulder?” Her whole world seemed off balance and she held onto him.

“Hmm-hmm. Not sure how you feel about Neanderthals, but we’re going to have to find out.” He cupped her breast

and she forgot to breathe.

Blinking rapidly, she tried to string together a coherent response, but he rubbed the pad of his thumb over her nipple and it went taut, beading and straining under the thin lace of her bra. “Neanderthals?”

When the hell had her voice gotten so husky?

“Hmm.” He spread her shirt wider, his attention wholly fixed on her breasts. “My woman.”

The heat in her face seemed to spread out everywhere, a volcanic eruption of raw flame setting fire to her blood.

“And you blush beautifully.” It really was the last thing she heard as he

covered both of her breasts and kissed her again.

Her sudden, wide-eyed shyness had caught him off-guard, but he reveled in peeling back another delightful layer to the complicated woman in his arms. Rowan—even her name provoked an almost irrational surge of need and protectiveness in him. Her scent filled his every breath, and he wanted to roll around in the pure warmth radiating from her.

Torn between continuing to play with her breasts and wanting her naked, he made sure to turn the lock on the door before scooping her up in his arms.

Something inside his chest had hurt for weeks, but Rowan eased that pain—or maybe it was simply being with her that gave him time to heal whatever he'd broken.

Frankly, Kaiden didn't give a damn. She said yes, and while she might not know what it meant—he did. The inch she'd given him, he would turn into a lifetime. Setting her down on the bed, he marveled at the image she made—her clothes disheveled, her breasts straining against the lacy cups, and her skin suffused in delicate pink from her cheeks to the swell of her belly button.

He could stare at her for hours, but his cock ached. The strain had been on him all day, and he wanted both of them

naked so he could leisurely explore every sweet curve she possessed. It took him no time to shed his clothes.

Rowan rose, her gaze fixed on him and her pupils dilated. The fact that he affected her as much as she did him thrilled him. When she started shedding her clothes, dropping shirt, pants—after a delightful feminine shimmy to get them off—then her bra and panties off the side of the bed, his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth.

“You okay?” Her earlier shyness seemed to have retreated, but the husky note in her voice stroked him like a caress.

“You’re really fucking beautiful.” She was more than beautiful. Full

breasts, lush hips, and long, firm legs—her clothes did not do her justice. In nearly every way, she reminded him.... “You look like one of those pin-up girls.”

Her eyebrows inched upwards. “Excuse me?”

“You know,” he said, easing onto the bed and pressing a kiss to her ankle. “Those sexy women they used to paint onto planes—Bettie Page, Rita Hayworth—” He stroked her soft skin, and kissed the inside of one knee and then the other. He met her eyes. “Lush, beautiful women, and they don’t have half your appeal.”

To his delight, her face pinked again. “And have I mentioned.” He

continued on his upward trajectory to rub the heel of his palm against the red curls nesting at the juncture of her thighs. “I have a real thing for—” And then his gaze snagged on the tattoo above the line created by her hip, placed on the delicate skin curving along her abdomen. “Is that...?”

The rosy bloom of her skin turned deep red, and he laughed.

“It is, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” She laughed around her hand.

“It was an impulse.”

“Well, you do know the rules, don’t you?”

“It’s a tradition,” she chided him, but interest lit her expression.

“Tradition. Ritual. Rules—does it



matter as long as I get to kiss you right under the mistletoe?” He didn’t wait for her answer. Nudging her thighs farther apart, he pressed a kiss to her folds and blew a soft breath. The muscles in her legs clenched. Sliding a finger along the slickness, he grinned. “Someone’s very wet.”

Her bottom clenched and her thighs tensed. “If you’re trying to torture me—”

He kissed her, long, slow, and deep. She moaned, and it spiked the need racing through him. Circling her clit with his tongue, he laughed at the incoherent sound of protest. When her hips arched and she planted a foot on his back, he whispered. “Patience. I want to make sure you’re thoroughly kissed.”

Having her in his bed gave him a patience he hadn't thought he possessed. Easing a finger into her, he glanced up to see her head thrown back, her breasts pushed up, and her hands digging into the bed covers. Total abandon, and it made her that much more fucking gorgeous to him. Adding a second finger to the first, he curved them to stroke her beneath her clit, and when she gasped, he locked his mouth around the hard bud and sucked.

Only the hand he had on the inside of her thigh kept her from clamping her legs around his head. Her foot dug into his back and she pushed up, her unabashed shout music to his ears. Teasing her along, he pushed her toward another orgasm. He'd never wanted to spend so

much time worshiping a woman before, but he loved the way her body responded. As the quakes of her second orgasm slowed, he gentled his touch. Every brush of his lips elicited another little gasp or soft moan.

Not wanting to lose contact with her, he followed the curves of her body to kiss a path along her abdomen, pausing at her mistletoe tattoo to lovingly trace the art with his tongue.

“An impulse,” she whispered, her voice filled with pleasure and need.

“Hmm?” The sweet, tangy flavor of her lingered on his tongue and, if not for the brutal steel stiffening his cock, he’d go back for another helping.

“My tattoo.” She wrapped her arms

around him as he glided up the length of her body, dragging her nails lightly across his skin, exploring him as he longed to do to her. “I got it eight weeks ago.”

Kaiden froze and their gazes locked. The air between them thickened, growing heavier with expectation—and on his part, wonder. “Eight weeks ago,” he whispered, “I was still on the fence about coming home.”

She darted her pink tongue to slide along her lower lip, dragging his attention to the lusciousness of her lips. “And then you *knew*?”

He nodded once, cupping her cheek before kissing her. His tongue slid in and stroked hers in an invitation. He’d

*known* he had to go, no matter how many times he reconsidered it—his gut said *go* and he'd come home. The muscles in his body turned to rock.

She smelled divine, felt better. He kept her captive, delighting in the way she sucked his tongue and dug her nails into his back. Reaching down, he lifted her thigh up to his hip and circled her clit with his thumb. Continuing to torment her—or maybe it was him—or both. He pushed two fingers into her again, and her breathing grew erratic, her touch more frantic.

“Please,” she pleaded softly and he dragged himself up, reached over to the nightstand, and found the condoms he kept with his wallet. He'd picked up the

damn things at the airport and he'd had no idea why. His instincts, however, remained golden.

Never losing eye contact with the beautiful woman on his bed, he sheathed his cock and settled back between her thighs. "Rowan." He fisted his cock and rubbed the head between her damp folds. Squeezing once, he bit off a curse—he needed a hell of a lot more control before he slammed into her.

"What?"

"One question?" And he had to ask—her confession earlier at the lake jiggling loose in the back of his mind.

"What?" It came out as a growl, and she gazed up at him, her eyes glazed with passion.

“Are you a virgin?” She was in her mid-twenties so he doubted it, but still....

“No.” She shook her head. “But it’s been a long time....”

Damn him, he wanted to know. *No, I need to know...I need this to be good for her.* He’d hurt enough people in his life. Rowan was special. She deserved special.

Her expression faltered, and the open vulnerability wrenched at his heart. “Um...college.”

A long time then. He gave himself another hard squeeze and controlled the wince of pain that lanced through his desire. Slow. She needed slow, gentle, and patient. “Okay.” He softened his

voice. “Slow then....”

And putting word to action, he eased into her, sinking against the hard clamp of tight muscles. Her respiration increased, coming out in rapid little gasps. Sweat beaded along his back, and his spine burned with the control it took, wanting to drive into her, but he couldn't. No way in hell would he risk hurting her.

It took an agonizingly long time and then he sank all the way, balls deep, and he sucked in a harsh breath, fisting the covers on either side of her head. “You okay?”

“Oh...yes....” The hitching pauses between the words stroked him and her sex clenched hard until he thought he'd



come right on the spot. But he wasn't some dumbass teenager. He could do this. Checking her expression for confirmation of her words, he began to slide back out and then in again. The pace would kill him, a long slow drive into madness, but damn if it didn't feel good too.

Rocking gently, he deepened his strokes with each glide until she began to writhe and lifted her hips in welcome. When she clasped his ass and dug her nails in, he gave her a hard kiss and continued his ruthless pace, driving her toward the peak and himself to insanity.

She cried out, meeting him thrust for thrust until his body went liquid, the rhythm frantic and, fighting for one last

gift, he braced his arm and slid his hand down to tease her clit. That was all it took to send her head back and tear a scream of pleasure from her throat. She bucked and he slammed into her once, twice, and then the fire raced out of him, his body melting into hers as he came in a mind-blowing torrent.

With a groan, he buried his face against her neck, their ragged breathing the only sounds punching the air around them. It was so much better than he'd imagined. The numbness—the ice chipping away at his soul—all dissolved under the radiant warmth of her kindness and passion.

It took walking through hell to truly understand heaven—but he got it.

Opening his eyes, he lifted his head to study her. If possible, she'd grown even lovelier.

He really had come home.

“Hey,” she whispered.

“Hey.”

“So...I have a confession.” She licked her lips, the shyness a hint in her gleaming, passion-drenched glaze. He'd put that look there.

His heart thudded with pride. “What do you want to confess?”

“I found something I like better than chocolate.”

Laughter rumbled out of him and he buried his face to her neck again, nuzzling her soft skin. “Give me a little while and I'll get you seconds so you

can be sure.”

Her answering groan sent a shiver up his spine, even as her softening muscles tightened around his cock. “Can you die from good sex?”

“I don’t know. But I aim to find out.”



# Epilogue

Six months to the day, Rowan sat on the edge of the lake at the house and sighed. Summer Solstice meant rising temperatures, lazy heat, and a restlessness she couldn't contain. Had it really been six months since she spent Yule with the best man she'd ever met? He'd followed her home from the Lake House, staying with her in her too tiny apartment for the next week. Fortunately, Christmas break meant she only had to work three days before having five days off.

They never did make it to her parents'. Before New Year's, though,

she had to drive him to the airport—kiss him goodbye, and wait. Ten days of bliss and six months of waiting. He'd not waffled once, calling her every chance he had and, three days after he left, she'd received a delivery of three roses, one red, one white, and one yellow along with a spring of mistletoe—and she'd received similar deliveries once per week since. They always said the same thing.

*Save me the kiss....*

“How do you feel about North Carolina?” The deep voice was the last thing she'd expected to hear. Whirling around, she saw only Kaiden's smiling face and let out a whoop. It took her no time at all to leap to her feet and race

toward him. He caught her in a tight hug, and then his mouth was on hers and everything else faded away.

When she came up for air, her heart raced and her soul sang. “North Carolina?”

“Camp Lejeune. That’s my assignment. I don’t know for how long, but they’re looking for a few civilian contractors for their IT needs—we’d have to get you clearance, but....”

“Yes.” She didn’t care. Hooking her arms around his neck, she grinned. “If it means I get to be with you, then yes.”

His smile dimmed and his expression sobered. “Rowan, I need you to be sure—you’d be leaving everyone here.”



“What does your gut say?” She teased the short strands of his hair and wondered what it would be like if he were ever able to grow it out. She’d seen the pictures of him in high school; he’d had the most adorable curl that drifted over his forehead then.

“It says you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me and if you can get a job there, then this assignment means we can be together.” He’d changed again, but she didn’t see darkness in his eyes—only hope.

“Then I’m certain.” She had a job. She could get another job. Moving away didn’t mean losing her friends, it meant they’d have to come and visit. “I’ve *missed* you.” More than she could

express in words.

“Yeah?”

“Oh. Yeah.” Stretching up onto her tiptoes, she began to pepper his face with kisses. “And I believe I owe you about thirty of these.”

His laughter vibrated against her. “Those weren’t what I was counting.”

Heat scorched her and she leaned away. “Really?”

“Oh. Yeah.” He spread his palm over her hip and then stroked over the tattoo hidden by her tank top. “Thirty or more. At least.”

“I love you, Sergeant Grumpy.”

He nuzzled the corner her mouth. “Say it again.”

Feeling freer, fuller than she had in

months, she giggled and obeyed. “I love you, Sergeant Grumpy.”

“Enough to be Mrs. Grumpy?”

Tears blanketed her vision and she swallowed. The proposal threatened to undo her. “Really?”

“Yes, really.” He scowled. “I’d have asked you before I left, but you didn’t believe me enough to trust my gut.”

She flushed and glanced down. “You’re right, I didn’t—but you didn’t give up on me.”

“Hell no, so you go ahead and say no. I’ll ask you again tomorrow.” He claimed her for a branding kiss, letting go of her long enough to say, “and then I’ll ask you the day after that.” Another

soul-burning kiss. “And the day after that.”

“You don’t give up, do you?” she managed when he let her have some air.

“No, ma’am. I don’t. Not when you’re mine.” The declaration held such sensual promise and determination, she gave up the ghost of resistance. Six lonely months had been enough.

Pressing her hand to his shirt, over the steady beat of his heart, she smiled. “Yours.”

“Be sure,” Kaiden warned her, his grip tightening. “Because I can go to your apartment, pack you up, and rent the U-Haul right now.”

“Or you can take me up to the house and we can make love all afternoon

while everyone else plays in the lake?” She didn’t even finish the question before he swept her up and over his shoulder. Laughing, she paddled his back. “Kaiden—everyone can see!”

From the lake, she heard the whoops and the whistles. Busted already.

“Let them watch.” His pace didn’t slow. “I’ve got some kisses to collect.”

## ~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](http://www.heatherlong.net)

## The Always a Marine Series

Always a Marine  
*Series so Far (in order by release)*

Once Her Man, Always Her Man  
*Luke & Rebecca*

Retreat Hell! She Just Got Here  
*Logan, Jazz & Zach*

Tell It to the Marine  
*James & Lauren*  
*Introduction of Matt McCall and*



*Damon Sinclair*  
*Features an appearance of Logan*  
*Cavanaugh*

*Proud to Serve Her*  
*Damon & Helena*  
*Matt, James, Lauren, Luke and*  
*Rebecca mentioned*

*Her Marine*  
*Brody & Shannon*

*No Regrets, No Surrender*  
*Logan, Jazz & Zach*  
*James featured*

*The Marine Cowboy*  
*A.J. & Sheri*

*Phone call from Luke*

The Two and the Proud  
*Rowdy & Kim*

A Marine and a Gentleman  
*Brenden & Liam*

*Appearances of James, Logan, Jazz,  
Shannon, Rebecca, Lauren*

Combat Barbie  
*Kyle & Mary*

*Jazz makes an appearance via phone*

Whiskey Tango Foxtrot  
*Joe & Melody*  
*James makes an appearance*

What Part of Marine Don't You  
Understand?

*Matt & Naomi*

*Appearances by James and Logan,  
Damon is mentioned*

A Marine Affair

*Eli & Rick*

Marine Ever After

*Paul & Lillianna*

*Multiple appearances at Luke &  
Rebecca's wedding*

Marine in the Wind

*Greg & Georgia*

*Appearances by A.J. & Sheri*

Marine with Benefits  
*Derek & Kara*  
*Appearance by Logan*

A Marine of Plenty  
*Charlie & Jana*  
*Appearance by Naomi*

A Candle for a Marine  
*Isaac & Zehava*  
*Appearances by Zach & Shannon*

# Contents

Title page

Welcome Letter

A Note from the Author

~Dedication~

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Epilogue

~ABOUT THE AUTHOR~