

EVERYDAY, AVERAGE JONES

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Published by Silhouette Books

America's Publisher of Contemporary Romance

My special thanks to Candace Irvin, who helped clear up a great deal of confusion about rank and pay-grade and U.S. Navy life in general. Thanks also to my on-line

SEAL buddy, Mike, who in the closed-mouth tradition of

the quiet professionals hasn't managed to tell me much,

yet still can always make me laugh.

For my big sister, Carolee Brockmann.

And for my mom, Lee Brockmann, who even likes the ones that never sell.

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Chapter 1

It was extremely likely that she was going to die.

And with every hour that passed, her chance of making it out of this godforsaken country any way other than inside a body bag was slipping from slim to none.

Melody Evans sat quietly in the corner of the little windowless office that had become her prison, writing what she hoped would not be her final words in a letter to her sister.

Dear Brittany, I'm scared to death of dying....

She was terrified of the finality of a single bullet to the head. But she was even more afraid of the other sort of death that possibly awaited her. She'd heard of the kinds of torture that were far too prevalent in this part of the world. Torture, and other archaic, monstrous practices. God help her if they found out she was a woman....

Melody felt her pulse kick into overdrive, and she took slow, deep breaths, trying to calm herself.

Remember the time you took me sledding up at the apple orchards? Remember how you got on the sled behind me, and told me in that supertheatrical voice you sometimes used that we were either going to steer a straight course down the hill through the rows of trees—or die trying?

Her older sister had always been the adventurous one. Yet it was Brittany who was still at home in

Appleton, living in the same four-story Godzilla of a Victorian house that they'd grown up in. And it was Melody who, in a moment of sheer insanity, had accepted the job of administrative assistant to the American ambassador and had moved overseas to a country she hadn't even known existed until six months ago.

I remember thinking as we plunged down the hill—God, I couldn't have been more than six years old, but I remember thinking—at least we'll die together.

I wish to God I didn't feel so alone....

"You don't really think they're going to let you send that, do you?" Kurt Matthews's acerbic voice dripped scorn.

"No, I don't." Melody answered him without even looking up. She knew she was writing this letter not for Brittany, but for herself. Memories. She was writing down some childhood memories, trying to give herself a sense of that peace and happiness she'd known once upon a time. She was writing about the way she'd always tried so desperately to keep up with a sister nearly nine years older than she was. She skipped over the sibling infighting and petty arguments, choosing to remember only Britt's patience and kindness.

Britt always used to make such a big deal over Melody's birthday. This year, even though Mel was thousands of miles from the New England charm of their hometown in Massachusetts, Britt had sent a huge box of birthday surprises. She'd taken care to send it far enough in advance, and Melody had received it four days ago—more than a week before her twenty-fifth birthday.

She was glad now that she hadn't followed Britt's written orders and instead had opened the pile of presents in advance of the so-called special day. Britt had sent five new pairs of warm socks, a thick woollen sweater and some new athletic shoes. Those were the practical gifts. The fun gifts included the newest Garth Brooks CD, Tami Hoag's latest romantic thriller, a jar of real peanut butter and two videotapes on which Brittany had recorded the past three months' episodes of ER. It was America-in-a-box, and Melody had both laughed and cried at her older sister's thoughtfulness. It was the best birthday present she'd ever received.

Except now it looked as if she wouldn't live to see those episodes of ER. Or her twenty-fifth birthday.

Kurt Matthews was ignoring her again. He'd gone back to his asinine discussion with Chris Sterling. They were trying to figure out just how much CNN would pay them for the exclusive rights to their story after the deal between the terrorists and the U.S. government was made and they were released.

Matthews, the fool, actually had the gall to say that he hoped the talks weren't going too smoothly. He seemed to think that the monetary value of their story would increase with the length of their ordeal. And so far, they'd only been held for two days.

He—or Sterling, either, for that matter—didn't have a clue as to the seriousness of this situation.

Melody, on the other hand, had done research on this particular terrorist group who had overthrown the entire government in an unexpected coup early Wednesday morning. They'd taken the American embassy by storm shortly after that. They were terrorists, and the U.S. didn't negotiate with terrorists. Right now, they were only talking. But if the talking didn't end, and end soon, this group of zealots was not likely to continue to show their three civilian hostages the same amount of respect and creature comfort they had to date. Provided, of course, that one could call being locked in a tiny, nearly airless

office with two idiots, irregular deliveries of food and water and a washroom facility that no longer worked "comfortable."

Matthews and Sterling both seemed to think they were being held under rather dire conditions.

But Melody knew better.

She closed her eyes, trying to force away the image of the cold dankness of an underground cell. When she'd left Appleton to take this job at the embassy, she'd had no idea that the desert could be so cold during the winter months. It was March now—early spring—and it could still be chilly at night.

She focused instead on her feet. They were warm, clad in a pair of the socks and the cross trainers Brittany had sent.

They'd be taken from her—both shoes and socks—before she was thrown into that dark cell.

Lord, she had to stop thinking like that. It wasn't going to do her a bit of good.

Still, the image of the prison cell was better than the other picture her overactive imagination cooked up: three American infidels, dead at the hands of their captors.

Cowboy watched the back of the American embassy through high-powered binoculars. The place was jumping with tangos, arriving and leaving at apparently unscheduled times.

"Cat," he said almost silently into his lip microphone.

Capt. Joe Catalanotto, commander of SEAL Team Ten's Alpha Squad, was positioned on the other side of the building. He was cooling his heels with the five other members of the team, having set up temporary camp in an abandoned apartment. The owner of the unit was no doubt some smart son of a bitch who had grabbed his TV and run, realizing the obvious negatives in owning real estate so close to a building that could go up in flames at any moment.

For Alpha Squad's purposes, the apartment was perfect. The master-bedroom window had a nifty view of the front of the embassy. With one of the other SEALs seated in an easy chair in front of that window, and with Cowboy positioned somewhat less comfortably on a rooftop overlooking the back, they could track the tangos'—SEAL slang for terrorists—every move.

"Yeah, Jones." Cat's flat New York accent came in loud and clear over the headphones Ensign Harlan Jones, otherwise known as Cowboy, was wearing.

Cowboy said only one word. "Chaos." He had made himself invisible on the roof, but he was well aware that the windows were opened on the floor directly below him, so when he spoke, he was as concise and as quiet as possible. He kept his binoculars trained on the building, moving from one broken window to the next. He could see movement inside, shadowy figures. The place was huge—one of those old mothers of a building, built during the middle of the previous century. He didn't doubt for a moment that the hostages were secured in one of the inner chambers.

"Copy that," Catalanotto said, a trace of amusement in his voice. "We see it from this side, too. Whoever these clowns are, they're amateurs. We'll go in tonight. At oh-dark-hundred."

Cowboy had to risk a full sentence. "I recommend we move now." He could hear Cat's surprise in the silence that grew longer and longer.

"Jones, the sun'll be going down in less than three hours," the captain finally said. The SEALs worked best at night. They could move almost invisibly under the cover of darkness.

Cowboy switched the powerful lenses to the infrared setting and took another quick scan of the building. "We should go now."

"What do you see that I don't see, kid?" Joe Cat's question was made without even a trace of sarcasm. Yeah, Cat had a wagonload of experience that Cowboy couldn't begin to compete with. And yeah, Cat had recently gotten a pay raise to O-6—captain—while Cowboy was a measly O-1, an ensign. But Captain Joe Catalanotto was the kind of leader who took note of his team's individual strengths and used each man to his full ability. And sometimes even beyond.

Every man on the team could see through walls, provided they had the right equipment. But no one could take the information that equipment provided and interpret it the way Cowboy could. And Cat knew that

"At least fifty T's inside."

"Yeah, that's what Bobby tells me, too." Cat paused. "What's the big deal?"

"The pattern of movement."

Cowboy heard Cat take over Bobby's place at the bedroom window. There was silence, and then Cat swore. "They're making room for something." He swore again. "Or someone."

Cowboy clicked once into his lip mike—an affirmative. That's what he thought, too.

"They're clearing out the entire east side of the building," Joe Cat continued, now able to see what Cowboy saw. "How many more tangos are they expecting?"

It was a rhetorical question, but Cowboy answered it anyway. "Two hundred?"

Cat swore again and Cowboy knew what he was thinking. Fifty T's were manageable—particularly when they were of the Three Stooges variety, like the ones he'd been watching going in and out of the embassy all day long. But two hundred and fifty against seven SEALs... Those odds were a little skewed. Not to mention the fact that the SEALs didn't know if any of the soon-to-be-arriving tangos were real soldiers, able to tell the difference between their AK-47s and their elbows.

"Get ready to move," he heard Cat tell the rest of Alpha Squad.

"Cat."

"Yeah, Jones?"

"Three heat spots haven't moved much all day."

Catalanotto laughed. "Are you telling me you think you've located our hostages?"

Cowboy clicked once into his lip mike.

Christopher Sterling, Kurt Matthews and Melody Evans. Cowboy had been carrying those names inside his head ever since Alpha Squad was first briefed on this mission in the plane that took them to their insertion point—a high-altitude, low-opening parachute jump from high above the desert just outside the terrorist-controlled city.

He'd seen the hostages' pictures, too.

All of the men in Alpha Squad had held on to the picture of Melody Evans for a little bit longer than necessary. She couldn't have been more than twenty-two, twenty-three at most—hardly more than a kid. In the photo, she was dressed in blue jeans and a plain T-shirt that didn't show off her female figure but didn't quite manage to hide it, either. She was blue-eyed with wavy blond hair that tumbled down her back and a country-fresh, slightly shy smile and sweet face that reminded each and every one of them of their little sisters—even those of 'em like Cowboy who didn't have a little sister.

And Cowboy knew they were all thinking the same thing. As they were sitting there on that plane, waiting to reach their destination, that girl was at the mercy of a group of terrorists who weren't known for their humanitarian treatment of hostages. In fact, the opposite was true. This group's record of torture and abuse was well documented, as was their intense hatred of all things American.

He hated to think what they might do—had already done—to this young woman who could've been the poster model for the All-American Girl. But all day long, he'd kept a careful eye on the three heat sources he suspected were the hostages. And all day long, none of them had been moved.

"Fourth floor, interior room," he said quietly into his mike. "Northwest corner."

"I don't suppose in your free time you found us a way into the embassy?" Cat asked.

"Minimal movement on the top floor," Cowboy reported. Those windows were broken, too. "Roof to windows—piece a cake."

"And gettin' to the roof?" The south-of-the-Mason-Dixon-line voice that spoke over his headphones was that of Lt. Blue McCoy, Alpha Squad's point man and Joe Cat's second in command.

"Just a stroll from where I'm at. Connecting roofs. Route's clear—I've already checked."

"Why the hell did I bother bringing along the rest of you guys?" Cat asked. Cowboy could hear the older man's smile in his voice. "Good job, kid."

"Only kind I do," Cowboy drawled.

"That's what I really love about you, Junior." Senior Chief Daryl Becker, also known as Harvard, spoke up, his deep voice dry with humour. "Your humility. It's rare to find such a trait in one so young."

"Permission to move?" Cowboy asked.

"Negative, Jones," Cat replied. "Wait for Harvard. Go in as a team."

Cowboy clicked an affirmative, keeping his infrared glasses glued to the embassy.

It wouldn't be long now until they went inside and got Melody Evans and the others out.

It happened so quickly, Melody wasn't sure where they came from or who they were.

One moment she was sitting in the corner, writing in her notebook, and the next she was lying on her stomach on the linoleum, having been thrown there none too gently by one of the robed men who'd appeared out of thin air.

She felt the barrel of a gun jammed into her throat, just under her jaw, as she tried to make sense of the voices.

"Silence!" she was ordered in more languages than she could keep track of. "Keep your mouths shut or we'll shut 'em for you!"

"Dammit," she heard someone say in very plain English, "the girl's not here. Cat, we've got three pieces of luggage, but none of them's female."

"If none of them's female, one of 'em's a tango. Search 'em and do it right."

English. Yes. They were definitely speaking American English. Still, with that gun in her neck, she didn't dare lift her head to look up at them.

"Lucky, Bobby and Wes," another voice commanded, "search the rest of this floor. Find that girl."

Melody felt rough hands on her body, moving across her shoulders and down her back, sweeping down her legs. She was being searched for a weapon, she realized. One of the hands reached up expertly to feel between her legs as another pushed its way up underneath her arm and around to her chest. She knew the exact instant that each hand encountered either more or less than their owner expected, because whomever those hands belonged to, he froze.

Then he flipped her onto her back, and Melody found herself staring up into the greenest eyes she'd ever seen in her life.

He pulled off her hat and touched her hair, then looked at the black shoe polish that had come off on his fingers. He looked down at the moustache she had made from some of her own cut hair darkened with mascara and glued underneath her nose. He smiled as he looked back into her eyes. It was a smile that lit his entire face and made his eyes sparkle.

"Melody." It was more of a statement than a question.

But she nodded anyway.

"Ma'am, I'm Ensign Harlan Jones of the U.S. Navy SEALs," he said in a soft Western drawl. "We've come to take you home." He looked up then, speaking to one of the other hooded men. "Cat, belay that last order. We've found our female hostage, safe and sound."

"Absolutely not." Kurt Matthews folded his arms across his narrow chest. "They said if any of us attempted an escape, they'd kill us all. They said if we did what we were told, and if the government

complied with their modest list of demands, we'd be set free. I say we stay right here."

"There's no way we can get out of here undetected," the other man—Sterling—pointed out. "There's too many of them. They'll stop us and then they'll kill us. I think it's safer to do what they said."

Cowboy shifted impatiently in his seat. Negotiating with damn fools was not one of his strengths, yet Cat had left him here to try to talk some sense into these boneheads as the rest of the squad went to carry out the rest of their mission—the destruction of several extremely confidential files in the ambassador's personal office.

He knew that if worse came to worst, they'd knock 'em over the head if they had to and carry 'em out. But it would be a lot easier to move through the city, working their way toward the extraction point, without having to carry three unconscious bodies over their shoulders.

Not for the first time in the past twenty minutes, he found himself staring at Melody Evans.

He had to smile. And admire the hell out of her. There was no doubt in his mind that her quick thinking had saved her own life. She'd disguised herself as a man. She'd cut her long hair short, blackened it with shoe polish to hide its golden colour and glued some kind of straggly-looking moustache thing onto her face.

Even with her hair shorn so close to her head and that ridiculous piece of hair stuck underneath her nose, she was pretty. He couldn't imagine that he'd looked at her when they'd first come in and not seen right away that she was a woman. But he hadn't. He'd thrown her onto the floor, for God's sake. And then he'd groped her, searching for hidden weapons.

She glanced at him as if feeling his eyes on her, and he felt it again—that flash of sexual awareness that jolted to life between them. He held her gaze, boldly letting his smile grow wider, letting her take a good long look at this mutual attraction that hovered in the very air around them.

That photo he'd seen had made her look like someone's little sister. But meeting Melody Evans face-to-face made him well aware—and grateful—of the fact that while she may indeed have been someone's little sister, she sure as hell wasn't his.

With the exception of the silly moustache, she possessed damn near everything he liked most in a woman. She was tall and slender with a body that he knew firsthand was trim in some places, soft in others. Her face was pretty despite her lack of makeup and the smudges of shoe polish that decorated her forehead and cheeks and hid the shining gold of her hair. She had a small nose, a mouth that looked incredibly soft and crystal blue eyes surrounded by thick, dark lashes. Clear intelligence shone in those eyes. Tears had shown there, too, moments after he'd introduced himself to her. But despite that, she hadn't let herself cry, much to Cowboy's relief.

As he watched, she rubbed her left shoulder, and he knew whatever pain she was experiencing was his fault. That shoulder was where she'd landed when he'd first come in and thrown her onto the floor.

"I'm sorry we had to treat you so roughly, ma'am," he said. "But in our line of work, it doesn't pay to be polite and ask questions first."

"Of course," she murmured, glancing almost shyly at him. "I understand—"

Matthews drowned her out. "Well, *I* don't understand, and you can be damned sure your superiors are going to hear about this little incident. Holding the ambassador's staff at gunpoint and subjecting us to a body search!"

Cowboy didn't get a chance to defend Alpha Squad's actions because Melody Evans stood up and defended them for him. "These men came into this embassy looking for us," she said hotly. "They're risking their lives to be here right now—the same way they risked their lives when they opened that locked door and came into this room. They had no idea who or what was on the other side of that door!"

"Surely they could've seen just from looking that we were Americans," Matthews countered.

"Surely there's never been a terrorist who dresses up as a hostage and hides with his captives, waiting to blow away any rescuers," she lit into him. "And of course there's never been an American who's been brainwashed or coerced or bribed into defecting to the other side!"

For the first time since they'd let the hostages up off the floor, Kurt Matthews was silent.

Cowboy had to smile. He liked smart women—women who didn't suffer fools. And this one was more than smart. She was strong and clearly courageous, too—able to stand up and defend that which she believed in. He admired the swift action she took to disguise herself in the face of sheer disaster. Surely a woman with that much fight in her could be made to see how important it was that she leave here—and leave soon.

"Melody," he said, then corrected himself. "Miss Evans, it's now or never, ma'am. These tangeros aren't gonna let you go, and you know that as well as I do. If you let these gee—gentlemen, talk you into staying here, you're all as good as dead. Forgive me for being so blunt, ma'am, but that's the God's truth. It would make our job a whole hell of a lot easier if you would simply trust us to get you safely home."

"But Chris is right. There's only a few of you and so many of them."

Count on a woman to play devil's advocate and switch sides just when he was convinced he had a solid ally. Still, when she fixed those baby blues on him, his exasperation dissolved into sheer admiration. It was true, the odds didn't appear to be in their favour. She had every right to be concerned, and it was up to him to convince her otherwise.

"We're Navy SEALs, ma'am," he said quietly, hoping she'd heard of the special forces teams, hoping word of SEAL Team Ten's counterterrorist training had somehow made its way to whatever small town she'd grown up in.

But his words didn't spark any recognition in her eyes.

The taller man, Chris Sterling, shook his head. "You say that as if it's some kind of answer, but I don't know what that means."

"It means they think they're supermen," Matthews said scornfully.

"Will you please let Ensign Jones talk?" Melody said sharply, and Matthews fell silent.

"It means that even with only seven of us and fifty of them, the odds are still on our side," Cowboy told them, once again capturing Melody's gaze and holding it tightly. She was the one who was going to talk these other idiots into seeing reason. "It also means that the U.S. government has totally given up all hope of getting you out through negotiation or settlement. They don't send us in, Melody," he said, talking directly to her, "unless they're desperate."

She was scared. He could see that in her eyes. He didn't blame her. There was a part of him that was scared, too. Over the past few years, he'd learned to use that fear to hone his senses, to keep him alert and giving a full hundred and fifty percent or more. He'd also learned to hide his fear. Confidence bred confidence, and he tried to give her a solid dose of that feeling as he smiled reassuringly into Melody's ocean blue eyes.

"Trust us," he said again. "Trust me."

She turned back to the other hostages. "I believe him," she said bluntly. "I'm going."

Matthews stood up, indignant, menacing. "You stupid bitch. Don't you get it? If you try to escape, they'll kill us!"

"Then you better come, too," Melody said coolly.

"No!" His voice got louder. "No, we're staying here, right, Sterling? All of us. These steroid-pumped sea lions or whatever they call themselves can go ahead and get themselves killed, but we're staying right here." His voice got even louder. "In fact, since Mr. Jones seems to want so badly to die, I can give him a hand and shout for the guards to come and turn him into hamburger meat with their machine guns right now!"

Melody didn't see the broad-shouldered SEAL move, let alone raise his hand, but before she could blink, he was rather gently lowering Kurt Matthews onto the floor.

"By the way, it's Ensign Jones," he said to the now unconscious man. He flexed the fingers of the hand he'd used to put Matthews into that state and flashed an apologetic smile in Melody's direction before he looked up at Chris Sterling. "How about you?" he asked the other man as he straightened up to his full height. "You want to walk out of this embassy, or do you want to get carried out like your buddy here?"

"Walk," Sterling managed to say, staring down at Matthews. "I'll walk, thanks."

The door swung silently open, and a big black man—taller even than Ensign Harlan Jones—stepped into the room. Harvard. He was the one Ensign Jones had called Harvard. "You ready, Junior?"

"Zeppo, Harpo and Groucho here need robes," Jones told the other man, sending a quick wink in her direction. "And sandals."

Groucho. She fingered her false mustache. He'd gestured toward Matthews when he'd said Harpo. Harpo. The silent Marx brother. Melody laughed aloud. Chris Sterling looked at her as if she was crazy to laugh when at any moment they could be killed, but Jones gave her another wink and a smile.

Kevin Costner. That's who Jones looked like. He looked like a bigger, beefier, much younger version of the Hollywood heartthrob. And she had no doubt he knew it, too. That smile could melt hearts as well as bolster failing courage.

"Melody, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to take off those kicks, hon."

Hon. Honey. Well, she'd certainly gone from being called Miss Evans and ma'am to hon awfully fast. And as far as taking off her shoes... "These are new," she told him. "And warm. I'd rather wear them, if you don't mind."

"I do mind," Jones told her apologetically. "Check out the bottoms of my sandals, then look at the bottoms of those things you're wearing."

She did. The brand name of the athletic shoes was emblazoned across the bottoms, worked into the grooved and patterned-to-grip soles of the sneakers.

"Everyone else in this city—and maybe even in this entire country—has sandals like mine," he continued, lifting his foot to show her the smooth leather sole. "If you go out wearing those, every time you take a step you'll leave a unique footprint. It will be the equivalent of signing your name in the dirt. And that will be like leaving a sign pointing in our direction that says Escaped American Hostages, This-a-way."

Melody took off the sneakers.

"That's my girl," he said, approval and something else warming his voice. He squeezed her shoulder briefly as he turned his attention to several more men who were coming silently into the room.

That's my girl.

His soft words should have made her object and object strenuously. Melody wasn't a girl. Jones couldn't have been more than a few years older than she was at most, and he would never have let anyone call him a boy.

And yet there was something oddly comforting about his words. She was his girl. Her life was totally in his hands. With his help, she could get out of here and return to the safety of Appleton. Without his help, she was as good as dead.

Still, she couldn't help but notice that little bit of something else that she'd heard in his voice. That subtle tone that told her he was a man and she was a woman and he wasn't ever going to forget that.

She watched Ensign Jones as he spoke quietly to the other SEALs. He certainly was a piece of work. She couldn't believe those smiles he kept giving her. Here they were, deep inside an embassy overrun with terrorists, and Jones had been firing off his very best bedroom smile in her direction. He was as relaxed as a man leaning against a bar, offering to buy her a drink, asking for her sign. But this wasn't a bar, this was a war zone. Still, Jones looked and acted as if he were having fun.

Who was this guy? He was either very stupid, very brave or totally insane.

Totally insane, she decided, watching him as he took a bundle of robes from another of the SEALs. Underneath his own robe, he wore some kind of dark-coloured vest that appeared to be loaded with all kinds of gear and weaponry. He had what looked to be a lightweight, nearly invisible set of headphones on his head, as well as an attached microphone similar to, but smaller than, something a telephone operator would wear. It stretched out on a hinged piece of wire or plastic and could be manoeuvred directly in front of his mouth when he needed to talk.

What kind of man did this kind of thing for a living?

Jones tossed one of the robes to Chris Sterling and the other to her, along with another of those smiles.

It was hard to keep from smiling back.

As Melody watched, Jones spoke to someone outside the room through his little mike and headphones as he efficiently and quickly dressed the still-unconscious Kurt Matthews in the third robe.

He was talking about sandals. Sandals, apparently, were a bit harder to procure than the robes had been. At least it was difficult to find something in her size.

"She's going to have to go in her socks," one of the other SEALs finally concluded.

"It's cold out there," Jones protested.

"I don't care," Melody said. "I just want to go."

"Let's do it," the black man said. "Let's move, Cowboy. Cat controls the back door. Now's the time."

Jones turned to Melody. "Put the kicks back on. Quickly."

"But you said—"

He pushed her down into a chair and began putting the sneakers on her feet himself. "Lucky, got your duct tape?"

"You know I do."

"Tape the bottom of her foot," Jones ordered, thrusting the tied shoe on Melody's right foot toward the other SEAL.

The SEAL called Lucky got to work, and Jones himself began taping the bottom of her left sneaker, using a roll of silvery grey duct tape he, too, had been carrying in his vest.

They were covering the tread, making sure that when she walked, she wouldn't leave an unusual footprint behind.

"It might be slippery." Jones was kneeling in front of her, her foot on his thigh, as if he were some kind of fantasy shoe salesman. "And we're going to have to make sure that if you wear it through, we tape 'em up again, okay?"

Melody nodded.

He smiled. "Good girl." He moved his mike so that it was in front of his mouth. "Okay, Cat, we're all set. We're coming out." He turned to Melody. "You're with me, okay? Whatever happens, stick close to me. Do exactly what I say, no questions. Just do it, understand?"

Melody nodded again. She was his girl. She couldn't think of anything else she wanted to be right at that particular moment in time.

"If shots are fired," he continued, and for once his face was serious, his eyes lit with intensity rather than

amusement or attraction, "get behind me. I will protect you. In return, I need two hundred percent of your trust."

Melody couldn't tear her gaze away from those neon green eyes. She nodded.

Maybe this man was insane, but he was also incredibly brave. He'd come into this terrorist stronghold to help rescue her. He'd been safe and sound, but he chose to give that up and risk his life for hers. I will protect you. As bold and as confident as his words were, the truth was that the next few minutes could see them both killed.

"In case something goes wrong," she began, intending to thank him. God knows if something went wrong, she wouldn't have the chance to thank him. She knew without a doubt that he would die first-taking bullets meant for her.

But he didn't let her finish. "Nothing's gonna go wrong. Joe Cat's got the door. Getting out of this latrine's gonna be a piece of cake. Trust me, Mel."

He took her hand, pulling her with him out into the hall.

Piece of cake.

She almost believed him.

Chapter 2

Something was wrong.

Melody could tell from the seriousness with which the man Ensign Jones called Joe Cat was talking to the shorter, blond-haired man named Blue.

They'd made it safely out of the embassy just as Jones had promised. They'd come farther than she'd ever thought possible. They'd travelled across and outside the limits of the city, up into the hills, moving quietly through the darkness.

The danger had not ended when they left the embassy. The city was under military rule, and there was a pre-dusk curfew that was strictly enforced. If they were spotted by one of the squads patrolling the streets, they would be shot without any questions.

More than once, they'd had to hide as a patrol came within inches of them.

"Close your eyes," Jones had murmured into her ear as the soldiers had approached. "Don't look at them. And don't hold your breath. Breathe shallowly, softly. They won't see us, I promise."

Melody's shoulder had been pressed against him, and she leaned even closer, taking strength from his solid warmth. And from the thought that if she died, at least she wouldn't die alone.

After that, each time they had to hide, he'd slipped one arm around her, keeping his other arm free for his deadly-looking assault weapon. Melody had given up her pretence of being strong and independent. She'd let him hold her—let him be big and strong, let herself take comfort from his strength. She'd tucked

her head underneath his chin, closing her eyes and listening to the steady beating of his heart kick into overdrive, breathing softly and shallowly as he'd told her.

So far they hadn't been caught.

Jones came and sat next to her now.

"We've got a problem," he said bluntly, not trying to hide the truth from her.

Her trust in him went up to just over a thousand percent. He wasn't trying to pretend everything was hunky-dory when it so obviously was not.

"The chopper's a no-show," he told her. In the moonlight, his expression was serious, his mouth grim instead of curling up into his usual smile. "They're ten minutes late. We're getting ready to split up. We can't keep moving together. Come daybreak, a group this size is going to get noticed. And it won't be long before the tingos realize you and Pete and Line got away."

Pete and Line. The men who made up two-thirds of the Mod Squad. Even at his most serious, this man couldn't resist making a joke of sorts. "Ten minutes isn't that long," Melody countered. "Shouldn't we just wait?"

Jones shook his head. "One minute isn't that long. Ten is too long. The chopper's not coming, Mel. Something went wrong, and our waiting here is putting us in danger." He lifted one of her feet, looking at the bottom of her sneaker. "How's that duct tape holding up?"

"It's starting to wear through," Melody admitted.

He handed her his roll of tape. "Can you put on another layer yourself? We need to be ready to leave here in about three minutes, but right now I want to put in my two cents about our next move."

Melody took the tape from him as he stood up.

Split up. He'd said they were going to split up. Melody felt a sudden rush of panic. "Jones," she called softly, and he paused, looking back at her. "Please. I want to stay with you."

She couldn't see his eyes in the shadows, but she saw him nod.

Dawn was beginning to light the eastern sky before they stopped moving.

Harvard had the point and he'd travelled twice as far as Cowboy and Melody had during the night. He'd continuously moved ahead, silently scouting out the best route to take, then doubling back to report what he'd seen.

Cowboy was glad to have H. on his team. Moving through hostile territory would've been tricky enough for two SEALs on their own. Add a female civilian into the equation, and that mission got significantly harder. Getting across the border was going to be a real pain in the butt.

He glanced at Melody. The small smile she gave him both worried and elated him.

It was obvious she trusted him. He hadn't been the only one in Alpha Squad to hear her say that she wanted to stay with him. Under normal circumstances, such an overheard remark would've been subject to merciless teasing. Cowboy Jones, notorious lady-killer, strikes again.

But every one of those other men knew that the lady's words only verified that Cowboy had done his job and done it well. It wasn't easy to gain the complete confidence and trust of a former hostage. Kurt Matthews, for instance, hadn't bonded to Cowboy in quite the same way.

Still, the girl trusted him. He saw it in her eyes every time he looked at her. He knew without a doubt that in the course of a few short hours, he had become the most important person in her world.

He'd spent quite a bit of time studying the psychology of hostages and the emotions and fears involved in a rescue mission such as this one. He'd spent twice as much time learning what to expect from himself—his own behaviour and psychological reactions when faced with life-and-death situations.

And what worried him most about Melody Evans's smile was not the fact that he'd become the centre of her universe. No, what worried him most was that she had somehow managed to become the centre of his.

He knew it could happen. The danger added to the tremendous responsibility of preserving another's life and multiplied by a very natural and honest sexual attraction sometimes resulted in an emotional response above and beyond the norm.

He'd first been aware of his inappropriate response to this girl when they'd hidden from the city's patrols. She'd huddled close and he'd put his arm around her—nothing wrong with that. She'd rested her head against his chest—and there was nothing wrong with her drawing strength and support from him that way, either.

But then, beneath the pungent odour of the shoe polish she wore on her hair, beneath the more subtle yet no less sharp odour of fear that surrounded all of the former hostages, he'd smelled something sweet, something distinctly female.

And then, right then, when the curfew patrol was inches away from them, when they were nanoseconds away from being discovered and killed, he'd felt Melody relax. The tension among the other hostages and the SEALs could've been cut with a knife, but Melody had damn near fallen asleep in his arms.

He knew in that instant that she trusted him more completely than anyone had ever trusted him before. Her faith in him was strong enough to conquer her fear. Her life was in his hands, and she'd placed it there willingly, trusting that if she died it would be because there was no other way out.

And just like that, as they hid behind trash in one of the city's back alleys, Cowboy's entire life changed. He felt his pulse rate accelerate out of control, felt his body respond to her nearness.

He might've been able to dismiss it as mere sexual desire except that it happened over and over again—even when she wasn't touching him. All this girl had to do was smile at him, and he got that same hot, possessive rush.

Cowboy knew he should have mentioned the way he was feeling to Joe Cat before they split into three smaller groups. But he didn't. He didn't want to risk Cat's pulling him away from Melody. He wanted to make damn sure she got out of this armpit of a country alive. As much as he trusted his team-mates, he knew the only way he'd be certain of that was to stay close, to take care of her himself.

With Harvard's help.

As the sun climbed above the horizon, they sat for a moment in the growing warmth outside a shallow cave Harvard had found cut into a desolate outcropping of rocks.

Once they warmed up, they'd spend the daylight hours here, out of the sun and out of sight of anyone wandering the foothills. Come nightfall, they would set out again, heading steadily north.

"I'll take the first watch," Cowboy told Harvard.

Melody was sitting next to him, near the entrance to the cave, her head back, eyes closed, face lifted toward the warmth of the sun. He touched her arm lightly, ready to pass her his canteen, but she didn't move. She was exhausted, but she hadn't complained once, all night long.

"Maybe you should get her settled first," Harvard said in a low voice.

"Am I suddenly not here?" Melody asked, opening her eyes and surprising them both.

Harvard laughed, a low, rich chuckle. "Sorry," he said. "I thought you were asleep."

"Where are we heading?" she asked. Her eyes were nearly the same shade of blue as the cloudless sky. "Up to the coast?" They flashed in Cowboy's direction as he handed her the canteen.

As their fingers touched, he felt an instant connection, a flood of electricity. And he knew damn well she felt it, too.

She was covered with dust from the road, smeared with shoe polish and utterly bone weary. Yet at the same time, she managed to be the most beautiful woman Cowboy could ever remember seeing. Damn, he shouldn't be feeling this way. After this was over, he would have to go in for a psychological review, work with the unit shrink and try to pinpoint what it was, exactly, that he'd done wrong. Find out when it was that he'd let her get under his skin...

Harvard nodded. "We're going for the ocean." He glanced at Cowboy. They hadn't had much time to discuss their route. "I thought it would be easier to leave the country by boat."

"Or plane, Senior Chief," Cowboy interjected. "Get us home a whole hell of a lot faster."

Harvard caught and held his gaze, and Cowboy knew the older man was thinking the same thing he was. They'd both studied a map of this country during the briefing. There was a major city directly between their current position and the ocean. According to the map, that city had an airfield. Maybe instead of skirting the city, they should get close enough to check out that airfield.

"With any luck, it'll be a military base," Cowboy said aloud. "We're the last people they'll be expecting to show up there."

Harvard nodded. "The best defence is a strong offence."

"Do you two always communicate through non sequiturs?" Melody asked.

Harvard stood up. "Junior thinks we should steal a plane tonight, and crazy as it sounds, I agree. But

right now I've got a combat nap scheduled." He paused before going into the cave, turning back to Melody. "You've got dibs on whatever soft ground is in there, milady," he said.

But she shook her head. "Thanks, but...I want to get warm first," she told him. She glanced at Cowboy and a faint blush spread along her cheeks as if she realized how transparent she was. No one was fooled. It was clear she wanted to be out here with her own personal hero.

Cowboy felt it again. That hot rush of emotion.

Harvard paused just inside the cave. "Don't let her fall asleep out here," he instructed Cowboy. "And make sure you get your Texan butt in the shade before too long, too. I don't want you two pigment-challenged types unable to move come dusk because of a sunburn."

"Yes, Mother," Cowboy droned.

"And wake me in four." Harvard headed toward the back of the cave. "No more, no less."

Cowboy looked at Melody and smiled. "Hell, I thought he'd never leave."

She blushed again.

"You okay?" he asked, both wishing she wasn't sitting quite so far away and glad as hell for the distance between them. God help him if he actually got her into his arms when it wasn't a life-and-death situation.

"I wish I could wash my face," she told him.

Cowboy shook his head in apology. "We've got to save the water I've got for drinking," he told her.

"I know," she said. "I just wish it, that's all."

The sun was warming the air considerably, and Cowboy loosened his robe and even unfastened the black combat vest he wore underneath.

Her next words surprised him. "I thought we'd be dead by now."

"Tomorrow at this time, we'll be on America-friendly soil."

She shifted her legs and winced slightly, then pulled her feet closer to untie her sneakers. "You say that with such conviction."

"Have I been wrong yet?" he countered.

She looked up at him, and her eyes were so wide, Cowboy felt as if he might fall into them and drown. "No," she said.

She turned away from him then, looking down as she started to slip off her sneakers.

That was when Cowboy saw the blood on her socks. The entire backs of her socks were stained. She saw it, too, and stopped trying to take off her sneakers. She pulled her feet underneath her as if she intended to hide the blood from him.

"Are you really from Texas?" she asked.

Cowboy was shocked. She was. She was planning to not tell him that her new sneakers had rubbed her heels raw. She wasn't going to mention that her feet were bleeding, for God's sake. Every step she'd taken last night had to have been sheer agony, but she hadn't said a word.

"Yeah," he managed to say. "Fort Worth."

She smiled. "You're kidding. How did someone from Fort Worth end up in the navy?"

Cowboy looked her squarely in the eye. "I know that your feet are bleeding," he said bluntly. "Why the hell didn't you tell me about that, like twelve hours ago?" His voice came out sounding harsher, sharper than he'd intended.

And although her smile faded and her face went a shade paler, she lifted her chin and met his gaze just as steadily. "Because it wasn't important."

"I have a medical kit. I could have wrapped 'em. All you had to do was say something!"

"I didn't want to slow us down," she said quietly.

Cowboy took his medikit from his combat vest as he stood up. "Are you going to take those sneakers off, or do you want me to do it for you?"

As he knelt in front of Melody, he could see her pain reflected in her face as she silently slid her feet out of her sneakers. Her eyes welled with tears, but she fought them, blinking them back, once again refusing to cry.

Her knuckles were white, hands clasped tightly in her lap, as he pulled off one sock and then the other as gently as he could.

"Actually," he said quietly, hoping to distract her with his words, "I didn't move to Fort Worth until I was about twelve. Before that, I lived damn near everywhere in the world. My old man's career Navy, and wherever he was stationed, that's where we lived."

She had extremely nice feet—long and slender, with straight toes. She had remnants of green polish on her toenails, as if she'd tried hastily to remove it but hadn't gotten it all off. He liked the idea of green nail polish. It was different. Intriguing.

Sexy.

Cowboy pulled his attention back to the task at hand. He rested her feet on his thigh as he opened his canteen and used some of their precious water to clean off the blood. He felt her stiffen as he touched her, and his stomach twisted as he tried his best to be gentle.

"He just made full admiral," he continued, telling her about his father. "He's stationed up in D.C. these days. But Mom still lives in Fort Worth, which just about says it all, considering that Fort Worth is about as landlocked a city as you can get."

He gave her a quick smile to offset the depressing undertones of his story. Yeah, his home life had sucked. His father had been by-the-book Navy. The old man was a perfectionist—harsh and demanding

and cold. He'd run his family the same way he'd commanded his ships, which, to both his young son and his wife, left much to be desired.

"So what made you join the Navy?" she asked, bracing herself for the antibiotic ointment he was about to spread on her raw and broken skin.

"Actually, the old guy manipulated me into it," Cowboy told her with a grin, applying the ointment as quickly as he could. "You don't make admiral without having some kind of smarts, and old Harlan the first is nobody's fool."

He wiped the ointment off his hands on the bottom edge of his robe, then dug in his kit for bandages. "After I graduated from high school, my old man wanted me to go to college and then into the U.S. Navy's officer's program. I flipped him the bird and set off for my own glowing future—which I was sure I'd find on the rodeo circuit. I spent about a year doing that—during which time the old man squirmed with embarrassment. Even in retrospect, that makes it damn well worth it."

He smiled up into Melody's eyes. "He started sending me letters, telling me about the problems he was having with 'those blasted Navy SEALs.' I knew when he was much younger, before I was born, he'd gotten into the BUD'S program and went through the training to become a SEAL. But he was one of the eighty-five percent who couldn't cut it. He was flushed out of the program—he wasn't tough enough. So every time he wrote to me, I could see that he was carrying around this great big grudge against the SEAL units."

"So you joined the SEALs to tick him off," Melody guessed.

Cowboy nodded, his grin widening. "And to show him that I could do something better than him—to succeed where he'd failed." He chuckled. "The crafty old son of a bitch broke down and cried tears of joy and pride the day I got my budweiser—my SEAL pin. I was floored—I'd rarely seen the old guy smile, let alone weep. Turns out that by joining the SEALs, I'd put myself exactly where he wanted me to be. He didn't hate the SEAL units the way he'd let me believe. He admired and respected them—and he wanted me to know what it felt like to achieve my potential, to be one of 'em. Turns out dear old Dad loved me after all."

She was looking at him as if he was some kind of hero. "You're amazing," she said softly. "For you to realize all that and come to terms with him that way..."

"One of my specialties is psychology," he told her with a shrug. "It's really not that big a deal."

All he had to do was to lean forward and he could kiss those soft, sweet lips. She wouldn't object. In fact, he could tell from the sudden spark of heat in her eyes that she would welcome the sensation of his mouth on hers.

Instead, he looked away, bandaging her feet in silence. Yes, one of his specialties was psychology, and he knew exactly the kind of problems even just one kiss could cause. But maybe, just maybe, after he'd brought her to safety...

"You should get some sleep," he told her quietly.

Melody glanced toward the cave. "Can I stay here, up near the entrance?"

Near him.

Cowboy nodded. "Sure," he said quietly, moving out of the sun and back into the shade himself. He found a fairly flat, fairly comfortable rock to lean against as he stretched his legs out in front of him, his HK MP5-K held loosely in his arms.

He kept his eyes on the distant horizon as she wrapped herself in her robe and settled down, right on the ground, not far from him. He wished he had a bedroll or a blanket to give her. Hell, he wished he had dinner reservations at some fancy restaurant and the room key to some four-star hotel to give her. He wished he could fall with her back onto some soft hotel bed and...

He pushed that thought far, far away. This wasn't the time or place for such distractions.

It wasn't long before the sound of her breathing turned slow and steady. He glanced at her and his heart clenched.

In sleep, she looked barely more than seventeen, her lashes long and dark against the smoothness of her cheeks. It didn't take much to imagine what she'd look like with that black shoe polish washed out of her hair. The boyishly short cut she'd given herself to hide her femaleness only served to emphasize her slender neck and pretty face.

Cowboy knew with a grim certainty that seemed to flow through him and out into the timeless antiquity of the moonlike landscape that he was going to bring this girl back home where she belonged. Or he was going to die trying.

Melody was sleeping on her side, curled into a ball with the exception of one arm that was stretched out and reaching toward him. And as he looked closer, he saw that in her tightly clasped fist she was holding on to the very edge of his robe.

"Shouldn't he be back by now?"

Melody heard the anxiety in her voice, saw a reflection of it in the darkly patient eyes of the man Jones called Harvard.

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

"Junior's doing his job, Melody," Harvard told her calmly. "This is something he does well—you're going to have to trust him to do it and return in his own good time."

The this that Ensign Jones was doing was to creep undetected into a terrorist-held air base. It was only a small air base, he'd told her as if that would reassure her, with only a dozen aircraft of any type out on the field. He was going over the barbed-wire fence to make sure that the dilapidated hangars didn't hold some fancy high-tech machine that could come roaring up into the sky and shoot them down as they made their getaway.

After Jones had checked out the hangar, he was going to sneak out into the airfield and select the biggest, fastest, most powerful plane of all to use for their escape. And after he did that, he was going to meet them here.

Then all three of them would go back over the fence and roar off in a stolen plane into the coming

sunrise.

After he came back. If he came back.

"You call him Junior," she said, desperate for something to talk about besides Jones's whereabouts. "But that other man, Joe Cat, he called Ensign Jones kid. And everyone else called him Cowboy. Doesn't anyone call him Harlan?"

Harvard smiled. His straight white teeth flashed, reflecting a beam of moonlight that streamed in through one of the cracks in the boarded-up windows. "His mom does. But that's about it. He hates being called Harlan. I only call him that when I want to make him really mad. It's his father's name, too. His father is Admiral Harlan Jones."

"I know. He told me."

Harvard lifted his eyebrows. "No kidding. Told you about his old man. I'm surprised, but...I guess I shouldn't be—Junior's always been full of surprises." He paused. "I worked closely with the senior Jones quite a few years ago. I know the admiral quite well. I guess that's why I call his son Junior Junior."

"And the other men call him Cowboy because he's from Texas?"

"Legend has it he came to BUD/S wearing an enormous rodeo ring and a cowboy hat." Harvard laughed softly.

"BUD/S," Melody repeated. "That's where SEALs go for training?"

"Not necessarily where, but what," he corrected her. "It's the training program for SEAL wanna-be's. Junior walked into this particular session out in California wearing everything but a pair of spurs, and the instructors took one look at him and named him Cowboy. The nickname stuck."

Melody wished he would come back.

She closed her eyes, remembering the way Jones had gently awakened her as the sun was starting to set. He'd given her a sip of water from his canteen and some kind of high-protein energy bar from a pocket of his vest.

He'd also given her his sandals.

He must've spent most of the time he'd been on watch cutting down the soles and reworking the leather straps to fit her much smaller feet. At first she refused them, but he'd pointed out that they wouldn't fit him now anyway.

Jones was barefoot at this very moment. Barefoot and somewhere on that air base with God only knows how many terrorists—

"Where are you from, Miss Melody Evans?" Harvard's rich voice interrupted her grim thoughts.

"Massachusetts," she told him.

"Oh yeah? Me, too. Where exactly?"

"Appleton. It's west of Boston. West and a little north."

"I grew up in Hingham," Harvard told her. "South shore. My family's still there." He smiled. "Actually, there's not much of my family left. Everyone's gone off to college, with the exception of my littlest sister. And even she heads out this September."

"I don't even know your real name," Melody admitted.

"Becker," he told her. "Senior Chief Daryl Becker."

"Did you really go to Harvard?"

He nodded. "Yes, I did. How about you? Where'd you go to school?"

Melody shook her head. "This isn't working. I know you're trying to distract me, but I'm sorry, it's just not working."

Harvard's brown eyes were sympathetic. "You want me to be quiet?"

"I want Jones to come back."

Silence. It surrounded her, suffocated her, made her want to jump out of her skin.

"Please don't stop talking," she finally blurted.

"First time I worked with the junior Harlan Jones was during a hostage rescue," Harvard told her, "back, oh, I don't know, about six years ago."

Melody nearly choked. "You've been doing this sort of thing for six years?"

"More than that."

She gazed into his eyes searchingly, looking for an explanation. Why? "Risking your life for a living this way is not normal."

Harvard laughed. "Well, none of us ever claimed to be that."

"Are you married?" she asked. "How does your wife stand it?"

"I'm not," he told her. "But some of the guys are. Joe Cat is. And Blue McCoy."

"They're somewhere out in the countryside tonight, hiding from the terrorists, the way we are," she realized. "Their wives must love that."

"Their wives don't know where they are."

Melody snorted. "Even better."

"It takes a strong man to become a SEAL," Harvard told her quietly. "And it takes an even stronger woman to love that man."

Love. Who said anything about love?

"Does SEAL stand for something, or is it just supposed to be cute?" she asked, trying to get the subject back to safer ground.

"It stands for Sea, Air and Land. We learn to operate effectively in all of those environments." He laughed. "Cute's not a word that comes to mind when I think about the SEAL units."

"Sea, air and land," she repeated. "It sounds kind of like the military equivalent of a triathlon."

Harvard's head went up and he held out a hand, motioning for her to be silent.

In a matter of an instant, he had changed from a man casually sitting in the basement entrance of a burned-out building to a warrior, every cell in his body on alert, every muscle tensed to fight. He held his gun aimed at the door, raising it slightly as the door was pushed open and...

It was Jones.

Melody forced herself not to move toward him. She forced herself to sit precisely where she was, forced herself not to say a word. But she couldn't keep her relief from showing in her eyes.

"Let's move," he said to Harvard.

There was blood on his robe—even Harvard noticed it. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Jones nodded dismissively. "I'm fine. Let's do it. Let's get the hell out of here."

Melody didn't want to think about whose blood that was on his robe. She didn't want to think about what he'd been through, what he'd had to do tonight to guarantee her safety.

There was blood on his bare feet, too.

"Are we going to do this by stealth or by force?" Harvard asked.

"By stealth," Jones answered. His smile was long gone. "Unless they see us. Then we'll use force. And we'll send 'em straight to hell."

He looked directly at her, and in the moonlight his eyes looked tired and old. "Come on, Melody. I want to take you home."

They were halfway to the plane before they were spotted.

Cowboy knew it was really only a question of when—not if—they were seen. It had to happen sooner or later. There was no way they could take a plane from an airfield without someone noticing.

He'd just hoped they wouldn't be noticed until they were taxiing down the runway.

But nothing else had gone right tonight, starting with his surprising four terrorists in the hangar. He'd had some luck, though—only one of them had had an automatic weapon, and it had jammed. If it hadn't, he wouldn't be running toward the plane now. He wouldn't be doing much of anything. Instead, he was racing across the sun-cracked concrete. He was both pulling Melody Evans along and trying to shield her

with his body from the bullets he knew were sure to accompany the distant cries to halt.

He'd dispatched the four men in the hangar efficiently and silently. As a SEAL, he was good at many things, and taking out the enemy was something he never shied from. But he didn't like it. He'd never liked it.

"You want to clue me in as to where we're going?" Harvard shouted.

"Twelve o'clock," Cowboy responded. And then there it was—a tiny Cessna, a mere mosquito compared to the bigger planes on the field.

Harvard's voice went up an octave. "Junior, what the hell...? I thought you were going to swipe us the biggest, meanest, fastest—"

"Did you want to take the 727?" Cowboy asked as he grabbed for the handle of the door, swung it open and gave Melody a boost inside. "It was this or the 727, and I sure as hell didn't want to be a sitting duck out on the runway, waiting for those jet engines to warm up."

He'd run the checklist when he'd been out here earlier, so he merely pulled the blocks and started the engine. "This way, I figured we'd be a smaller target in the air, too, in case the tangos want to give their antiaircraft toys a test run."

But Harvard wasn't listening. He was standing, legs spread, feet braced against the ground, firing his AK-47 in a sweeping pattern, keeping the wolves at bay.

"Do you know how to fly a plane?" Melody shouted over the din.

"Between me and H., there's nothing we can't pilot." Cowboy reached back behind him, pushing her head down as a bullet broke the back window. "Stay down!"

He gunned the engine, using the flaps to swing the plane in a tight, quick circle so that the passenger door was within Harvard's grasp.

He took off before H. even had the door fully open, let alone had climbed in. They headed down toward the edge of the field at a speed much too fast to make the necessary U-turn to get onto the main runway.

"I assume you've got another plan in mind," Harvard said, fastening his seat belt. He was a stickler for things like personal safety. It seemed almost absurd. Forty men were shooting at them, and H. was making sure his seat belt was on correctly.

"We're not using the runway," Cowboy shouted, pushing the engine harder, faster. "We're going to take off...right...now!"

He pulled back the stick and the engine screamed as they climbed at an impossibly steep angle to avoid hitting the rooftops of nearby buildings.

Cowboy heard Harvard shout, and then, by God, they were up. They were in the air.

He couldn't contain his own whoops of excitement and success. "Melody, honey, I told you we were going to get you home!"

Melody cautiously raised her head. "Can I sit up now?"

"No, it's not over yet." Harvard was much too grim as he looked over his shoulder, back at the rapidly disappearing airfield. "They're going to send someone after us—try to force us down."

"No, they're not," Cowboy said, turning to grin at him. God, for the first time in hours, he could smile again.

They were flying without lights, heading due east. This godforsaken country was so tiny that at this rate of speed, with the wind behind them, they'd be in friendly airspace in a matter of minutes. It was true they'd covered a great deal of the distance last night. But this was by far the easiest way of crossing the border.

"Aren't we flying awfully low?" Melody asked.

"We're underneath their radar," Cowboy told her. "As soon as we're across the border, I'll bring 'er up to a higher altitude."

Harvard was still watching their six, waiting for another plane to appear behind them. "I don't know how you can be so convinced they're not going to follow, Jones."

"I am convinced," Cowboy told him. "What do you think took me so long earlier tonight? I didn't stop for a sandwich in the food commissary, that's for damn sure."

Harvard's eyes narrowed. "Did you...?"

"I did."

Harvard started to laugh.

"What?" Melody asked. "What did you do?"

"How many were there?" Harvard asked.

Cowboy grinned. "About a dozen. Including the 727."

Melody turned to Harvard. "What did he do?"

He swung around in his seat to face her. "Junior here disabled every other plane on that field. Including the 727. There are a whole bunch of grounded tangerines down there right now, hopping mad."

Cowboy glanced back into the shadows, hoping to see her smile. But as far as he could tell, her expression was serious, her eyes subdued.

"We are crossing the border," Harvard announced. "Boys and girls, it looks as if we are nearly home!"

Ensign Harlan Cowboy Junior Kid Jones landed the little airplane much more smoothly and easily than he'd taken off.

Melody could see the array of ambulances and Red Cross trucks zooming out across the runways to meet them in the early dawn light. Within moments, they would taxi to a stop and climb out of the plane.

She wanted four tall glasses of water, no ice, lined up in front of her so that she could drink her fill without stopping. She wanted a shower in a hotel with room service. She wanted the fresh linens and soft pillows of a king-size bed. She wanted clean clothes and a hairdresser to make some sense out of the ragged near scalping she'd given herself.

But before she had any of that, she wanted to hold Harlan Jones in her arms. She wanted to hold him tightly, to thank him with the silence of her embrace for all that he had done for her.

He'd done so much for her. He'd given her so much. His kindness. His comforting arms. His morale-bolstering smiles. His encouraging words. His sandals.

And oh yeah. He'd killed for her, to keep her safe, to deliver her to freedom.

She'd seen the blood on his robe, seen the look in his eyes, on his face. He'd run into trouble out alone on the air base and he'd been forced to take enemy lives. And the key word there was not enemy. It was lives.

Melody was long familiar with the expression "All's fair in love and war." And this was a war. The legal government had been overthrown and the country had been invaded by terrorist forces. They'd threatened American lives. She knew full well that it was a clear-cut case of "them" or "us."

What shook her up the most was that this was what Cowboy Jones did. This was what he did, day in, day out. He'd done it for the past six years and he'd continue to do it until he retired. Or was killed.

Melody thought about that blood on Jones's robe, thought about the fact that it just as easily could have been his own blood.

All was fair in love and war.

But what were the rules if you were unlucky enough to fall in love with a warrior?

Jones cut the engine, then pushed the door open with his bare feet. But instead of climbing out, he turned around to face Melody, giving her his hand for support as she moved up through the cramped cabin and toward the door.

He slid down out of the plane, then looked up at her.

He'd taken off his blood-streaked robe, but he still wore that black vest with its array of velcroed pockets. It hung open over a black T-shirt that only barely disguised his sweat and grime. His face was streaked with dirt and dust, his hair matted against his head. There was shoe polish underneath his chin and on his neck—from where she'd burrowed against him, stealing strength and comfort from his arms.

But despite his fatigue, his eyes were as green as ever. He smiled at her. "Do I look as...ready for a bath as you do?"

She had to smile. "Tactfully put. Yes, you certainly do. And as for me—I think I'm more than ready to be a blonde again and wash this stuff out of my hair."

"But before you do, maybe I could send my shoes over to your hotel room for a touch-up...?"

Melody laughed. Until she looked down at his feet. They were still bare. They looked red and sore.

"You and Harvard saved my life," she whispered, her smile fading.

"I don't know about H.," Jones told her, gazing up into her eyes, "but as far as I'm concerned, Miss Evans, it was purely my pleasure."

Melody had to look away. His eyes were hypnotizing. If she didn't look away, she'd do something stupid like leap into his arms and kiss him. She glanced out at the line of cars approaching them. Was it possible that Jones had cut the engine and stopped the plane so far away from the terminal in order to let them have these few moments of privacy?

He reached for her, taking her hands to help her down from the plane.

"What's going to happen next?" she asked.

He pulled just a little too hard, and she fell forward, directly into his arms. He held her close, pressing her against his wide chest, and she held him just as tightly, encircling his waist with her arms and holding on as if she weren't ever going to let go. His arms engulfed her, and she could feel him rest his cheek against the top of her head.

"Jones, will I see you again?" she asked. She needed to know. "Or will they take you away to be debriefed and then send you back to wherever it was you came from?"

She lifted her head to look up at him. The trucks were skidding to a stop. She was going to have to get into one of those trucks, and they would take her someplace, away from Harlan Jones, maybe forever....

Her heart was pounding so hard she could barely hear herself think. She could feel his heart, too, beating at an accelerated rate.

"I'll tell you what's going to happen," he said, gazing into her eyes unsmilingly. "Second thing that's going to happen is that they're going to put you in one ambulance and me and H. in another. They'll take us to the hospital, make sure we're all tight. Then we'll go into a short debriefing—probably separately. After that's done, you'll be taken to whatever hotel they're keeping the top brass in these days, and I'll go into a more detailed debriefing. After we both get cleaned up, I'll meet you back at the hotel for dinner—how's that sound?"

Melody nodded. That sounded very good.

"But the first thing that's going to happen," he told her, his mouth curving up into that now familiar smile, "is this."

He lowered his head and kissed her.

It was an amazing kiss, a powerful kiss, a no-holds-barred kind of kiss. It amplified all of the heat she'd seen in Harlan Jones's bedroom eyes over the past forty-eight hours. God, had it only been forty-eight hours? She felt as if she'd known this man for at least a lifetime. She felt, too, as if she'd wanted him for every single second of that time.

He kissed her even harder, deeper, sweeping his tongue into her mouth. It was a kiss that was filled with a promise of ecstasy, of lovemaking the likes of which she'd never known. The entire earth dropped out

from under her feet, and she clung to him, giddy and dizzy and happier than she'd ever been in her entire life, returning his kisses with equal abandon. He wanted her. This incredible man honestly, truly wanted her.

His lips were warm, his mouth almost hot. He tasted sweet, like one of those energy bars he'd shared with her. Melody realized that she was laughing, and when she pulled back to look at him, he was smiling, too.

And then, just as he'd said, she was tugged gently away from him toward one of the ambulances as he was led toward another.

He kept watching her, though, and she held his gaze right up until the moment that she was helped into the back of the emergency vehicle. But before she went in, she glanced at him one last time. He was still watching her, still smiling. And he mouthed a single word. "Tonight."

Melody couldn't wait.

Chapter 3

Seven months later

Melody couldn't wait.

She had to get home, and she had to get home now.

She looked both ways, then ran the red light at the intersection of Route 119 and Hollow Road. But even then, she knew she wasn't going to make that last mile and a half up Potter's Field Road.

Melody pulled over to the side and lost her lunch on the shoulder of the road, about half a mile south of the Webers' mailbox.

This wasn't supposed to be happening anymore. She was supposed to be done with this part of it. The next few months were supposed to be filled with glowing skin and a renewed sense of peace, and yeah, okay, maybe an occasional backache or twinge of a sciatic nerve.

The morning sickness was supposed to have stopped four months ago. Morning sickness. Hah! She didn't have morning sickness—she had every-single-moment-of-the-day sickness.

She pulled herself back into her car and, after only stalling twice, slowly drove the rest of the way home. When she got there, she almost didn't pull into the driveway. She almost turned around and headed back toward town.

There was a Glenzen Bros. truck parked out in front of the house. And Harry Glenzen—one of the original Glenzen brothers' great-great-grandsons—was there with Barney Kingman. Together the two men were affixing a large piece of plywood to the dining-room window. Or rather to the frame of what used to be the dining-room window.

Melody had to push her seat all the way back to manoeuvre her girth out from behind the steering wheel.

From inside the house, she could hear the unmistakable roar of the vacuum cleaner. Andy Marshall, she thought. Had to be. Brittany was going to be mad as a hornet.

"Hiya, Mel," Harry called cheerfully. "How about this heat wave we're having, huh? We've got a real Indian summer this year. If it keeps up, the kids'll be able to go trick-or-treating without their jackets on."

"Hey, Harry." Melody tried not to sound unenthusiastic, but this heat was killing her. She'd suffered all the way through July and August and the first part of September. But it was October now, and October in New England was supposed to be filled with crisp autumn days. There was nothing about today that could be called even remotely crisp.

She dragged herself up the front steps of the enormous Victorian house both she and her sister had grown up in. Melody had moved back in after college, intending to live rent free for a year until she decided what she wanted to do with her life, where she wanted to go. But then her mom had met a man. A very nice man. A very nice, wealthy man. Before Melody could even blink, her mother had remarried, packed up her things and moved to Florida, leaving Mel to take care of the sale of the house.

It wasn't long after that that Brittany filed for divorce. After nearly ten years of marriage, she and her husband, Quentin, had called it quits and Britt moved in with Melody.

Melody never did get around to putting the house on the market. And Mom didn't mind. She was happier than Melody had ever seen her, returning to the Northeast for a month each summer and inviting her two daughters down to Sarasota each winter.

They were just two sisters, living together. Melody could imagine them in their nineties, still living in the same house, the old Evans girls, still unmarried, eccentric as hell, the stuff of which town legends were made.

But soon there would be three of them living together in this big old house, breaking with that particular tradition. The baby was due just in time for Christmas. Maybe by then the temperature would have finally dropped below eighty degrees.

Melody opened the front door. As she lugged her briefcase into the house, she heard the vacuum cleaner shut off.

"Mel, is that you?"

"It's me." Melody looked longingly toward the stairs that led to her bedroom. All she wanted to do was lie down. Instead, she took a deep breath and headed for the kitchen. "What happened?"

"Andy Marshall happened, that's what happened," Britt fumed, coming into the cheery yellow room through the door that connected to the dining room. "The little juvenile delinquent threw a baseball through the dining-room window. We have to special order the replacement glass because the damn thing's not standard-sized. The little creep claimed the ball slipped out of his hand. He says it was an accident."

Mel set her briefcase on the kitchen table and sank into one of the chairs. "Maybe it was."

Britt gave her such a dark look, Melody had to laugh. "It's not funny," Brittany said. "Ever since the Romanellas took that kid in, it's been chaos. Andy Marshall has a great big Behaviour Problem, capital B, capital P."

"Even kids with behaviour problems have accidents," Melody pointed out mildly, resting her forehead in the palm of her hand. God, she was tired.

Her sister's eyes softened. "Oh, hell. Another bad day?"

Melody nodded. "The entire town is getting used to seeing my car pulled over to the side of the road. Nobody stops to see if I'm okay anymore. It's just, 'Oh, there's Melody Evans hurling again.' Honk, honk, 'Hey, Mel!' and then they're gone. I feel like a victim of the boy-who-cried-wolf syndrome. One of these days, I'm going to be pulled to the side of the road in hard labour, giving birth to this baby, and no one's going to stop to help me."

Brittany took a glass down from the cabinet, filling it with a mixture of soda water and ginger ale. "Push those fluids. Replace what you've lost," she said, Andy Marshall finally forgotten. "In this weather, your number-one goal should be to keep yourself from becoming dehydrated."

Melody took the glass her sister was pressing on her. Her stomach was still rolling and queasy, so she only took a small sip before she set it down on the table. "Why don't you go upstairs and change out of your nurse's uniform before you forget you're not at work any longer and try to give me a sponge bath or something?" she suggested.

Britt didn't smile at her pitiful attempt at a joke. "Only if you promise to lie down and let me take care of dinner." Melody's sister had to be the only person in the world who could make an offer to cook dinner sound like a dire threat.

"I will," Melody promised, pushing herself out of the chair. "And thank you. I just want to check the answering machine. I ordered the latest Robert Parker book from the library and Mrs. B. thought it might be back in today. I want to see if she called." She started toward the den.

"My, my, you do have quite a wild and crazy lifestyle. Spending Friday night at home with a book again. Honestly, Mel, it's something of a miracle that you managed to get pregnant in the first place."

Mel pretended not to have heard that comment as she approached the answering machine. There were only two messages, but one of them was a long one. She sat down as the tape took forever to rewind.

...it's something of a miracle that you managed to get pregnant in the first place...something of a miracle...

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes, remembering the look in Harlan Jones's eyes as she'd met him at the door to her hotel room.

Cleaned up and wearing a naval dress uniform, he'd looked like a stranger. His shoulders were broader than she remembered. He seemed taller and harder and thoroughly, impossibly, devastatingly handsome.

She'd felt geeky and plain, dressed in too conservative clothes from the American shop in the hotel. And at the same time, she felt underdressed. The store had had nothing in her bra size except for something in that old-fashioned, cross-your-heart, body-armour style her grandmother used to wear, so she'd opted to go without. Suddenly, the silky fabric of the dress felt much too thin.

At least her hair was blond again, but she'd cut it much too short in her attempt to disguise herself. It would take weeks before she looked like anything other than a punk-rock time traveller from the early 1980s.

"I ordered room service," she'd told him shyly. "I hope you don't mind if we stay in...."

It was the boldest thing she'd ever done. But Jones's smile and the rush of heat in his eyes left no room for doubt. She'd done the right thing.

He'd locked the door behind him and pulled her into his arms and kissed her and kissed her and kissed her....

"Hi, Melody, this is Mrs. Beatrice from the Appleton Public Library," said the cheery voice on the tape, interrupting Melody's thoughts. "The book you requested is here. We've got quite a waiting list for this one, so if you aren't interested any longer, please give me a call! Hope you're feeling better, dear. I heard the heat's due to break in a day or two. I know when I was carrying Tommy, my eldest boy, I simply could not handle any temperature higher than seventy-two. Tom Senior actually went out and bought an air conditioner for me! You might want to think about something like that. If you want, I could send both Toms over to help you girls install it. Call me! Bye now!"

Girls. Sheesh.

That's my girl.

With determination, Melody pushed that thought out of her head.

The machine beeped, and a different voice, a male voice with the slightest of drawls, began to talk.

"Yeah, hi, I hope this is the right number. I'm looking for Melody Evans...?"

Melody sat forward. Dear God, it couldn't be, could it? But she knew exactly who it was. This was one voice she was never going to forget. Ever. Not until the day she died.

"This is Lt. Harlan Jones, and Mel, if you're listening, I, uh, I've been thinking about you. I'm going to be stationed here on the East Coast, in Virginia, for a couple of months, and um...well, it's not that far from Boston. I mean, it's closer than California and it's a whole hell of a lot closer than the Middle East and..."

On the tape, he cleared his throat. Melody realized she was sitting on the edge of her seat, eager for his every word.

"I know you said what you said before you got on the plane for Boston back in March, but..." He laughed, then swore softly, and she could almost see him rolling his eyes. "Hell, as long as I'm grovelling, I might as well be honest about it. Bottom line, honey-I think about you all the time, all the time, and I want to see you again. Please call me back." He left a number, repeating it twice, and then hung up.

The answering machine beeped and then was silent.

"Oh. My. God."

Melody looked up to see Brittany standing in the doorway.

"Is this guy trying to win some kind of title as Mr. Romantic, or what?" her sister continued. "He is totally to die for, Mel. That cute little cowboy accent—where's he from anyway?"

"Texas," Melody said faintly. Lieutenant. He'd called himself Lt. Harlan Jones. He'd gotten a promotion, been awarded a higher rank.

"That's right. Texas. You told me that." Britt sat down across from her. "Mel, he wants to see you again. This is so great!"

"This is not so great!" Melody countered. "I can't see him—are you kidding? God, Britt, he'll take one look at me and..."

Brittany was looking at her as if she'd just confessed to murdering the neighbours and burying them in their basement. "Oh, Melody, you didn't—"

"He'll know," Melody finished more softly.

"You didn't tell him you're pregnant?"

Mel shook her head. "No."

"You didn't tell him you're having his baby—that he's fathered your child?"

"What was I supposed to do? Write him a postcard? And where was I supposed to send it? Until he called, I didn't even know where he was!" Until he called, she didn't even know if he was still alive. But he was. He was still alive...

"Melody, that was a very, very, very bad thing to do," Brittany said as if she were five years old again and had broken their mother's favourite lamp by playing ball in the house. "A man has a right to know he's knocked up his girlfriend!"

"I'm not his girlfriend. I never was his girlfriend."

"Sweetie, you're having this man's baby. You may not have been his girlfriend, but you weren't exactly strangers!"

Melody closed her eyes. No, they were anything but strangers. They'd spent three days in that hotel room in that Middle Eastern city whose name she couldn't pronounce, and another three days in Paris. In the course of those six amazing days, they'd made love more times than she could count—including once in the miniature bathroom on board the commercial flight that had taken them north to France.

That was her doing. She'd wanted him so badly, she couldn't bear to wait until they touched down and took a taxi to their hotel. The plane was nearly empty—she'd thought no one would notice if they weren't in their seats for just a little while.

So she'd lured Jones to the back of the plane and pulled him into the tiny bathroom with her.

After three days, she had learned enough of his secrets to drive him wild with just a touch. And Jones—he could light her on fire with no more than a single look. It wasn't long before the temperature in that little room skyrocketed out of control.

But Jones didn't have a condom. He'd packed his supply in his luggage. And she didn't have one, either...

Making love that way was not the smartest thing either of them had ever done.

Brittany went to the answering machine and rewound the message, playing it again and writing down the phone number he left. "What does he mean by 'I know you said what you said before you got on the plane for Boston...'? What's he talking about?"

Melody stood up, "He's talking about a private conversation we had before I came home."

Brittany followed her out of the room. "He's implying that you were the one who broke off whatever it was you had going."

Melody started up the stairs. "Britt, what I said to him is not your business."

"I always just assumed that he dumped you, you know. 'So long, babe, it's been fun. Time for me to go rescue some other chick who's being held hostage.'"

Melody turned and faced her sister, looking down at her from her elevated position on the stairs. "He's not that type of man," she said fiercely.

She could practically see the wheels turning in Brittany's head. "Now you're defending him. Very interesting. Fess up, Sis. Were you the one who dumped him? Jeez, I never thought you'd turn out to be the love-'em-and-leave-'em type."

"I'm not!" Melody started up the stairs again, exhaling noisily in frustration. "Look, nobody dumped anyone, all right? It was just a...fling! God, Britt, it wasn't real—we hardly even knew each other. It was just...sex, and lust, and relief. A whole lot of very passionate relief. The man saved my life."

"So naturally you decide to bear his child."

Melody went into her bedroom and turned to shut the door, but Brittany blocked her.

"That's what you told him before you got on the plane home, isn't it? That crap about sex and lust and passionate relief? You told him you didn't want to see him again, didn't you?"

Mel gave up and sat down wearily on her bed. "It's not crap. It's true."

"What if you're wrong? What if this man is your missing half, your one true love?"

She shook her head vehemently. "He's not." God, over the past seven months, she'd asked herself the same question. What if...?

It was true that she missed her Navy SEAL. She missed him more than she was willing to admit. There were nights that she ached for his touch, that she would have died for a glimpse of his smile, And those amazing green eyes of his haunted her dreams.

But what she felt wasn't love. It wasn't.

Brittany sat next to her on the bed. "As much as you talk about passionate relief, sweetie, I just don't see you as the type to lock yourself in a hotel room with any man for six solid days unless he means something special to you."

Melody sank back against her pillows. "Yeah, well, you haven't met Harlan Jones."

"I'd like to meet Harlan Jones. Everything you've told me about him makes him sound like some kind of superman."

"There you go," Melody said triumphantly, sitting back up again. "That's my point exactly. He's some kind of superhero. And I'm just a mere mortal. What I felt for him wasn't love. It was hero worship. Jones saved my life. I've never met anyone like him before—I probably never will again. He was amazing. He could do anything. Pilot a plane. Bandage my feet. Cut his sandals down to fit me yet make them look like new. He spoke four different languages, four! He knew how to scuba dive and skydive and move through the centre of an enemy compound without being seen. He was smarter and braver and—God!—sexier than any man I've ever known, Britt. You're right, he is a superman, and I couldn't resist him—not for one day, not for six days. If he hadn't been called back to the States, I would've stayed with him for sixteen days. But that has nothing to do with real love. That was hero worship. I couldn't resist Harlan Jones any more than Lois Lane could resist Superman—and that's one relationship that could never be called healthy, or normal, either."

Brittany was silent.

"I still think it's wrong not to tell him about the baby," she finally said, setting the paper with Jones's phone number on Melody's bedside table. She stood up and crossed the room, pausing with her hand on the doorknob. "Call him and tell him the truth. He deserves to know."

Brittany left the room, closing the door behind her.

Melody closed her eyes. Call Jones.

The sound of his voice on her answering machine had sparked all sorts of memories.

Like finding the bandage he wore under his shirt on the back of his arm. They had been in her hotel room and she had been in the process of ridding him of that crisp white dress uniform, trailing her lips across every piece of skin she exposed. She'd pushed his jacket and then his shirt over his shoulders and down his arms, and there it was—big and white and gauze and covering a "little" gash he'd had stitched up at the hospital that morning.

When she pressed, he told her he'd been slashed with a knife, fighting off the men he'd surprised in the hangar at the air base.

He'd been stabbed, and he hadn't bothered to mention it to either Harvard or Melody. He'd simply bandaged the wound himself, right then and there, and forgotten about it

When she asked to see it, he'd lifted the gauze and shown her the stitches with a shrug and a smile. It was no big deal.

Except the "little" gash was four inches long. It was angry and inflamed—which also was no big deal to Jones, since the doctor had given him antibiotics. He'd be fine in a matter of days. Hours.

He'd pulled her back on top of him, claiming her mouth with a gentleness astonishing for a man so strong, intertwining their legs as he took a turn ridding her of more of her clothes.

And it was then Melody knew for dead certain their love affair was not going to be long-term.

Because there was no way this incredible man—for whom rescuing strangers deep inside a terrorist stronghold and getting sliced open in a knife fight was all in a casual day's work—would ever remain interested in someone like drab little Melody Evans for long.

He would be far better off with a woman reminiscent of Mata Hari. Someone who would scuba dive and parasail with him. Someone strong and mysterious and daring.

And Melody would be better off with an everyday, average guy. Someone who would never forget to mention it when he was slashed by a knife. Someone whose idea of excitement was mowing the lawn and watching the Sunday afternoon football game on TV.

She curled up on her side on her bed, staring at the piece of paper that Brittany had left on her bedside table.

Still, she had to call him back.

If she didn't call him, he'd call here again, she was sure of it. And God help her if he spoke to Brittany and she let slip Melody's secret.

Taking a deep breath, Melody reached for the paper and the phone.

Cowboy was in Alpha Squad's makeshift office, trying to get some work done.

Seven desks—one for each member of the squad—had been set up haphazardly down at one end of an echoey metal Quonset hut. This hut was a temporary home base to work out the details of a training mission. Except this time, the members of Alpha Squad were the trainers, not the trainees. Within a few months, a group of elite FInCOM agents were being sent down from D.C. to learn as much as they could of SEAL Team Ten's successful counterterrorist operations.

They needed the desks, and the computers and equipment set up on top of them, to plan out their own little version of BUD/S training for these Finks.

Joe Catalanotto had pulled strings with his admiral pal, Mac Forrest, to make arrangements for Lt. Alan Francisco, one of the top BUD/S training instructors, to meet them out here in Virginia. Joe Cat was hoping Frisco would be able to organize the jumble of notes and training ideas the squad had come up with to date.

Frisco was a former member of Alpha Squad who had been pulled off the active duty list with a knee injury more than five years ago. Cowboy had been filling in for a missing member of the squad when Frisco had been injured. That had been Cowboy's first time in the field, his first time in a real war zone—and he'd been sure that it was going to be his last. Cowboy was certain that Joe Cat, the squad's commander, had seen his hands shaking as they set a bomb to blow a hole in the side of an embassy.

It had been another embassy rescue....

Melody Evans's wide blue eyes flashed into his head, but Cowboy gently pushed the image away. He'd been thinking about Mel too much lately, and right now he was writing up a summary of the information he was intending to share with the FInCOM agents. At Cat's request, he was in charge of presenting the

psychological profile of a terrorist to the Finks. The key to success when dealing with terrorists lay in understanding their reasoning and motivation—how their minds worked. And with all of the cultural, environmental and religious differences, their minds worked very differently from the average white-bread American FInCOM agent.

Frisco was going to arrive Monday morning, and although it was only Friday, Cowboy was pushing to get his report finished today. After working nearly non-stop over the past seven months, he was hoping to take a few days of leave this weekend.

Mel's face popped into his thoughts again. He'd left a message on an answering machine he'd hoped was hers. Please, dear Lord, let her call him back.

Again he took a deep breath and focused his thoughts on his report. It was important to him that this summary be as complete as possible. Alan "Frisco" Francisco was going to be the man to read it, and Cowboy wanted to make the best impression he could.

Because when it was determined that Frisco's injury was permanent, Cowboy had been assigned to Alpha Squad at Joe Cat's request, as the man's replacement.

Cowboy still felt a little uncomfortable when Frisco was around. He knew the man missed being in the action, and here he was, his official replacement. And if Frisco hadn't been hurt, Cowboy probably wouldn't be working with the elite seven-member Alpha Squad. Cowboy had benefited from Frisco's tragedy, and both men damn well knew it. As a result, when they were together, they tippytoed around each other, acting especially polite. Cowboy was hoping that would change as the two men worked closely together over the next few months.

Right now, he appeared to be the only man in the room who was actually working. Blue McCoy and Harvard were checking out the Web site for Heckler and Koch, the German weapon manufacturer. Even Joe Catalanotto had his feet up on his desk as he talked on the phone with his wife, Veronica. Their son's first birthday was quickly approaching, but from what Cowboy couldn't help but overhear, it sounded as if Joe was more interested in planning a separate, very different, very private party for the parents of the birthday boy, to be held after all the guests had gone home and little Frankie Catalanotto was tucked into his crib.

The rest of the guys were sitting around the "office," trying to come up with ways to truly torment the poor Finks.

"We start the whole thing off with a twenty-five-mile run," Wesley was suggesting.

One desk over, Lucky O'Donlon was playing some kind of computer game complete with aliens and exploding starships and roaring sound effects.

"No, I read the rule book," Bobby countered loudly to be heard over the sound of the alien horde. "These guys—and gals—are going to be put up at the Marriott while they're here. I don't think they're going to let us run 'em for five miles, let alone twenty-five."

That got Lucky's attention. "FInCOM's sending women out here?"

"That's what I heard," Bobby said. "Just one or two out of the bunch of them."

Lucky smiled. "One or two is all we need. One for me and one for Cowboy. Oh, but wait. I almost

forgot. Cowboy's sworn off women. He's decided to become a priest—or at least live like one. But then again, maybe a little one-on-one with a pretty young FInCOM agent is all he needs to get him back in the game."

Cowboy couldn't let that go. Lucky had been teasing him mercilessly about his current celibacy for months. "I don't criticize the way you live, O'Donlon," he said tightly. "I'd appreciate it if you'd show me the same courtesy."

"I'm just curious, Cowboy, that's all. What's going on? Did you honestly find God or something?" Lucky's eyes were dancing with mischief. He didn't realize that he'd pushed Cowboy to his limit "I seem to remember a certain Middle Eastern country and a certain pretty little former hostage you seemed intent upon setting some kind of world record with. I mean, come on. It was kind of obvious what you were up to when you went to meet her for dinner and then didn't come back for six days." Lucky laughed. "She sure must've been one hell of a good—"

Cowboy stood up, his chair screeching across the concrete floor. "That's enough," he said hotly. "You say one more word about that girl and you're going to find the very next word you say is going to be said without any teeth."

Lucky stared at him. "God, Jones, you're serious! What the hell did this girl do to you?" But then he grinned, quick to turn anything and everything into a joke. "Do you think if I asked real nice, I could get her to do it to me, too?"

Cowboy was moments from launching himself at the blond-haired SEAL when Harvard stepped between them, holding up one hand, silently telling Cowboy to freeze.

The big man fixed Lucky with a steady, dangerous gaze. "You're nicknamed Lucky because with all the truly asinine things that come out of your mouth, you're lucky to still be alive, is that right, O'Donlon?"

Lucky wisely returned his attention to his computer game, glancing up at Cowboy with disbelief still glimmering in his eyes. "Sorry, Jones. Jeez."

Cowboy slowly sat back down, and as Joe Cat hung up the phone, a complete silence fell, broken only by the sounds of Lucky's computer game.

What the hell did this girl do to you?

Cowboy honestly didn't know.

Surely it was some kind of witchcraft. Some kind of enchantment or spell. It had been seven months, seven months, and he couldn't so much as glance at another woman without comparing her, unfavorably, to Melody Evans.

Melody. Shoot, she'd had his head spinning from the moment she'd opened her hotel-room door for him.

Her hair was so light, he'd nearly laughed aloud. He knew she was a blonde from her picture, but until he saw her, he really hadn't been able to imagine it. Cut short the way it was, it accentuated the delicate shape of her face and drew attention to her long, graceful neck.

She was gorgeous. She'd gotten hold of some makeup and wore just a trace of it on her eyes and a

touch of lipstick on her sweet lips. It highlighted her natural beauty. And it told him without a doubt that she had anticipated and prepared for this dinner as much as he had.

She was wearing some kind of boxy, shapeless, too large dress that she must've had sent up from one of the hotel shops. On any other woman, it would've looked as if she was playing dress-up in her mother's clothes. But on Mel, it looked sexy. The neckline revealed her delicate collarbone, and the silky material managed to cling to her slender body, revealing every soft curve, every heart-stopping detail. Her legs were bare, and she wore the sandals he'd made for her on her feet

Nail polish. She had pink nail polish on her toes. Probably hadn't been able to get any green.

He'd stood there in the doorway, just looking at her, knowing that despite all he'd silently told himself about the basis for the emotion behind hostage-and-rescuer relationships, he was lost. He was truly and desperately lost.

He'd wanted this woman more than he'd ever wanted anyone...

Wes's voice broke the silence. "You think they're gonna put us up in the Marriott, too?" the shortest member of Alpha Squad wondered aloud.

Bobby, Wes's swim buddy, built like a restaurant refrigerator, shook his head. "I didn't see anything about that in the FInCOM rule book."

"What FInCOM rule book?" Joe Cat's husky New York accent cut through the noise of exploding spacecraft "Blue, you know anything about a rule book?"

"No, sir."

"This morning, FInCOM sent over something they're calling a rule book," Bobby told their commanding officer.

"Let me see it," Cat ordered. "O'Donlon, kill the volume on that damn thing."

The computer sounds disappeared as Bobby sifted through the piles of paper on his desk. He uncovered the carefully stapled booklet FInCOM had sent via courier and tossed the entire express envelope across the room to Cat. Cat caught it with one hand.

The phone rang and Wesley picked it up. "Alpha Squad Pizza. We deliver."

Catalanotto pulled out the booklet and the cover letter. He quickly skimmed the letter, then opened the booklet to the first page and did the same. Then he laughed—a snort of derision—and ripped both the book and the letter in half. He stuffed it back into the envelope and tossed it back to Bob.

"Send this back to Maryland with a letter that tells the good people of FInCOM no rule books. No rules. Sign my name and send it express."

"Yes, sir."

"Hey, Cowboy."

Cowboy looked up to see Wes holding up the telephone receiver, hand securely over the mouthpiece.

"For you," Wesley said. "A lady. Someone named Melody Evans."

Suddenly, the room was so quiet, Cowboy could have heard a pin drop.

But then Harvard clapped his hands together. "Okay, coffee break," he announced loudly. "Everyone but Junior outside. Let's go. On the double."

Cowboy held the phone that Wes had handed him until the echo from the slamming door had faded away. Taking a deep breath, he put the receiver to his ear.

"Melody?"

He heard her laugh. It was a thin, shaky laugh, but he didn't care. Laughter was good, wasn't it? "Yeah, it's me," she said. "Congratulations on making lieutenant, Jones."

"Thanks," he said. "And thanks for calling me back. You sound...great. How are you?" He closed his eyes tightly. Damn, he sounded like some kind of fool.

"Busy," she said without hesitation, as if it was something she'd planned to say if he asked. "I've been incredibly busy. I'm working full-time as an AA for the town attorney, Ted Shepherd. He's running for state representative, so it's been crazy lately."

"Look, Mel, I don't want to play games with you," he told her. "I mean, we've never been anything but honest with each other, and I know you said you didn't want to see me again, but I can't get you out of my head. I want to get together."

There. He'd said it.

He waited for her to say something, but there was only silence.

"I can get a weekend pass and be up in Massachusetts in five hours."

More silence. Then, "Jones, this weekend is really bad for me. The election's only a few weeks away and... It's not a good time."

Now the silence belonged to him.

He had two options here. He could either accept her excuses and hang up the phone, or he could beg.

He hadn't begged back in March. He hadn't dropped to his knees and pleaded with her to reconsider. He hadn't tried to convince her that everything she'd told him about their passion being false, about their relationship being based on the adrenaline rush of her rescue, was wrong.

He was a psych specialist. Everything she said made sense—everything but the incredible intensity of his feelings for her. If those feelings weren't real, he didn't know what real was.

But his pride had kept him from saying everything he should have said. Maybe if he'd said it then, she wouldn't have walked away.

So maybe he should beg. It wouldn't kill him to beg, would it? But if he was going to beg, it would have to be face-to-face. No way was he going to do it over the phone.

"Nothing's changed," Melody said softly. "Ours wasn't a relationship that could ever go anywhere."

I miss you, Mel. Cowboy closed his eyes, unable to say the words aloud.

"It was nice hearing your voice, though," Melody said.

She said she was busy this weekend. Maybe it wasn't just a transparent excuse. Maybe she was busy. But even busy people had to grab a sandwich for lunch. He'd take that weekend pass, head up to Boston, rent a car and drive out to Appleton.

And then, face-to-face, he'd get down on the ground and beg.

"Yeah," Cowboy said, "yeah—it was nice talking to you."

"I'm sorry, Jones," she said quietly, and the line was disconnected.

Cowboy slowly hung up the phone.

For all these months, he'd sat around, waiting to get over this girl. It was definitely time to stop waiting and take some action.

He saved his file on the computer, then set it up to print. As the laser printer started spewing out his psych summary, Cowboy pushed his chair back from his desk.

He left the Quonset hut and headed toward the barracks where the unmarried members of Alpha Squad were being housed. He would pack a quick bag, do the necessary paperwork for a weekend pass, then bum a ride to the air base.

As Cowboy pulled open the screen door, the inner door opened, too, and he nearly walked into Harvard. The older man took one look at the grim set to Cowboy's mouth, then sighed.

"No good, huh?" Harvard stepped back to let Cowboy into the spartanly decorated bunk room.

Cowboy shook his head. "Senior Chief, I need a weekend pass and information on flights heading north to Boston."

Harvard smiled. "Way to go, Junior. You pack your things, I'll handle the paperwork. Meet you by the gate in fifteen."

Cowboy forced a smile of his own. "Thanks, H."

First thing tomorrow, he'd be face-to-face with Melody Evans.

She didn't want to see him because she knew damn well that if she saw him, she wouldn't be able to resist the pull of the attraction that lingered between them. Face-to-face, she wouldn't be able to resist him any more than he could resist her.

And by this time tomorrow, he'd have her back in his arms.

And maybe, if he played his cards right, if he got humble and got down on his knees and begged, maybe

then he'd have her back in his life for as long as it took for him to be satisfied-to get over her once and for all.

For the first time in a long time, Cowboy's smile actually felt real.

Chapter 4

Melody spotted him from across the town common and her heart nearly stopped.

The Romanellas' new foster kid, Andy Marshall, was fighting with two boys who had to be at least three years older and a foot and a half taller than he was.

The three kids were in the shadows of the trees at the edge of the town playground. As Melody watched, Andy was knocked almost playfully to the ground as the two older boys laughed. But the kid rolled into the fall like an accomplished stunt fighter and came up swinging. His fist connected with the nose of one of the other boys, sending the taller one staggering back.

Melody could hear the bellow of pain from inside her car. She heard the shouts change from taunting laughter to genuine anger, and she knew that Andy was on the verge of getting the spit kicked out of him.

She took a quick left onto Huntington Street and another left the wrong way into the Exit Only marked drive of the playground parking lot, leaning on her horn as she went.

"Hey!" she shouted out the car window. "You boys! Stop that! Stop fighting right now!"

One of the older boys—Alex Parks—savagely backhanded Andy with enough force to make Melody's own teeth rattle before he and his friend turned and ran.

As Melody scrambled to pull her girth from the front seat of her car, Andy tried to run, too, but he couldn't. He couldn't do better than to push himself up onto his hands and knees on the grass.

"Oh, Andy!" Melody crouched down next to him. "Oh, God! Are you all right?"

She reached for him, but he jerked away and she backed off.

His knees and elbows were raw, and his nose was bleeding pretty steadily. He had a scrape on his cheek underneath his left eye, and his lip was already swollen and split. His brown hair was messy and clotted with dirt and bits of grass, and his T-shirt was bloody and torn.

He'd had the wind knocked out of him and he struggled to regain his breath as tears of pain and humiliation filled his eyes.

"Go away," he growled. "Just leave me alone!"

"I can't do that," Melody told him evenly. "Because we're neighbours. And here in Appleton, neighbours look out for each other."

She sat down in the grass, crossing her legs tailor-style, fighting a familiar wave of nausea, thankful they were sitting in the shade.

He was checking the watch he wore on his skinny left wrist, examining the protective surface over the clock face and holding it to his ear to be sure it was still ticking.

"Did they break it?" Melody asked.

"What's it to you?" he sneered.

"Well, you seem more concerned with your watch than with the fact that you're bleeding, so I thought—"

"You're the unwed mother, right?"

Melody refused to acknowledge the tone of his voice. He was being purposely rude so that she wouldn't know he was on the verge of dissolving into tears. She ignored both the rudeness and the threatening tears. "In a nutshell, yeah, I guess I am. My name's Melody Evans. I live next door to the Romanellas. We met last week, when Vince and Kirsty brought you home with them."

He sat down, still catching his breath. "You know, they talk about you. They wonder exactly who knocked you up. Everyone in town talks about you all the time."

"Except when they're talking about you," Melody pointed out. "Between the two of us, we've got the gossips working full-time, haven't we? A foster child from the big, bad city who blows up lawn mowers. There's probably a betting pool guessing how long it'll be before the police become involved in your discipline."

Her bluntly honest words surprised him, and he actually looked at her. For a brief moment, he actually met her eyes. His own were brown and angry—far too angry and bitter for a twelve-year-old. But then he looked away.

"The hell with them," he said harshly. "I won't be here long anyway."

Melody feigned surprise. "Really? Vince told me you were going to be staying with him and Kirsty at least until next September—that's almost a year." She fished in her handbag for some tissues. She wished she had a can of ginger ale in her bag, too. She was trying to make friends with this kid, and God knows throwing up on him wouldn't win her big points.

"A year." Andy snorted. "Yeah, right. I'll be gone in a month. Less. A week. That's all most people can take of me."

She handed him a wad of tissues for his nose. "Gee, maybe you should try a different brand of mouthwash."

There was another flash of surprise in his eyes. "You're a laugh riot," he said scornfully, expertly stemming the flow of blood. He seemed to be a pro at repairing the damage done him in fistfights.

"You're a sweet little bundle of charm and good cheer yourself, munchkin."

He held her gaze insolently. He was James Dean and Marlon Brando rolled into one with his heavily lidded eyes and curled lip. He'd successfully concealed all of his pain and angry tears behind a "who cares?" facade. "I broke your window yesterday."

"I know." Melody could play the "who cares?" game, too. "Accidents happen."

"Your sister didn't think it was an accident."

"Brittany wasn't born with a lot of patience."

"She's a witch."

Melody had to laugh. "No, she's not. She's got something of a volatile temper, though."

He looked away. "Whatever."

"Volatile means hot. Quick to go off."

"Duh. I know that," he lied.

She handed him more tissues, wishing she could pull him into her arms and give him a hug. He was skinny for a twelve-year-old, just a narrow slip of a little boy. His injuries from the fight—and probably from the battles he'd been fighting all of his life—went far deeper than a split lip, a bloody nose and a few scrapes and scratches. Still, although he may have looked like a child, his attitude was pure jaded adolescent, and she gave him a smile instead.

"You're prettier than what's-her-name, the witch," he said, then snorted again. "But look what being prettier got you. Preggo."

"Actually, being careless got me...preggo. And to tell you the truth," Melody said seriously, "not using a condom could've gotten me far more than just pregnant. These days, you have to use a condom to protect yourself against AIDS. But I'm sure you already know that. Smart men never forget—not even for a minute."

Andy nodded, acting ultracool, as if sitting around and talking about condoms was something he did every day. It was clear he liked being spoken to as if he were an adult.

"What was the fight about?"

"They insulted me." He shrugged. "I jumped them."

"You jumped them? Andy, together those boys weigh four times more than you."

He bristled. "They insulted me. They were making up stories about my mother, saying how she was a whore, turning tricks for a living, and she didn't even know who my father was—like I was some kind of lousy bastard." He glanced down at her belly. "Sorry."

"I know who the father of my baby is."

"Some soldier who saved your life."

Melody laughed. "Gee, you're up to speed on the town gossip after only a few days, aren't you?"

Another shrug. "I pay attention. My father's a soldier, too. He doesn't give a damn about me, either."

Doesn't give a damn. Melody closed her eyes, righting another wave of nausea. She hadn't exactly given Harlan Jones a chance to give a damn, had she?

"So you gonna keep it or give it away?"

The baby. Andy was talking about the baby. "I'm going to keep it. Him." Melody forced a smile. "I think he's a boy. But I don't know for sure. I had an ultrasound, but I didn't want to know. Still, it just...he feels like a boy to me."

As if on cue, the baby began his familiar acrobatic routine, stretching and turning and kicking hard.

Melody laughed, pressing her hand against her taut belly and feeling the ripple of movement from both inside and out. It was an amazing miracle—she'd never get used to the joy of the sensation. It made her sour stomach and her dizziness fade far away.

"He's kicking," she told Andy. "Give me your hand—you've got to feel this."

Andy gave her a skeptical look.

"Come on," she urged him. "It feels so cool."

He wiped the palm of his hand on his grubby shorts before holding it out to her. She held it down on the bulge close to her belly button just as the baby did what felt like a complete somersault.

Andy pulled back his hand in alarm. "Whoa!" But then he hesitantly reached for her again, his eyes wide.

Melody covered his hand with hers, pressing it down once again on the playground-ball tightness of her protruding stomach.

Andy laughed, revealing crooked front teeth, one of which was endearingly chipped. "It feels like there's some kind of alien inside of you!"

"Well, there sort of is," Melody said. "I mean, think about it. There's a person inside of me. A human being." She smiled. "A little, wonderful, lovely human being." And if she was lucky, that little human being would take after his mother. Her smile faded. If she was really lucky, she wouldn't have to spend the rest of her life gazing into emerald green eyes and remembering....

"Are you okay?" Andy asked.

It was ironic, really. He was the one who looked as if he'd been hit by a train. Yet he was asking if she was all right. Underneath the tough-guy exterior, Andy Marshall was an okay kid.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Melody forced another smile. "I just get dizzy and...kind of queasy sometimes."

"You gonna barf?"

"No." Melody took a deep breath. "Why don't we go get you cleaned up?" she suggested. "Maybe I should take you over to the hospital...?"

He pulled away, slipping instantly back into surly James Dean mode. "No way."

"You've got dirt ground into your knee." Melody tried to sound reasonable. "It's got to be washed. All of your scrapes have to be washed. My sister's a nurse. She could—"

"Yeah, like I'd ever let the Wicked Witch of the West touch me."

"Then let me take you home to Kirsty—"

"No!" Beneath his suntan and the dirt, Andy's face had gone pale. "I can't go there looking like this. Vince said..." He turned abruptly away from her.

"He told you no more fighting," Melody guessed. Violence wasn't in her next-door neighbor's vocabulary.

"He said I got into another fight, I'd get it." Andy's chin went out as he pushed himself to his feet. "No way am I gonna let him take his belt to me! Hell, I just won't go back!"

Melody laughed aloud. "Vince? Take his belt to you?"

"I'm outta here," Andy said. "It's not like anyone's gonna miss me, right?"

"Andy, Vince doesn't even wear a belt." Vince Romanella might've looked like the kind of guy who would react with one of his big, beefy fists rather than think things through, but in the three years he and his wife had been foster parents, he'd never raised a hand to a child. What Andy was going to "get" was a trip to his bedroom tonight, where he would sit alone, writing a five-page essay on nonviolent alternatives to fighting.

But before she could tell Andy that, he was gone, walking quickly across the field, trying his best to hide a limp.

"Andy, wait!"

She started after him. He glanced back at her and began to run.

"Shoot, Andy, wait for me!"

Melody broke into a waddling trot, supporting her stomach with her arms.

He had to stop at Main Street and wait for a break in the traffic before he could cross.

"Andy, Vince isn't going to hit you!"

But he didn't hear her. He darted across the road and started running down the street.

Melody picked up her own pace, feeling like one of the running dinosaurs in Jurassic Park. With each step she took, the sky should have rumbled and the earth should have shook.

"Andy! Wait! Somebody stop Andy Marshall—please!"

She was light-headed and dizzy and within nanoseconds of losing what little breakfast she'd forced down earlier this morning. But no one seemed to notice her calls of help. No one seemed to be paying one bit of attention to the gigantically pregnant woman chasing the twelve-year-old boy.

No one except the exceptionally tall, exceptionally broad-shouldered man on the corner. Sunlight gleamed off sun-streaked brown hair that was pulled back into a ponytail at the nape of his neck. He was dressed similarly to just about all the other Saturday-morning antique shoppers who crowded the quaint little stores that surrounded the common. He wore a muted green polo shirt and a pair of khaki Dockers that fit sinfully well.

Seemingly effortlessly, he reached out and grabbed Andy around the waist. He moved with the fluid grace of a trained warrior, and as he moved, Melody recognized him instantly. He didn't have to come any closer for Melody to know that his shirt accentuated the brilliant green of his eyes.

Lt. Harlan "Cowboy" Jones had come to Appleton to find her. Blackness pressed around Melody, taking out her peripheral vision and giving her the illusion of looking at Jones through a long, dark tunnel.

"Is this the kid you wanted, ma'am?" he called across the street to her, his voice carrying faintly over the roaring in her ears. He didn't realize he'd found her. He didn't recognize her new, extralarge, two-for-the-price-of-one size.

Melody felt nausea churning inside of her, felt dizziness swirling around her, and she did the only thing she could possibly do, given the circumstances.

She carefully lowered herself down onto the grass of the Appleton Common and fainted.

"What's wrong with you?" Cowboy scolded the squirming kid as he carried him across the street. "Making your mama chase after you like that."

"She's not my mother," the kid spit. "And you're not my father, so let go of me!"

Cowboy looked up and blinked. That was odd. The woman had been standing right behind the blue Honda sedan. She was blond and hugely, heavily pregnant, but somehow she had managed to vanish.

He took a few more steps and then he saw her. She was on the ground, on the grass behind the parked cars, lying on her side as if she'd stopped to take a nap, her long hair hanging like a curtain over her face.

The kid saw her, too, and stopped struggling. "God, is she dead?" His face twisted. "Oh, God, did I kill her?"

Cowboy let go of the kid and moved fast, kneeling next to the woman. He slid his hand underneath her hair and up to the softness of her neck, searching for a pulse. He found one, but it was going much too fast. "She's not dead."

The kid was no longer trying to run away. "Should I find a phone and call 911?"

Cowboy put his hand on the woman's abdomen, wondering if she was in labour, wondering if he'd even be able to feel her contractions if she was. He knew quite a bit about first aid—enough to qualify as a medic in most units. He knew the drill when it came to knife wounds, gunshot wounds and third-degree burns. But unconscious pregnant women were way out of his league. Still, he knew enough to recognize shock when he saw it. He brushed her hair out of her face to check her eyes, glancing up at the kid. "Is the hospital far away?"

"No, it's right here in town—just a few blocks north."

Cowboy looked back to check the woman's eyes, and for several long, timeless seconds, he couldn't move.

Dear, dear God, it was Melody. It was Melody. This immensely pregnant woman was Melody. His Melody. His...

He couldn't breathe, couldn't speak, could hardly even think. Melody. Pregnant?

The implication nearly knocked him over, but then his training kicked in. Keep going, keep moving. Don't analyze more than you have to. Don't think if it's gonna slow you down. Act. Act and react

His rental car was on the corner of Main Street. "We can probably get her to the hospital faster ourselves." His voice sounded hoarse. It was a wonder he could speak at all. He handed his car keys to the kid with the split lip. "I'll carry Mel, you unlock the car door."

The kid stared at him as he lifted Melody up and into his arms. "You know her?"

A hell of a question, considering he'd gone and gotten her pregnant. "Yeah. I know her."

She roused slightly as he carried her down the street toward his car. "Jones...?"

"Yeah, honey, I'm here."

The kid dropped the keys twice but finally managed to get the passenger door open.

"Oh, God, you are, aren't you?" Melody closed her eyes as he affixed the seat belt around her girth.

Cowboy felt light-headed himself. She looked as if she were hiding a watermelon underneath her dress. And he'd done that to her. He'd sent his seed deep inside of her and now she was going to have his baby. And if he didn't hurry, she was going to have his baby in the front seat of this car.

"Hang on, Mel. I'm taking you to the hospital."

Cowboy turned around to order the kid into the back seat, but the kid was gone. He did a quick sweep of the area and spotted the boy at ten o'clock, running full speed across the common.

Melody had no doubt been chasing him for a reason, but no matter what that reason was, getting her to the hospital had to take priority.

The kid had left Cowboy's car keys on the front seat, thank God. Cowboy scooped them up as he slid behind the wheel, then started the engine with a roar.

Melody was pregnant and the baby had to be his. Didn't it? Had it truly been nine months since the hostage rescue at the embassy? He did a quick count but came up with only seven months. He must have counted wrong. He pushed all thoughts away as he searched the street for a familiar blue hospital sign. Don't think. Act. He'd have plenty of time to think after he was certain Mel was going to be okay.

The kid had been right—the hospital was nearby. Within moments, Cowboy pulled up to the emergency-room entrance.

He took the shortest route to the automatic ER doors-over the hood of the car-and helped the sliding doors open faster with his hands. "I need some help," he shouted into the empty corridor. "A wheelchair, a stretcher, something! I've got a lady about to have a baby here!"

The startled face of a nurse appeared, and Cowboy moved quickly back to the car, opening the door and lifting Melody into his arms. Even with the aided weight of her pregnancy, she still felt impossibly light, improbably slender. She still felt so familiar. She still fit perfectly in his arms. God, how he'd missed her.

He was met at the door by a gray-haired nurse with a wheel-chair who took one look at Mel and called out, "It's Melody Evans. Someone call Brittany down here, stat!"

"She's unconscious," Cowboy reported. "She's come out of it once but slipped back."

The nurse pushed the chair away. "She'd only fall out of this. Can you carry her?"

"Absolutely." He tossed his car keys to a security guard. "Move my car for me, will you, please?"

He followed the woman through a set of doors and into the emergency room where they were joined by another woman-this one a doctor.

"She's preregistered, but we will need your signature on a form before you go," the nurse told him as they moved briskly toward a hospital bed separated from a row of other beds by only a thin, sliding curtain.

"I'm not going anywhere," Cowboy said.

"Can you tell me when the contractions started?" the doctor asked. "How far apart they are?"

"I don't know," he admitted as he set Melody on the bed. "She was out cold when I found her. She must have just keeled over, right by the side of the road."

"Did she hit her head when she fell?" The doctor examined Melody quickly, lifting her eyelids, checking her eyes and feeling the back of her head for possible injury.

"I don't know," Cowboy said again, feeling a surge of frustration. "I didn't see her fall."

The nurse had already slipped a blood-pressure cuff on Mel's arm. She pumped it up and took a reading. "Blood pressure's fine. Pulse seems steady."

Melody looked so helpless lying there on that narrow bed. Her face was so pale. Her hair was so much longer than it had been in Paris. Of course, his hair was a lot longer, too.

It had been a long time since he'd seen her.

But it had only been seven months. Not nine.

Was it possible that she'd already been two months pregnant in Paris? He couldn't believe that. He wouldn't believe that. Of course the baby was his. She'd told him it had been close to a year since she'd broken up with her last serious boyfriend and...

Melody's eyelashes flickered.

"Well, hello," the doctor said to her. "Welcome back."

As Cowboy watched, Melody gazed up at the doctor, her brow wrinkled slightly with confusion. "Where am I?" she breathed.

"At County Hospital. Do you remember blacking out?"

Melody closed her eyes briefly. "I remember..." She opened them, sitting up suddenly, turning to look around the room until her gaze fell directly on Cowboy. "Oh, God. You're real."

"I'd say hi, how are you, but that's kind of obvious." Cowboy did his best to keep his voice low and even. She was in no condition to be yelled at—even if she damn well deserved it. "It looks as if you have some news you forgot to tell me yesterday when we spoke on the phone."

Her cheeks flushed, but she lifted her chin. "I'm pregnant."

He moved closer. "I noticed. When were you planning to tell me?"

She lowered her voice. "I thought you told me SEALs were trained never to assume anything. Yet here you are, assuming my condition has something to do with you."

"Are you telling me it doesn't?" He knew without a doubt that that baby was his. He couldn't imagine her with somebody else. The idea was ludicrous—and unbearable.

"How far apart are the contractions?" the doctor asked as the nurse gently pushed Melody back down on the hospital bed.

"Are you telling me it doesn't?" Cowboy said again, knowing he should just step back and give the doctor space but needing to know if Melody was actually going to look him in the eye and lie to him.

She looked from the doctor to Cowboy and back. "The... what?"

"Contractions." The doctor spoke slowly and clearly. "How far apart are they?"

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to wait outside," the nurse murmured to him.

"And, ma'am, I'm going to have to decline that request. I'm staying right here until I know for sure Melody's all right."

Melody was shaking her head. "But I'm not—" "

"Mel, what happened?" Another nurse came bursting through the door. She didn't wait for an answer before turning to the doctor. "It's nearly two months too soon. Have you given her something to stop the contractions? How far is she dilated?"

"I'm not having—"

"I've given her nothing," the doctor reported calmly. "If she's having contractions, they're very far apart. I haven't even done a pelvic exam."

"Sir, her sister's here now. Please wait outside," the older nurse murmured, trying to push him gently toward the door.

Cowboy didn't budge. So this was Mel's sister. Of course. Mel had told him she was a nurse.

"I don't need a pelvic exam," Melody protested loudly. "I'm not having contractions at all. I was running after Andy Marshall and I got a little dizzy, that's all."

Her sister nearly jumped down her throat. "You were running!"

Melody sat up again, turning toward Cowboy. "You caught Andy for me. I saw you. Is he here?"

"No. I'm sorry. He ran away while I was getting you into my car."

"Shoot! Shoot!" Melody turned toward her sister. "Brittany, you've got to call the Romanellas for me. Andy's going to run away because he thinks Vince is going to take his belt to him for getting into another fight!"

But Brittany was looking at Cowboy, noticing him for the first time. Her eyes were a different shade of blue than Mel's. Her face was sharper, more angular, too, but it was clear the two women were closely related. "Who the hell are you?"

"That depends on the baby's due date," he answered.

"What?"

"He brought Melody in," the other nurse told her. "I've been trying to tell him—"

"Can we focus on Melody for a minute?" the doctor asked, gently trying to push Melody back down onto the bed. "I'd like to do that pelvic anyway—make sure that fall didn't do anything it shouldn't have."

The gray-haired nurse was persistent. "Sir, now you really must wait outside."

Brittany was still looking at him, her eyes narrowed in speculation. "Her due date, huh?"

Melody sat up again. "If we don't hurry, Andy Marshall will be gone!"

"December 1st," Brittany told Cowboy. She looked him over more carefully, from the tips of his boots to the end of his ponytail. "My God, you're what's-his-name, the SEAL, aren't you?"

December 1st. That made more sense. Melody wasn't due now—she wasn't about to have the baby. With her slender frame and petite build she only looked as if she were going to pop any minute.

December... Cowboy quickly counted back nine months to... March. He'd been in the Middle East in March performing that hostage rescue. And after that, he'd spent six solid days in heaven.

He met Melody's eyes. She knew without a doubt that he'd done the easy math and put two and two together—or, more accurately, one and one. And in this case, one and one had very definitely made three.

"I'm Lt. Harlan Jones," he said, holding Melody's gaze, daring her to deny what he was about to say. "I'm the baby's father."

Jones was waiting for her in the hospital lounge.

Melody took a deep breath when she saw him, afraid that she might pass out again. She'd more than half expected him to be long gone.

Brittany tightened her grip on her arm. "Are you okay?" her sister whispered.

"I'm scared," Melody whispered back.

Britt nodded. "This isn't going to be easy for either of you. Are you sure you don't want me to stick around?"

Jones was standing by the windows, leaning against the frame, looking out over the new housing development going up on Sycamore Street. He looked so tall, so imposing, so stern.

So impossibly handsome.

Melody could see the muscles in the side of his jaw jumping as he clenched his teeth. She saw the muscles in his forearms tighten and flex as he slipped his hands into the back pockets of his pants. She knew firsthand the strength and power of those arms. She knew how incredibly gentle he could be, as well.

Jones looked so odd in civilian clothes—particularly these pants and this shirt that had such a blandly yuppie style. But she realized that she'd never seen him out of uniform. He'd worn black BDUs under his robe during the rescue. And after that, she'd only seen him in—or out of—his dress uniform.

These oddly conservative clothes might be the way he dressed all the time when he was off duty. Or they might have been something he'd specially chosen to wear for this surprise visit.

Talking about surprises...

As she watched, he closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead with one hand, as if he had a headache and a half. And why shouldn't he? He'd come here obviously hoping to sweet-talk his way back into her bed. He'd gotten far more than he'd bargained for—that was for sure.

She could see the lines of stress clearly etched on his face.

He'd smiled and laughed his way through the six days they'd spent together. But then his pager had gone off, and he'd told her he needed to return to California. He'd smiled as he kissed her in the airport, making promises she knew he wouldn't keep. He'd smiled—right up until the point where she told him she didn't want to see him again. And as he struggled to understand her many reasons for making a clean break, he looked so grim and imposing—rather like the way he looked right now.

It was as if no time had passed at all. It was as if they were right back where they'd left off.

Except for the obvious differences. His hair was longer. Hers was, too. And instead of being three days

pregnant and ignorant of the fact, she was now seven months along.

Melody rubbed her extended belly nervously, afraid of what he was going to say, afraid of the tension she could see in his face and in the tightness of his shoulders.

The early-afternoon sunshine lit his face, giving his hair an even more sun-streaked look.

She remembered how soft his hair had felt beneath her fingers. It had grown down past his shoulders now-rich and gleamingly golden brown. Freed from its restraint, it would hang wavy and thick around his face, making him look like one of those exotic men who graced the covers of the historical romances she liked to read so much.

He straightened up as he saw her coming. A flick of his green eyes took in Brittany, too, and Melody knew he was wondering if they were going to have this conversation with an audience. She saw him straighten his shoulders and clench his teeth a little more tightly, and she knew he intended to say what he had to say whether or not her sister was listening.

But, "I've got to get back to work," Britt announced. She narrowed her eyes at Jones. "Will you see that she gets home safely?"

Jones nodded, managing only a ghost of his usual five-thousand-watt smile. "That's my specialty."

"Okay," Brittany said, backing away. "Then I'm out of here. It was nice finally meeting you, Lieutenant Jones."

"Likewise, ma'am."

Melody had forgotten how polite Cowboy Jones could be. She'd forgotten how green his eyes were, how good he smelled, how sweet his lips had tasted... No, she hadn't forgotten that. She had simply tried to forget.

"Are you really all right?" Jones asked. His smile was gone again, and he gazed searchingly into her eyes, looking for what, she didn't know. "They don't want to keep you here overnight or anything? Do more tests...?"

She shook her head, suddenly shy, suddenly wishing that Brittany hadn't walked away. "I didn't have much breakfast, and being hungry combined with chasing Andy across the common made me light-headed. It hasn't been an easy pregnancy—I've had trouble keeping food down almost right from the start."

"I'm sorry."

Melody glanced up at him. I'll bet you are. She forced a smile. "Brittany wouldn't let me leave until I had lunch. Did you have something to eat?"

"Yeah. I grabbed a sandwich from the cafeteria." He was uncomfortable, too. "Do you want to sit down?"

"No, I want to... I want to go home. If you don't mind."

He shook his head. "I don't mind. It might be easier to talk someplace less public." He led the way

toward the double doors. "My car's out this way."

"Are you still with SEAL Team Ten?" she asked, realizing as they stepped out into the warm afternoon sunshine that she had about a million questions to ask him.

"Yes, ma'am."

God, they'd regressed all the way back to "ma'am." "How's Harvard?"

"He's fine. He's good. The entire squad's in Virginia—for the next few months, at least."

"Say hello for me next time you see him."

"I will." He gestured with his head. "Car's over here."

"Have you heard from Crash?" Melody waited as he unlocked and opened her door for her.

Cowboy's swim buddy, Crash, was as dark and mysterious as his odd nickname implied. They'd met him by chance at the hotel in Paris. Crash wasn't a member of Alpha Squad, or even SEAL Team Ten. In fact, Cowboy hadn't been absolutely certain where the SEAL he'd called his best friend back in BUD/S training was assigned. Except for the accidental meeting, it had been years since they'd even seen each other, but the ongoing mutual trust and respect between the two men had been obvious.

"I got some E-mail from him just last week. Nothing much—just a hi, how are ya, I'm still alive. But when I wrote to him, the mail all bounced back, undeliverable. Need help getting in?" He watched her manoeuvre her unwieldy body into the bucket seat.

She shook her head. "It looks more awkward than it really is. Although ask me again when we get to my house—I won't refuse a hand getting out."

Jones leaned over so that he was at her eye level. "I can't believe you still have two more months to go." He quickly back-pedalled. "Not to imply that you're not telling the truth or..." He closed his eyes, swearing softly. When he opened them again, his eyes were a startling shade of green against the tan of his face. "What I was trying to say was that if that baby gets much bigger, it's going to be a real struggle for you to give birth." He paused. "I want you to know that from the moment I saw you, Mel, I didn't doubt for a minute that the baby was mine."

"Jones, you don't have to—"

"You haven't denied that I'm right."

"I haven't said anything either way!"

"You don't have to." Jones straightened up and closed the car door. As Melody watched, he crossed around the front and unlocked the driver's-side door. "I called your neighbour—Vince Romanella—about that kid. He said to relax—that he'd find him. Andy. That's the kid's name."

The subject of whose baby she was carrying seemed to have been temporarily and quite intentionally dropped. "I know," Melody said as he climbed in and started the car. "Brittany told me you called Information to get Vince's number. Thank you for doing that."

"It was no problem." He took a left as he pulled out of the driveway.

"Don't you want me to give you directions?"

Jones glanced at her. "I know where you live. I checked a map and went out there this morning, but you weren't home." He smiled slightly, politely, as if they were strangers. "Obviously."

Melody couldn't stand it anymore. "Look, I think you should just drop me off and drive away." He was silent, so she took a deep breath and went on. "You can pretend you don't know. Pretend you never came to Appleton. Just...drive into Boston and catch the next flight to Virginia and don't look back. Don't say hi to Harvard for me. Don't say anything. You can tell the guys I wouldn't see you and..."

She had to stop and clear her throat. He was holding on to the steering wheel so tightly, his knuckles were white, but he still didn't speak.

"I know you didn't ask for this, Jones. I know this was not what you were thinking when we spent that time together. It wasn't what I was thinking, either, but I've had a chance to deal with it. I've had time to fall in love with this little baby, and I'm okay about it now. I'm excited about it. It may not have been what I wanted seven months ago, but I do want it now. But your being here messes things up."

He pulled into her driveway and, leaving the engine running, turned toward her. "It was on the flight to Paris, wasn't it? That's when it happened."

The look in his eyes was so intense, Melody felt as if he had X-ray vision and could see deep inside of her. She prayed that he couldn't. She prayed that he wouldn't know how close she was to throwing up even as she desperately tried to send him away forever.

"Drive away," she said again, steeling herself, purposely making her words as harsh as she possibly could. "And don't look back. I don't need you, Jones. And I don't want you."

He looked away, but not before she saw a flare of hurt in his eyes. Her heart nearly broke, but she forced herself to go on. It was better this way. It had to be better this way.

"I know for a fact that the last thing you need is this baby and me, tying you down in any way at all. All you can possibly do by sticking around is to complicate things. I have money. I have enough saved so that I can spend the next four years at home with the baby. My mother's already started a trust fund for him, for college. There's nothing you can give him that I haven't already thought of and provided."

He tried to cover his hurt with a cynical smile. "Well, hell, honey. Don't hold back. Tell me how you really feel."

She felt like a total bitch. But she had to do this. She had to make him leave before he got some crazy idea of "doing right" by her. "I'm sorry. I just didn't think now was the time to play games."

He exhaled in what might've been a laugh, but there wasn't much humour in it. "I'd say we pretty much covered the game-playing seven months ago."

Melody flushed, knowing precisely to what he was referring. They'd left their hotel room only once each night—for dinner. They'd gone out onto the winding, romantic streets of both those foreign cities and had let their insatiable desire for one another drive them half-mad. They'd kissed and touched and gazed into each other's eyes in a silent contest of wills. Who would be the first to give in and beg the other to return

to their room to make giddy, passionate love?

Jones had had no shame, sliding his hand up her skirt, along the inside of her thigh to touch her intimately beneath the curtained privacy of a thick restaurant tablecloth. She had lost the battle that night but won the next when he did the same, only to discover she'd gone out without her panties on—without even the smallest scrap of lace to cover her. And when she smiled into his eyes right there in the restaurant and opened herself to his exploring fingers...

They'd taken a taxi back to the hotel that night, even though the restaurant had only been a short three-block walk away.

It had happened similarly on that flight to France. What began as an innocent conversation about favourite books and movies with a four-star general also heading to Paris took on more meaningful undercurrents. Jones had thought it best to hide the nature of their relationship, and sitting side by side without touching soon had them both totally on edge.

Jones had had to reach past her to shake the general's hand, and his arm brushed her breast. The sensation nearly sent her through the roof—a fact she knew that he had not missed.

She'd countered by leaning across him to get a look out the window at the countryside below and letting her fingers brush his thigh.

He'd stretched his legs and accidentally bumped into her.

She'd excused herself and went into one of the tiny bathrooms.

When she returned and sat back down, she looked through her handbag in the pretence of searching for some chewing gum. She opened her bag carefully, revealing its contents—including a white bit of satin and lace—only to Jones and not the general. While she'd been gone, she'd once again removed her panties, knowing full well Jones would recognize the same article of clothing he'd taken such pains to remove earlier that morning, causing them to have to rush to get to the airport on time.

Melody felt her blush deepen. Who would've thought she'd have done such things, such daring, provocative, sexually aggressive things like that?

She'd liked it, though. She'd loved the way Jones had made her feel as if she was the sexiest woman in the world. She loved the way he'd needed her so desperately, the way he couldn't seem to get enough of her.

On that flight to Paris, she'd lured him into the tiny bathroom. She hadn't realized he wasn't carrying any condoms. And he had thought she had some in her purse. But once they were together in that hot little closet of a room, the need to sate their searing desire had taken priority over the fact they had no protection.

Jones had roughly pushed her skirt up her thighs and she had wrapped her legs around him as he thrust deeply inside her and took her to heaven. He'd pulled out in an attempt to keep her from getting pregnant, but Melody was well aware that as a form of birth control, the withdrawal method was far less than foolproof.

Still, she'd convinced herself that one time wouldn't matter. Surely they could cheat just once. Surely the odds were in their favour. And heck, luck had been on their side so far. Besides, she'd told herself, she

wanted Jones badly enough to be willing to face the consequences.

As she glanced at him now, she knew he was remembering that little airplane bathroom, too. He was remembering the taste of her, the scent of her, the slick heat that surrounded him, carrying them both to ecstasy.

God knows she'd never forget the incredible waves of pleasure that engulfed her as he gritted his teeth, fighting to keep himself from releasing all of his seed deep inside her.

He cleared his throat not once but twice before he could speak. "At least the sex was the greatest I've ever had in my life. I mean, it would've been real anticlimactic—no pun intended—to find out that I got you pregnant after having only mediocre sex."

Melody laughed. She couldn't stop herself. It was so like Jones to search for the positives in a no-win situation. But then her eyes filled up and she opened the car door, afraid she was going to burst into tears.

Somehow she managed to scramble up and out of the bucket seat. She closed the door, then he climbed out, too. But he stood with his door open, engine still running, as he looked at her over the top of the car.

"Jones, we had fun together. I can't deny that. But I told you back in March and I'm telling you again—what we shared is not enough to base any kind of real relationship on." Her voice shook slightly, and she fought to steady it "So good luck. God bless. Don't think I won't remember you. I will." She forced a smile. "I brought home a souvenir."

Jones shook his head. "Melody, I can't—"

"Please. Do me a favour and don't say anything," she begged him. "Just...leave and think about it for a week or two. Don't say anything until you've given yourself time to really think it through. This whole concept—my pregnancy—is still so new to you. I'm giving you a chance to walk away. No strings attached. Give yourself time to think about what that means before you say or do anything rash." She turned and headed toward the house.

He didn't follow, thank God.

She nearly dropped her keys as she unlocked the door. As she went inside, he was still standing there, half in and half out of his car.

As she shut the door behind her, she heard the car door slam. And then, through the window, she saw him drive away.

With any luck at all, he'd do as she asked and think about his options. And if her luck held, he would realize that she was dead serious about this easy way out she was giving him. And that would be that. He wouldn't call, he wouldn't write.

She would never see Lt. Harlan Jones of the U.S. Navy SEALs again.

The baby kicked her, hard.

Chapter 5

Cowboy thought Mel was going to faint again, merely at the sight of him.

He opened the screen door, ready to catch her, but Melody stepped out on the porch rather than let him into the house.

"What are you doing here?" She sounded breathless, shocked, as if she'd actually expected him to take her advice and leave town.

He met her eyes squarely, forcing himself to keep breathing as the enormity of what he was about to do seemed to set itself down directly on his chest. "I think you can probably figure it out."

Melody sat on the edge of one of the plastic lounge chairs that hadn't yet been moved inside for the coming winter. "Oh, God."

He'd put on his white dress uniform, hat and all. He'd even shined his shoes for the occasion. This was not your everyday, average social call.

"Sweetie, who's...?" Brittany's voice trailed off as she came to look out the screen.

"Good evening, ma'am." Cowboy was uncertain if the covered porch was considered indoors or out. He took off his hat, deciding that the ceiling above his head had to count for something. And he didn't want to risk being rude. God knows he was going into this with enough points against him already.

Brittany did a double take. "Are those all medals?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

Melody wasn't looking at him. She was staring off into space, across the front yard and down the road that led into town. She looked worn-out and about as unhappy as he'd ever seen her. Even in the Middle East, in the midst of all the danger and death, she hadn't looked this defeated.

Her sister pushed open the screen door. "God, you've got—there must be...how many?"

"Lucky thirteen, ma'am."

"Thirteen medals. My God"

She leaned even closer to look and Cowboy cleared his throat. "If you'll excuse us, Brittany...? You see, I came over here tonight to ask Melody to marry me."

He managed to get the words out without choking. Dear God, what was he doing here? The answer came swiftly: he was doing the only thing he could do now. He was doing the right thing.

Melody looked up at him, clearly surprised he'd be so forthcoming.

He smiled at her, praying he didn't look as terrified as he felt. She'd told him back in Paris that she couldn't resist his smile. He held out his hand, too. "What do you say we go for a walk?"

But she didn't reach for him. In fact, she all but slapped at his hand. "Didn't you hear anything I said this

afternoon?"

It seemed as if over the past seven months, she'd somehow learned to resist him.

"I'll just go and, um, go." Brittany faded back into the house.

"You don't need me." Cowboy repeated Melody's words. "You don't want me. You've got it all figured out. You and you alone can give this baby everything he or she needs. Except you're wrong. Without me, you can't give this child legitimacy. And you can't be his father."

His words came out sounding a whole lot more bitter than he'd intended, and as he watched, her eyes filled with tears.

"I didn't say those things purposely to hurt you, Jones," she told him quietly. "I just thought... I wanted to give you a chance to escape. To get away from here free and clear. I wanted to keep you from doing exactly what you're doing right now. I thought if I could make you see that I truly, honestly don't need you to support me or the baby—"

"You actually thought I'd just walk away?" Cowboy felt sick to his stomach.

Her tears almost overflowed, but she fiercely blinked them back. "I thought if I could convince you that I'm absolutely not your responsibility—"

"You truly believed I'd just turn around and go back to the Alpha Squad and never even think of you again?" Cowboy sat down heavily in the chair directly across from hers. "Honey, you don't know me very well."

Melody leaned forward. "That's the point. We don't know each other at all. We were together for...what? Eight days? During which time we actually talked for all of eight hours? That's not enough to build a relationship on, let alone a marriage!"

Even tired, even with the seriousness of this argument keeping her from smiling, she was lovely.

There was a trail of freckles across her nose and cheeks, making her look as if she had slowly ripened in the summer sun. Her pregnancy had added a lushness to her body, a womanly fullness to breasts and hips that had been almost boyishly slender before.

Even her face was fuller, less little-girl cute and more grown-woman beautiful.

Cowboy wanted to touch her. He was dying to press his hand against the tautness of her stomach, to feel the reality of her baby—his baby—beneath his fingers.

They'd done this together. They'd created this baby in the cramped bathroom of that 747 to Paris. It had to have happened then. It was the only time they hadn't used protection. Hell, it was the only time in thirteen years he'd had sex without a condom.

He could still remember the dizzying swiftness with which he had thrown aside a lifetime of precaution and control. And he could also remember the heart-stoppingly exquisite sensation when he'd driven himself deeply inside her.

Damn, but he wanted to do that again. And over and over again...

Cowboy cleared his throat, unable to hide the heat he knew was in his eyes as he looked at her. "It's just that, well, let me put it this way. I could think of far worse ways to spend the rest of my life than being married to you."

Married. Damn, the word still made him feel faint.

She held his gaze with eyes the colour of a perfect summer sky. They were so familiar, those eyes. He'd dreamed about her eyes more times than he could count. He'd dreamed about sitting right here, across from her on the front porch of her house and gazing at her.

He'd dreamed that he'd touch her. He'd trail one finger down the silky smoothness of her cheek and she would smile and open her arms to him. And then, finally, after all these months of starving for the taste of her lips, he would kiss her and...

But here in real life, he didn't dare reach for her. And she didn't smile. She simply looked away.

But not before he saw it—the undeniable answering heat of attraction that flashed across her face. There was still a spark between them. Despite everything she'd said, she was not unaffected by his presence. But it just wasn't enough.

"I can't think of anything worse," she said softly, "than to get married for the wrong reason."

"And you don't think that little baby you're carrying is a right enough reason?"

Melody lifted her chin in the air in that gesture of defiance that was so familiar. "No, I don't. Love is the only reason two people should get married."

He was about to speak, but she stopped him. "And I know you don't love me, so don't insult my intelligence by even trying to pretend that you do. People don't really fall in love at first sight—or even after eight days. Lust, yes, but not love. Love takes time. The kind of love you base a long-term relationship on—a relationship like marriage—needs to grow over a course of weeks and months and even years. What we experienced during my rescue and those days following it had nothing to do with love. Love is about normal things—about sharing breakfast and then going off to work. It's about working in the yard together on the weekend. It's about sitting on the back porch and watching the sunset."

"When I go off to work, I don't come back for four weeks," Cowboy said quietly.

"I know." She gave him a very sad smile. "That's not what I want from a husband. If I'm going to get married, it's going to be to a man whose idea of risking his life is to mow the lawn near the hornet's nest."

Cowboy was silent. He'd never been one for long speeches. He'd never been the type for philosophizing or debating some minute detail of an issue the way Harvard could do for hours at a time.

But at this crucial moment, Cowboy wished he had Harvard's talent for waxing eloquent. Because he knew how he felt—he just wasn't certain he'd be able to find the right words to explain.

"Sometimes, Mel," he started slowly, hesitantly, "you've got to take what life dishes out. And sometimes that's real different from what you hoped for or what you expected. I mean, I didn't exactly picture myself getting married and starting a family for a whole hell of a lot of years, but here I am, sitting here with a diamond ring in a box in my pocket."

"I'm not going to marry you," she interrupted. "I don't want to marry you!"

His voice rose despite his intentions to stay calm. "Yeah, well, honey, I'm not that excited about it myself." He took a deep breath and when he spoke again his voice was softer. "But it's the right thing to do."

She pressed the palm of her hand against her forehead. "I knew it. I knew you were going to start with 'the right thing.'"

"You bet I'm starting with it. Because I believe that baby—my baby as well as yours, Mel—deserves a name."

"He'll have a name. He'll have my name!"

"And he'll grow up in this little town with everyone knowing he's a bastard. Yeah, you're really looking out for him, aren't you?"

Anger flashed in her eyes. "Stop with the Middle Ages mentality. Women are single mothers all the time these days. I can take care of this baby by my—"

"I know. I heard you. You've got it all figured out. You've got his college education handled. But you know, there is one thing you can't provide for this kid, and that's a chance for him to know his father. I'm the only one who can make sure this kid grows up knowing that he's got a father who cares."

Cowboy couldn't believe the words that had come out of his mouth. He was glad he was sitting down. A father who cared. Hell, he actually sounded as if he knew what he was talking about—as if he knew anything at all about how to make sure this unborn child would grow up believing that he was loved.

In truth, he was clueless. His own father had been a dismal failure in that regard. By-the-book U.S. Navy, Admiral Jones was a perfectionist. He was harsh and demanding and cold and—with the exception of Cowboy's joining the SEALs—was never happy with anything he ever did. With the old man as his only real role model, Cowboy wasn't sure he was ready to get within a hundred feet of an impressionable child.

Still, he didn't have any choice, did he? He drew the ring box from his pocket and snapped the lid open. He held it out to her. "Mel, you gotta marry me. This isn't just about you and me anymore."

Melody couldn't bring herself even to look at the ring.

She clumsily pushed herself to her feet, fighting to keep from crying. She'd made a mistake—assuming Jones wouldn't care. She'd misjudged him—thinking his good-time, pleasure-seeking, no-strings disposition would win out over his sense of responsibility.

But a sense of responsibility didn't make for a happy home.

"The worst thing we can do for this baby is enter into a marriage neither one of us wants," she said. "What kind of home life could we possibly give him when we don't even know if we like each other?"

That seemed to floor Jones. He swore softly, shaking his head. "I like you. I sort of thought you liked me, too." He laughed in disbelief. "I mean, come on..."

She stopped, her hand on the screen door. "I did like you," she told him. "I liked you a whole lot when you were the only thing standing between me and death when we were inside that embassy. And I liked you even more when you made love to me, after we were back and safe. But there's a whole lot more to you besides your abilities as a Navy SEAL and your considerable talent in bed. And I don't know that part of you at all. And you don't know me, either. Let's be honest—you don't."

Let's be honest. Except she wasn't—not really. She did like Cowboy Jones. She admired and respected him, and every time he opened his mouth, every minute longer he hung around, she liked him more and more.

It wouldn't take much for her feelings to grow into something stronger.

And that would be trouble, because adventure and excitement were this man's middle names. There was no way he would be satisfied with a marriage to someone as unadventurous and unexciting as Melody Evans. And after the novelty of doing the right thing wore off, they'd both be miserable.

By then, he'd be bored with her, and she—fool that she was—would be hopelessly in love with him.

Melody looked up at him as she opened the door and stepped inside. "So, no, Lieutenant Jones, I'm not going to marry you."

"I need a room."

The elderly woman behind the counter at the local inn could have been a SEAL team's point man. Cowboy could tell that she missed nothing with her shrewd, sweeping gaze. She quickly took in his naval uniform, his perfectly shined shoes, the pile of medals that decorated his chest. No doubt she was memorizing the colour of his eyes and hair and taking a mental picture of his face—probably for reference later when she watched Top Cops or another of those reality-based TV shows just to make sure the uniform wasn't an elaborate disguise when, in fact, he was wanted for heinous crimes in seven different states.

He gave her his hundred-dollar smile.

She didn't blink. "How many nights?"

"Just one, ma'am."

She pursed her lips, making her face look even longer and narrower, and slid a standard hotel-room registration form across the counter to him. "You're from Texas?"

Cowboy paused before picking up the pen. His accent wasn't that obvious. "You have a good ear, ma'am."

"That was a question, young man," she told him sternly. "I was asking. But you are, aren't you? You're that sailor from Texas."

Another elderly woman, this one as round and short as the other was tall and narrow, came out of the back room.

"Oh, my," she said, stopping short at the sight of him. "It's him, isn't it? Melody's navy fellow."

"He wants to stay the night, Peggy," the stern-faced woman intoned, disapproval thickening her voice. "I'm not sure I want his type in our establishment. Having all kinds of rowdy parties. Getting all of the local girls pregnant."

All of the...?

"Hannah Shelton called to say he just bought a diamond ring at Front Street Jeweler's," the round lady-Peggy-said. "On credit."

Both women turned to look at him.

"About time," the tall one sniffed.

"Did he give it to her?" Peggy wondered.

It was odd—the way they talked about him as if he weren't there, even as they stood staring directly at him.

He decided the best course would simply be to ignore their comments. "I'd like a room with a telephone, if possible," he said as he filled out the registration form. "I need to make some out-of-state calls. I have a calling card, of course."

"None of our rooms have private phones," the tall lady informed him.

"Our guests are welcome to use the lobby phone." Peggy gestured across the room toward an antique sideboard upon which sat an equally antique-looking rotary phone.

The lobby phone. Of course. God forbid a conversation go on in this building that Peggy and the bird lady not know about.

"You did buy it as an engagement ring, didn't you?" the tall woman asked, narrowing her eyes, finally confronting him directly. "With the intention of giving it to Melody Evans?"

Cowboy tried his best to be pleasant. "That's private business between Ms. Evans and me."

"Thank God, Lieutenant! You're still here!" Brittany came bursting through the inn's lobby door. "I have to talk to you."

"It's Brittany Evans." Peggy stated the obvious to her dour-faced companion.

"I can see that. She wants to talk to the sailor."

"Do you have a few minutes?" Mel's sister asked Cowboy.

He shrugged. "Yeah, sure. Although I'm not sure if the Spanish Inquisition has finished with me."

She laughed, and he could see traces of Melody in her face. The wave of longing that hit him was overpowering. Why couldn't this have been easy? Why couldn't he have arrived in Appleton to find

Melody happy to see him—and not seven months pregnant?

But "why couldn't" scenarios were of no help to him now. He couldn't change the past—that wasn't in his control. And difficult as it seemed, he somehow had to change Mel's mind. He had to make her see that they really only had one choice here.

As he'd walked away with that diamond ring still in his pocket, it occurred to him that he'd been taking the wrong tack. He shouldn't have tried to argue with Melody. He should've spent all of his energy sweet-talking her instead. He should've tried to seduce his way back into her life.

Yeah, sure, great sex probably wasn't enough to base a long-term relationship on. But great sex combined with a soon-to-be-born baby were grounds for a definite start.

Brittany turned to the two old ladies, fixing them with a pointed finger and a glare. "Peggy. Estelle. If either one of you breathes so much as a word about the fact that I came here to talk to Lieutenant Jones, and my sister hears about it, I swear I will take my chain saw to your rosebushes. Is that understood?"

Estelle didn't seem convinced, lifting a hawklike nose into the air. "She'd never do it."

Peggy wasn't quite so certain. "She might."

Brittany grabbed Cowboy's arm. "Come on, Lieutenant. Let's take a walk."

He scooped his duffel bag off the floor and followed her out into the early-evening dusk.

There was a chill in the air as the sun dipped below the horizon. After weeks of unseasonably warm weather, autumn was definitely on its way.

Melody's sister marched in silence until they were a good fifty feet away from the front porch of the inn. At that point, Cowboy ventured to speak. "I doubt they can hear us from this distance. Although I suppose they could be tracking us via some KH-12 SATCOM." At her frown of confusion, he explained, "Spy satellite. It'd be right up their alley."

Brittany laughed, rolling her eyes and crossing the street, taking them onto the town common. "God, I can just picture Peggy and Estelle down in some high-tech studio in their basement, with little headsets on over their purple hair, gleefully monitoring the private conversations going on all over town."

"Seems they do pretty well all by themselves. In fact, they could probably teach the staff at NAVINTEL a thing or two about information gathering."

Appleton was a perfect little New England town, complete with eighteenth-century clapboard houses that surrounded a picture-perfect, rectangular-shaped common. The common was covered with thick green grass and crisscrossed with sidewalks. Benches and stately trees were scattered here and there. Brittany led the way toward one of the benches.

"This town has a gossip network like you wouldn't believe. We've got the highest busybody per capita ratio in the entire state."

Cowboy swore softly. "That must've been really tough on Melody—I mean, when her pregnancy started to show. There was probably a lot of talk."

"Actually, she didn't give anyone a chance to talk. Come on, let's sit. I've been on my feet, running all day." Brittany sank onto the white-painted bench, and Cowboy sat beside her.

From a playground, way down at the other end of the green, he could hear the sounds of children laughing. Someday his kid would play there. His kid. He felt a cold streak of fear run down his spine. How could he have a kid? He wasn't ready to stop being a kid himself.

"Melody went all the way into the city to buy a home pregnancy test," Brittany continued. "She knew if she bought it here in town, word would've been out within two minutes of leaving the store. When the test turned up positive, she didn't have to think for very long before deciding that an abortion wasn't the right choice for her. And giving the child up for adoption was also out of the question. So there she was, pregnant, about to be a single mother. She realized that sooner or later her condition was going to be obvious to the entire town, so she..."

She broke off, chuckling and shaking her head. "I'm sorry—I still can't quite believe she did this. But my little sister crashed one of Estelle Warner's Ladies' Club meetings. The Ladies' Club is really just a cover name for Gossipers Anonymous. I usually don't go—Estelle and I aren't exactly friends—but I was there that day, drumming up support for the hospital's AIDS awareness program.

"At first I thought Melody was there to give me support, but when Hazel Parks opened the floor for new topics of discussion, Mel stood up. She cleared her throat and said, 'I would like you all to know that I have no intention of getting married, but I am, however, two months pregnant.' She didn't even give anyone time to gasp in shock. She just kept going. She gave 'em the facts—that you were the father and that she intended to keep the baby."

"She stood there," Brittany went on, "looking all those gossipmongers in the eye, and offered to answer any questions they might have about her condition and her plans. She even passed around a picture of you."

Cowboy shook his head in admiration. "She told them the truth, And once the truth was out, no one could speculate." He paused. "God, I wish she'd told me, too. I wish..."

He should've called her at the beginning of the summer. He should have swallowed his pride a whole hell of a lot sooner and picked up the phone. He should have been there. He should have known right from the start.

"Although Estelle and Peggy pretend to disapprove, I've got to admit even they've been pretty supportive. They even threw Mel a baby shower that the entire Ladies' Club turned out for." Brittany gazed at him. "There's been some talk, but not a lot. And most of it's concerned you."

Cowboy sighed. "And here I am, showing up in town, throwing the gossip squad into an uproar. No wonder Melody wanted me to leave as quickly as possible. I'm just making things worse for her, aren't I?"

"I heard what you said to my sister this evening out on the porch," Brittany said baldly. "And I heard what she said to you, about not needing you. Don't you believe her for a second, Lieutenant. She pretends to be so tough and resilient. But I know better.

"She's been depressed and unhappy ever since she came back from Paris," Brittany told him. "And she may believe with all of her heart that marrying you won't make her any happier, but I've got to tell you, today in the hospital, I watched her when she looked at you. And for the first time in more than half a

year, she actually seemed alive again. Don't let her chase you away, Lieutenant."

Cowboy looked at the woman sitting next to him and smiled. "I wasn't about to go anywhere. In fact, I was planning to knock on your door again first thing in the morning."

Brittany took a deep breath. "Good. Okay. I'll plan not to be home."

"And, by the way, since I'm getting a strong hint here that we're allies, you should know that my friends call me Cowboy."

She lifted one eyebrow. "Cowboy. Is that because you're from Texas or because you're some kind of hotshot?"

"A little of each."

Brittany laughed. "Doesn't it figure? Somehow I always imagined Melody spending the rest of her life with an accountant—not one of the X-Men."

Cowboy smiled ruefully. He wished he could feel as certain that Melody was going to see things his way. And despite his belief that getting married was the only solution, he wished that the thought of vowing to remain faithful and true to one woman for the rest of his life didn't scare him half to death.

He'd been so enchanted by Melody that he hadn't been able to stop thinking about her those months they'd been apart. He'd loved making love to her. But she was right. He hadn't come all the way to Appleton to pledge his undying love. He'd come to renew their affair. He'd come to have sex, not to get married.

But now he had to convince Mel to marry him.

That would be hard enough to do even if he didn't have his own doubts and fears. And he was running out of time. His leave was up at 0900 Monday morning.

Cowboy closed his eyes at the sheer impossibility of this situation. Compared to this mess, a hostage rescue was a piece of cake.

Chapter 6

Melody was a hostage in her own home.

Of course, she was a hostage to her own stupidity and foolishness, but knowing that didn't make it any better. In fact, it made it worse.

Cowboy Jones had been sitting out on her front porch for more than two hours now. He'd rung her doorbell while she was getting dressed to go to the late service at the Congregational Church. She'd wrapped her robe around herself and rushed into Brittany's room, intending to beg her sister to tell him she wasn't home.

But Brittany's bed was neatly made. She was long gone. There was a note on the kitchen table saying that she'd forgotten to tell Melody, but she'd promised to work a friend's shift at the hospital. She

wouldn't be home until late.

So Melody had hidden from Jones. She'd taken the chicken's way out and she hadn't answered the door at all. And Jones had made himself comfortable out on the porch, apparently determined to wait all day for her to come back home.

So if she went out now, she'd be forced to admit that she truly had been home all this time. Assuming, of course, that he didn't already know that.

She tried to catch up on her reading, tried not to let herself be unnerved by the fact that this man she had shared such intimacies with was sitting within shouting distance. She tried to convince herself that those twinges of frustration and longing she felt were the result of her being unable to work in her garden. She'd planned to spend the afternoon out in the sunshine and fresh air.

Instead, she was here. Locked inside her house.

Melody slowly opened the window in the room she was making into a nursery, careful not to make any noise. It was a glorious day-cool and crisp. She pressed her nose to the screen and took a deep breath.

There was no way she could possibly have caught a whiff of Harlan Jones's hauntingly familiar and utterly masculine scent, was there? Of course not. Not all the way up here on the third floor. She was imagining things. She was remembering—

"Hey."

The sound of a voice in the yard made her jump back, away from the window. But it was only Andy Marshall, crossing over from the Romanellas' yard.

"That's not an Army uniform, is it?" He wasn't talking to her. He hadn't even seen her, and she moved closer to the window to peer down at the boy. "My old man's in the Army."

"I'm Navy," Jones replied from beneath the roof of the porch.

"Oh." There was disappointment in Andy's voice. "Then I guess you don't know my father."

"I guess not." Jones sounded sleepy, his Western drawl more pronounced. Melody could picture him sitting back in one of her lounge chairs, feet up and eyes half-closed, like a lion sunning himself. Relaxed, but dangerously aware of everything going on around him.

"Looks pretty damn uncomfortable, buttoned all the way up like that," Andy commented.

"It's not that bad."

"Yeah, well, you look like a monkey. You'd never get me into one of those things, not in a million years."

"Probably not. Only the smartest, toughest and strongest men get into the SEAL teams. You probably wouldn't come close."

Out on the lawn, Andy took a step back. "The hell with you."

Jones yawned. "The hell with you too. If you don't want to be insulted, don't insult me. But the fact is,

SEAL training is tough. Most guys don't have what it takes and they end up dropping out of the program. They run away—the way you did yesterday."

Melody winced. Ouch. Jones wasn't pulling his punches.

"And you're like some kind of god, right?" Andy bristled with outrage. "Because you made it through—?"

Jones laughed. "That's right. My pay grade is O-3, but my rank is God. Anytime you feel like it, just go right ahead and grovel and bow down to my magnificence. And if you don't believe me, go to the library and read anything you can get your hands on about BUD/S—the SEAL training program. Of course, in your case, you're probably going to have to learn to read first."

Melody watched Andy, certain that he was going to turn and run away. But to her surprise, the boy laughed and sat down on the steps leading up to the porch.

"You think you're pretty funny, don't you?" he retorted.

"Hey, I'm a god—I don't need to be funny. The mortals laugh even when I make a bad joke."

"Is it really that tough—you know, the training?"

"It's insane," Jones said. "But you know what I learned from doing it?"

"What?"

"I can do anything." Jones paused and Melody could picture his smile. "There's no job that's too tough. There's no task that's impossible. If I can't climb over it, I'll swim around it. If I can't swim around it, I'll blow the damn thing up and wade through the rubble."

Melody closed her eyes. Jones had already done the very same thing to her life. He'd blown it up and now was wading through the rubble.

"So you're the guy who knocked up Melody Evans, huh?" Andy asked.

Jones was silent for several long seconds. And when he spoke, there wasn't even the slightest trace of amusement or laughter in his voice. "You want to rephrase that question so that I'm certain you meant absolutely no disrespect to the woman I intend to marry? You can dis me all you want, but don't you ever, ever dis Melody. Not behind her back and not to her face. Do you read what I'm saying?"

"But she doesn't want you around."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"So why are you even bothering?" Andy asked. "You should be grateful and leave while you've got the chance. That's what my father did. He left before I was born even. I've never met him, you know. The closest I've ever gotten to him is this stupid watch."

Andy's watch. Melody remembered how carefully he'd checked it after fighting with Alex Parks in the playground. That had been his father's watch. She had guessed it was important to him in some way.

Jones's voice was quiet. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well, you know, he probably had things to do. My mother told me he was stationed overseas and she didn't want to go. He didn't have a choice, though. When you're in the Army, you've got to go where you're sent. You don't have a lot of extra time to spend on having kids." His words were almost recited—as if this was something he'd said over and over in an attempt to justify his father's actions.

Jones was silent, and Melody knew that he didn't want to say anything that would contradict Andy.

But then Andy himself laughed—a scornful expulsion of air. "Yeah, right. I don't know why I'm sticking up for him. Like he didn't run to get away from us."

Melody's heart broke for the boy. He was at the age where he was starting to doubt the fairy tales his mother had told him. He still knew all the words, but he was starting to see through them to the truth beneath the surface.

It was a moment before either Jones or Andy spoke again.

"Melody's home, you know," Andy finally said. "Her car's in the garage."*

"I know."

Melody closed her eyes. Jones knew.

"I figure sooner or later she'll get tired of hiding and she'll come out and talk to me."

"She'll have to come out tomorrow morning," Andy pointed out. "She's got to go to work."

"Well, there you go," Jones said. "Of course, by Monday morning, I'll be AWOL. Unless I can arrange more leave. Hell, with the amount of vacation time coming to me, I figure I could sit out here on this porch until Thanksgiving."

More leave? Melody closed her eyes. Oh, God, no...

"That would be a stupid way to spend your vacation."

"Yeah, it would be," Jones agreed. "But if that's what I've got to do..."

"But you don't," Andy argued. "She doesn't want you to stay. She doesn't want to marry you. If I were you, I'd've been out of here a long time ago. 'Cause, like, what do you get out of this anyway? I mean, seven months ago, yeah, she was probably pretty hot. But now she's all...well, no disrespect intended, but she's all fat and funny-looking."

Melody grimaced in despair. Andy was only a kid—what should she care what he thought of her physical attractiveness? But she did care. She cared what Jones thought and she braced herself, waiting for his response.

"She's 'fat and funny-looking,' as you so tactlessly put it, because I made her that way," Jones countered. "I did this, I got her pregnant, and I've got to make it right. I don't deal with my problems by running and hiding like some kind of frightened girl."

Melody couldn't stand it any longer. Not only was she some awful fat and funny-looking problem, but she was cowardly, as well.

She headed downstairs and threw open the front door before she gave herself a chance to think.

"I am not hiding," she announced as she stepped out onto the porch.

Andy looked startled at her sudden appearance, but Jones just smiled as if he'd been expecting her.

"I knew that one would get you out here," he drawled.

He was sitting back in one of the lounge chairs, legs crossed at the ankles, hands behind his head, elbows out, just the way she'd pictured him.

"You were listening?" Andy actually had the sense to look embarrassed.

"Yes," Melody told him tartly. "I was listening. With my fat and funny-looking ears. I was practicing the age-old Appleton skill of eavesdropping."

"I didn't mean—"

"For me to overhear. Yeah, no kidding, Einstein. And you still owe me an apology for making me chase you across the world yesterday."

"I'm sorry," Andy said.

His quick and seemingly sincere apology caught her off guard. "Well, good," she said. "You should be."

Jones smiled at Andy. "Thanks for keeping me company, but I think you'll probably understand when I say scat."

Andy was gone before Melody could blink.

Jones sat up, putting one leg on either side of the lounge chair, leaving space on the cushion in front of him. He patted the cushion. "Sit down. You look like you could use a back rub."

He was right. The tension of the past few hours had turned her shoulders into knots. But there was no way she was going to let him touch her. That would be sheer insanity.

"Come on," he whispered, holding out his hand for her. His impossibly sexy smile almost did her in.

But she sat down on the other lounge chair instead. "You know darn well where we'd end up if I let you give me a back rub."

His smile didn't falter. "I was hoping we'd end up having dinner."

"Right. And we've never had dinner without it leading directly back to my bed," she said bluntly. "Jones, what possible good could come of our sleeping together?"

The warmth in his eyes got hotter. "I can think of one hell of a reason—to remind you how really good we were together."

"When we had sex," she clarified.

"The rest of the time, too."

Melody had to laugh. "There was no rest of the time. We were either having sex or unconscious."

"We spent two days together behind enemy lines and I hardly even touched you the entire time."

"That was foreplay," she told him. "For you, anyway."

His smile was gone and his eyes were nearly neon green in their intensity. "You don't really believe that."

She shook her head. "I don't know what to believe—I don't know you well enough to do more than guess. But it sure seemed to me that while I was scared to death, you were having fun."

"I was doing my job. And part of that job was to keep you from losing faith."

"You did it well," she told him. "I had total faith in you. God, I would have followed you into hell if you'd told me to."

"So where's your faith in me now?" he asked quietly.

Without his smile to light him up, Jones looked tired. He looked as if he'd slept about as well as she had last night—which was not well at all.

"The faith I have in you is still as strong," Melody said just as softly. "I believe—absolutely—that you think you're doing the right thing. But I also believe that getting married would be a total disaster." She sat up, her conviction making her voice louder. "You'd never be happy married to someone like me. Jones, I work with the local Brownie troop, going around picking up trash on the side of the road for excitement. And when I'm feeling really adventurous, I volunteer down at the Audubon Bird Refuge. Believe me, I'm really boring."

"I'm not looking to recruit you to join the Alpha Squad," he argued. "I have six teammates—I don't need to be married to a SEAL."

"And I don't need to be married to a SEAL, either," she countered. She leaned forward. "Don't you see, Jones? I don't want to be married to someone like you. I want to find a boring, regular, average, normal man."

"I'm as average and normal as the next guy—"

She cut him off. "Oh, please!"

"I am."

"Yeah, I can just picture you in the yard with an edge trimmer or cleaning out the gutters. Or helping me shop for baby furniture—oh, that's right up your alley! You can 'take the point' when we go to the mall," she said, using some of the military terminology he'd taught her during their brief tune together.

Jones shook his head, trying to hide his smile. "Come on, Mel. You said yourself you don't know me

well enough to—"

"I know enough to be convinced that you're the polar opposite of average."

"How can you be so sure?" He threw her own words back at her. "We were either having sex or unconscious."

Jones stood up, and she knew she was in trouble. She held up one hand before he could move any closer. "Please don't touch me."

He sat down next to her anyway, invading her personal space, invading her senses. God, he smelled so good. "Please don't tell me not to touch you," he countered in that slight Western drawl that melted her insides and weakened her resolve.

He lightly trailed his fingers through her hair, not quite touching her. "We can make this work," he whispered. His eyes were a very persuasive shade of green, but there was something in his face that told her he was trying to persuade himself as well. "I know we can. Come on, Mel, say you'll marry me, and let's go upstairs and make love."

"No." Melody pushed herself up and off the chair, desperate to get away from the hypnotizing warmth in his eyes. God, he made her dizzy. She pulled open the screen door and reached for the knob....

Locked.

The door was locked.

She tried it again, praying it was only temporarily stuck. But it didn't budge. Somehow it had swung shut behind her and now was tightly locked.

She and Brittany kept a spare key hidden beneath a loose board under the front welcome mat, but when she lifted it up, there was no key to be found. Of course not. She'd used that key the last time she'd locked herself out. And it was sitting where she'd left it—on the foyer sideboard. She could see it through the window, gleaming mockingly at her from among the piles of junk mail.

She could feel Jones watching as she fought the waves of nausea that hit her one after another.

She was locked out.

None of the downstairs windows was open—Brittany had just finished reading a heart-stoppingly scary serial-killer suspense novel and had been making a point to lock the windows at night. Even the mudroom windows were tightly shut. The only open window in the house was the one in the baby's nursery—the tower room, way up on the third floor.

She was going to have to ask for Jones's help.

She turned toward him, taking a deep, steadying breath. "Will you help me, please? I need a ride to the hospital."

He was up out of the chair and next to her in a fraction of a second. "Are you all right?"

Melody felt a twinge of regret. For the span of a heartbeat, she allowed herself to wish that the concern

darkening his eyes was the result of love rather than responsibility. But she wasn't into playing make-believe, so she quickly pushed those errant thoughts aside and forced a smile.

"I'm locked out. I need to go get Brittany's key. I think she's probably still at work." Please God, let her be there...

"As long as we're going downtown, why don't we stop and have some lunch?"

"Because I don't want to have lunch with you, thank you very much."

He inched a little closer, reaching out to play with the edge of her sleeve. Touching, but not touching. "So, okay, we'll skip lunch, drive into Boston and catch the next flight to Vegas instead. We can get married before sundown at the Wayne Newton Wedding Chapel or someplace equally thrilling. No, don't answer right away, honey. I know the thought overwhelms you and leaves you all choked up with emotion."

Melody laughed despite herself. "God, you're never going to give up, are you?"

"No, ma'am."

The tips of his fingers brushed her arm, and she pulled away, straightening her back. "I can be as stubborn as you can."

"No, you can't. You dull, boring types are never as stubborn as us wild adventurers."

Another wave of dizziness hit, and she reached behind her, suddenly needing to sit.

Jones held her elbow, helping her down into one of the chairs. "Is this normal?"

She pulled her hand free from his grasp. "It's normal for me."

"As long as we're going to the hospital, maybe we should get you checked out. You know, make sure everything's okay...?"

She sat back in the chair, closing her eyes. "Everything's okay."

"You're looking a little green."

She felt him sit down next to her, felt the warmth of his leg against her thigh, felt his hand press against the clamminess of her forehead. But she didn't have the strength to move. "I feel a little green. But that's normal—for me, or so my doctor tells me. Every now and then, I throw up. It's part of my particular pregnancy package. I just sip some ginger ale and nibble on a cracker and then—if I'm lucky—I feel a little better."

"And the ginger ale and crackers are...?"

"Conveniently stored in the kitchen," she finished for him. "Inside the locked house."

"Hang on—I'll get 'em."

She felt him stand up and she opened her eyes to see him step off the porch.

"Jones..."

He flashed her a smile. "There's no such thing as locked," he told her and disappeared from sight.

Cowboy unfastened the screen and pushed the window up even higher. He slipped into the house and looked around as he slid the screen back into place.

This room had recently been painted. The walls were white and the window frames were bright primary colours. There was a band of dancing animals stencilled across the walls in those same brilliant hues.

He was standing in a nursery.

Some kind of baby dresser thing was against the wall and a gleaming white crib was set up in one corner of the room. Several silly-looking teddy bears were already waiting in the crib, their mouths set in expressions of blissful happiness.

Cowboy picked one of them up. It was as soft and furry as it looked, and he held it as he took in the rest of the room.

A rocking chair sat near the open window. It, too, had been painted white, with several of the same dancing animals carefully stencilled on the back. A package of what looked to be brightly patterned curtains and several curtain rods had been set on the dresser—a project yet to be completed.

It was obvious that Melody had already spent a great deal of time getting this room ready for her baby.

Their baby.

What had she been thinking about as she painted those yellow, red and blue animals on the walls? Had she thought of him at all? Had she wondered where he was, what he was doing?

He gazed into the teddy bear's plastic eyes, unable to keep from smiling back at its loopy grin. But then his smile faded. If Melody had her way, his son was going to know this bear's face better than Cowboy's. This bear was going to be the kid's constant companion while Cowboy would be a stranger.

He felt a rush of anger and frustration that quickly turned to despair. He couldn't blame Melody for her mistrust. Everything she'd said was based in truth.

They didn't know each other very well at all. And marriage did need more than sex and physical attraction to make it work. Growing up in a household filled with arguments, anger and tension could well be worse than growing up in a household without a father.

And it wasn't as if he was any kind of major prize. Sure, he'd made the maverick jump from enlisted seaman to officer, but it wasn't as if he had any great aspirations to follow in his own father's footsteps and become an admiral.

He had a little money saved, but not a lot. In fact, it was barely enough to pay for that ring he'd bought at the local jeweller's. He'd spent most of his disposable income on his car and that sweet little powerboat that was docked down in Virginia Beach right this minute. He liked things that went fast and he'd spent

his money accordingly.

He hadn't even considered saving up. The need for financial security hadn't crossed his mind. He'd had no intention of settling down and starting a family for a good, long time.

But now here he was. Standing in his soon-to-be-born son's nursery, his insides tied in a knot because there was no way out, no easy solution.

There was only the obvious solution—the grit-your-teeth and shoulder-your-responsibility solution that involved marriage vows and a shockingly abrupt change in life-style.

But hell, he'd made this baby; now he was going to have to live with it. Literally.

Cowboy gently set the bear back in the crib.

Right now, he had to go downstairs and fetch Melody some ginger ale and crackers from the kitchen. And then, despite his own doubts, he had to go out on that porch and convince her to do right by this baby and marry him.

Except every time he sat down next to her, every time he gazed into her heaven-blue eyes, every time he as much as thought about her, he wanted to skip the negotiations. He wanted nothing more than to swing her up into his arms and carry her into the house. He wanted to take her into her bedroom and show her exactly how well they could get along. He wanted to bury himself inside her, to lose himself in the sweetness he'd only known in his dreams for the past seven months.

Despite the fact that her near-perfect body was swollen with child, he wanted her so much he could barely breathe. He'd never even glanced twice at a pregnant woman before—in fact, he'd considered the lack of an hourglass figure to be something of a major turnoff. But now he found himself fascinated by the changes in Melody's body. And he couldn't deny the extremely primitive rush of masculine pride he felt every time he saw her.

He had done that. He had possessed her and made her his own.

In everything but name.

Of course, that insane sense of pride was accompanied by a healthy dollop of toe-curling fear. How on earth was he going to be a good father when he didn't have a clue as to how a good father acted? And how the hell was that enormous, destined-to-be-six-feet-three-inches, Harlan Jones-sized baby going to be delivered from petite little Melody Evans without putting her at risk and endangering her life?

And how was he going to react on his next counterterrorist mission with Alpha Squad, knowing he had a wife and son waiting for him—depending on him—at home?

He went down a few steps and pushed the nursery door open, then found himself in what had to be Melody's bedroom.

It smelled like the perfume he'd caught a whiff of both yesterday and today. It smelled like Melody—sweet and fresh. The room was a little messy, with clothes flung over the back of a chair, and the bed less than perfectly made.

Her sheets had a floral print that matched the bedspread. Throw pillows spilled over onto the hardwood

floor. Her bedside table was cluttered with all kinds of things—books, a tape player, CDs, bottles of lotion and nail polish.

It was a nice room, pretty and comfortable and welcoming—a lot like Melody herself.

Cowboy caught sight of his reflection in the full-length mirror attached to the closet door. The starkness of his dress uniform accentuated his height and the width of his shoulders, and surrounded by the tiny rose-coloured flowers and the lacy curtains, he looked undeniably out of place.

He tried to picture himself dressed down in civilian clothes, in jeans and a T-shirt, with his hair loosened from its rather austere-looking ponytail, but even then, he didn't seem to fit into the pretty picture this room made. He was too big. Too muscular. Too male.

Cowboy squared his shoulders. That was just too damn bad. Melody was going to have to get used to him. Or redecorate. Because neither of them had any choice. He was here to stay.

He went down the stairs and found the kitchen.

The entire house was decorated in a pleasant mixture of both antiques and more modern furnishings. It was neat, but not obsessively so.

He searched the cabinets for some crackers and found a box that boasted unsalted tops. He grabbed the package and a can of ginger ale from a refrigerator that was nearly filled with fresh vegetables and went down the hall to the front door. He opened it, making sure it was unlocked before he stepped out onto the porch.

Melody was sitting, bent practically in half, her head between her knees. The position was awkward—her belly made it difficult to execute.

"Sometimes this helps if I feel as if I'm going to faint," she told him without even looking up.

Cowboy crouched next to her. "Do you feel like you're gonna faint?"

"I think it was the thought of you climbing all the way up to that third-floor window," she admitted. "I figured that's how you got into the house." She turned to look at him through a veil of golden hair, her eyes wide and her lips questioningly pursed. "Am I right?"

"It was no big deal." Cowboy wanted to kiss her, but he opened the can of soda instead.

She sat up, pulling her hair back from her face. "Except if you slipped and fell. Then it would be a very big deal."

He had to laugh, handing her the can. "There's no way I would slip. It just wasn't that tough a climb."

Her eyebrow went up into a delicate, quizzical arch as she took a sip of the ginger ale. "No? What exactly is a tough climb?"

Cowboy found himself looking at the freckles that were sprinkled liberally across her cheeks and nose. Her skin looked so soft and smooth, and he could smell the sweet freshness of her clean hair. Great big God, he wanted to kiss her. But she'd asked him a question.

"Let's see...." He cleared his throat. "Tough is going up the side of an oil rig in freezing weather, coming out of a forty-five degree ocean, carrying more than a hundred pounds of wet gear on my back. Compared to that, this was nothing. Piece a cake." He looked down at his uniform. "I didn't even get dirty."

She took another sip of her soda, gazing at him pensively. "Well, you've certainly proved my point."

Cowboy didn't follow. "Your point...?"

"Climbing three stories up the outside of a house isn't a 'piece a cake.' It's dangerous. And it's on the absolute opposite end of the spectrum from average and normal."

He laughed. "Oh, come on. Are you saying I should have just let you lie here and feel sick even though I knew it wouldn't take me more than three minutes tops to get inside the house and get you the ginger ale and crackers?"

Melody pressed the cold can against the side of her face. "Yes. No. I don't know!"

"So what? So I can do some things that other guys can't do," he countered.

She stood up. "That's like Superman saying 'So what—I can leap tall buildings in a single bound.'"

She was preparing to go inside. He should have locked the door behind him when he came outside. "Melody, please. You've got to give me a chance—"

"A chance?" Her laughter was tinged with hysteria. "Asking someone to fly to Vegas to marry you isn't exactly what I'd call a chance!"

He straightened up. "I can't believe you don't even want to try."

"What's to try? Your leave is up tomorrow morning. God only knows where you'll be going and for how long! If I marry you tonight, I could be a..." She stopped herself, closing her eyes and shaking her head. "No," she said, "forget it. Forget I said that. That doesn't matter, because I'm not going to marry you." She opened the screen door. "Not now, not ever. It's as simple as that, Jones. And there's nothing you can do to make me change my mind, short of mutating into a nearsighted accountant or a balding computer programmer."

Cowboy stopped himself from taking a step toward her, afraid to push her farther into the house. "I'll make arrangements to get more leave."

"No," she said, and she actually had tears in her eyes. "Don't. I'm sorry, Jones, but please don't. The next time I need rescuing, I'll call you, all right? But until then, do us both a favour and stay away."

"Mel, wait—"

She closed the door firmly in his face and he resisted the urge to swear and kick it down.

Now what?

Short of going inside after her, Cowboy was stuck waiting for her to come back out. And something told him that she wasn't likely to do that again today.

He needed more time. Lots more time.

And he knew exactly the man who could help him.

Chapter 7

"Somebody spend the damn hundred bucks to get me more memory for this thing? It's like trying to surf the net on one of those kiddie kickboards. I swear to my sweet Lord above, if this takes much longer, I'm not going to be responsible for my actions!" Wes was giving the computer screen his best psychotic-killer glare when Cowboy tapped him on the shoulder.

"Have you seen the senior chief?"

Wes didn't even look up. "Yo, Bobby—is H. here?" he shouted across the busy Quonset hut before muttering to the computer, "Don't you hang on me. Don't you dare."

"Nope," Bobby shouted back.

"Nope." Wes finally glanced up. "Oh, hey, Cowman! You're back. Feeling better?" His smile turned knowing. "Finally get some?"

Cowboy swatted the smaller man on the back of the head. "None of your damned business, gutterbrain. And by the way, I could see with my own eyes that Harvard isn't here. I was wondering if you knew where I could find him."

"Cowboy didn't get any," Wes announced in a megaphone voice that belied his compact size as Cowboy moved farther into the Quonset hut, searching for a free desk and a telephone. Somebody on this base had to know where Harvard was. "Look out, guys. It's like the groundhog seeing his shadow. Cowboy goes on leave and doesn't score and we're in for another six months of winter."

"It's October," Blue McCoy pointed out in his slow Southern drawl. "Winter's coming anyway."

"Good thing something's coming." Lucky cracked himself up.

Cowboy pretended not to hear as he picked up the phone and dialed Joe Cat's home number.

"Maybe it's the hair," Wes suggested. "Maybe she'd go for you if you got it cut."

"Maybe you need a distraction," Bobby chimed in. "Wes and I hooked up with some really amazing-looking girls who hang out at the Western Bar. Problem is, there's three of 'em, so you'd actually be doing us a favor if—"

"No, thanks," Cowboy said, listening to the phone ring. "I'm not interested."

"Yeah, that's what I said, too." Lucky put his feet up on his desk. "I figured since it was Bobby and Wes, they didn't mean amazing-looking like a Sports Illustrated swimsuit model, but amazing-looking like someone from the bar scene in Star Wars."

Bobby shook his head. "You're wrong about this one, O'Donlon. I'm talking potential supermodels."

"Potential. That means either they're twelve or in need of plastic surgery." Lucky rolled his eyes.

"One of these days, O'Donlon," Blue said in his soft voice, "you're going to come face-to-face with the one woman on this earth who alone has the ability to make your sorry life complete, and you're going to walk away from her because she's not an eleven on a scale from one to ten."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Poor, pitiful me." Lucky pretended to wipe tears from his eyes. "I'm going to die alone—an old and broken man."

Over at Joe Cat's house, an answering machine picked up. "Capt. Joe Catalanotto," Cat's New York-accented voice growled into Cowboy's ear. "I'm not available. Leave a message at the beep."

"Yeah, Skipper, this is Jones. If you see the senior chief, tell him I'm looking to find him ASAP."

"This ol' bar we go to is right up your alley, Texas-boy," Wesley said with an exaggerated Western drawl when Cowboy hung up the phone. "There's line dancin' and boot scootin' and everything short of a rodeo bull."

"Including Staci, Tiffani and pretty little Savannah Lee," Bobby said with a sigh. "Course with our luck, Wes, Jones'll hit the dance floor and walk out with all three of 'em on his arm."

"I'm not interested," Cowboy said again. "Really."

On the other side of the Quonset hut, the door burst open.

Joe Cat entered with Harvard right behind him. Neither of the two men looked very happy. "Pack it all up, guys, we've been reassigned. We're getting the hell out of here."

Reassigned. Cowboy felt his heart sink. Damn, the last thing he wanted to do was be forced to ask for a transfer away from the Alpha Squad. But if they were being sent overseas...

He had responsibilities now. Responsibilities and different priorities.

Two days ago, his number-one goal would've been to stay with Alpha Squad for as long as he possibly could, no matter where they went, no matter what they did.

Today, his number-one goal was very different.

"What the hell, Cat?" Bobby spoke up. "I thought this FInCOM agent training gig was our silver bullet"

"Yeah, this was the perfect cushy assignment," Lucky added. "Lots of R and R with the added bonus of a chance to really mess with some Finks' minds."

Joe Cat was steamed. "Yes, pulling this assignment was supposed to be a reward," he told them. "But silver bullet or not, our job was to train a team of FInCOM agents in counterterrorist techniques. We can't possibly train these people effectively if our hands are completely tied—which is the only way the top brass will let us do it."

"Aw, come on, Cat. So we let the Finks sleep in their fancy hotel and we let them do their twenty-mile

run from the back seat of a limo," Wes urged. "It's no skin off our noses."

"Yeah, Captain, we can cope with their rule book." Lucky pulled his feet down off his desk. "It's no big deal."

"It'll probably make the job that much easier for us," Bobby argued.

"These agents we were supposed to train," Harvard countered in his rich bass voice, "are going to be used in the field to back up or work with SEAL units. I sure as hell wouldn't want to go up against a crazy-assed pack of 'Brothers of the Light' terrorists with some badly trained FInCOM team of fools as the only thing preventing Alpha Squad from being shipped home in body bags."

There was no argument anyone could make against that.

"So where's Alpha Squad going, Cat?" Cowboy broke the gloomy silence.

The dark-haired captain looked up at his men and exhaled a single burst of extremely nonhumorous laughter. "Barrow," he enunciated with extra clarity.

"Alaska?" Wesley's voice cracked. "In the winter?"

"You got it," Cat said, smiling grimly. "The pencil pushers upstairs are not happy with me right now, and they're making sure I know it—and you poor bastards pay."

Alaska. Cowboy closed his eyes and swore.

"Not planning to come with us, Junior?" Harvard never missed a thing, no matter how subtle the comment. And Cowboy had said "Alpha Squad," not "we."

Cowboy lowered his voice. "I have a situation, Senior Chief. I was hoping to talk to you privately. I need to take an extended leave. A full thirty days if possible."

Wesley overheard. "Leave? Hell, yeah, H., I need to take some, too. Anything to get out of going to Alaska."

"Let's get this gear packed and stored," Joe Cat ordered. "Our new assignment has us going wheels up in less than two hours."

Harvard shook his head. "Sorry, Jones. There's no time. We'll have to deal with it after we get to Barrow."

"Senior Chief, wait." Cowboy stopped him short. Suddenly, the answer to this top-brass-induced snafu seemed obvious. "Don't you see? That's the solution. Leave. For everyone."

Understanding sparked in Harvard's dark brown eyes and then he laughed. "Harlan Jones Jr., you have the devious soul of a master chief. Cat, guess what Junior here thought up all by himself? The Answer, with a capital A."

"We've probably all got lots of time coming to us. Hell, I've got a full 120 days on the books," Cowboy continued. "And if we stall long enough, say maybe two or three weeks, they won't want to ship us up to northern Alaska because of the risk of bad weather. There's no way they'd send Alpha Squad someplace

we could be snowed in—I've heard of people going up there and not able to get back until spring. No matter how ticked off they are at the skipper, they won't do that to SEAL Team Ten's top counter-terrorist squad."

Everyone else in the room was listening now, too, including Joe Cat.

Blue McCoy laughed softly, shaking his head. "What do you think, Joe?" he said to the captain. "A vacation in the Virgin Islands with your wife and kid, or cold-water exercises for the squad in Barrow, Alaska?"

Joe Cat looked at Cowboy and smiled. "I'm gonna get hammered for this, but...who wants leave?"

The curtains were up and hanging in the nursery windows.

Melody had meant to do that project before she got too large to stand on a chair. She'd put it off for too long, of course, and had been meaning to ask Brittany to help.

It looked as if Britt had beaten her to the punch.

Melody went back into her bedroom and quickly dialled her sister's number at the hospital. As she waited for Brittany to come to the phone, she sat on her bed and wriggled out of her panty hose. Even with the stretch panel in the front, they were hellish to wear for more than an hour or two.

"Brittany Evans."

"Hi, it's me," Melody said. "I wanted to let you know that I'm home from Ted's photo op."

"It took longer than you thought."

"It was late getting started."

"You weren't standing up that entire time, were you?" Brittany asked.

"No, I wasn't," Melody said. She hadn't been standing, she'd been running. She lay back on the bed, exhausted. "Thank you for hanging the curtains."

"You're purposely changing the subject," Brittany accused her. "It was awful, wasn't it?" she guessed. "You spent half the time with your ankles swelling and the other half of the time in the ladies' room, throwing up."

"Not half the time."

"Sweetie, you've got to give Ted Shepherd your notice. This is crazy."

"I told him I'd work up to the election. I promised him." Melody liked the hectic busyness of her job. All day today, she'd only thought about Harlan Jones a few dozen times rather than the few million times she'd caught herself thinking about him yesterday.

She closed her eyes, feeling a familiar surge of regret. Jones had left. He'd actually gotten into his car and

driven away. But that was what she'd wanted, she reminded herself. It was for the best.

"Look, I'm bringing home Chinese for dinner tonight," Brittany told her, "so don't even think about cooking. I want you to be in bed, napping, when I get home."

"Believe me, I'm not going anywhere."

"I'll be home around six. I've got some errands to run."

"Britt, wait. Thanks—really—for hanging those curtains."

There was a pause on the other end of the phone. "Yeah, you said that before, didn't you? What curtains?"

"The ones in the nursery."

"Mel, I haven't had the time or energy to even go into the nursery over the past few days, let alone hang up any curtains."

"But..." Melody sat up. From her vantage point on the bed, she could see up the stairs into the tower room she'd made into a nursery. The bright coloured curtains she'd bought to match the animals she'd stencilled on the nursery walls were moving gently in a breeze from an open window.

An open window...?

Melody stood up. "Brittany, my God, I think he's back!"

"Who's back?"

"Jones."

"Oh, thank you, Almighty Father!"

"Hey, whose side are you on here?" Melody asked her sister indignantly.

"Yours. The man is to die for, Mel. He's clearly got his priorities straight when it comes to his responsibilities, he's impossibly polite, he seems very sweet, he's got excellent taste in jewellery and he's built like a Greek statue. And oh, yeah. As if that wasn't enough, he just happens to look like Kevin Costner on a good hair day! Marry him. The rest will sort itself out."

"I'm not marrying him. He doesn't love me. And I don't love him."

"Why not? I'm half in love with him myself already."

Melody crossed to her bedroom window and looked down into the yard. "Oh, God, Britt, I've got to go! There's a tent in the backyard!"

"A what?"

"A tent."

"Like a circus tent—?"

"No," Melody said. "Like a camping tent. Like..."

Jones pushed his way out of the tent and into the yard. The sun glistened off his bare chest and shoulders. He wore only faded jeans, a pair of worn-out cowboy boots and a beat-up baseball cap. His hair was down loose around his tanned shoulders.

"Like an army tent," she finished weakly.

Melody knew that the Dockers and polo shirt Jones had worn the day he'd arrived in Appleton had been similar to his gleaming white dress uniform. He'd worn both outfits in an attempt to be more formal, more conservative. But these clothes he was wearing now—this was the real Jones.

His message was clear. He was done playing games.

As Melody watched, he bent and made an adjustment to the tent, and the muscles in his back and arms stood out in sharp relief. He looked dangerous and hard and incredibly, mind-blowingly sexy.

Despite his long hair, he looked much more like the man she'd first come face-to-face with in the middle of a terrorist-controlled embassy all those months ago.

"A tent?" Brittany was saying. "In our yard?"

"Brittany, look, I have to go. He's definitely here." As she watched, Jones straightened up and said something. Said something to whom? But then, Andy Marshall scrambled out from inside the tent, laughing—apparently at whatever Jones had said.

"Sweetie, don't be too quick to—"

"Goodbye, Britt!"

Melody cut the connection, and taking a deep breath she headed downstairs.

She went out the kitchen door and stood on the back porch, just watching until Jones looked up. He glanced at Andy but didn't have to say a word. The kid disappeared.

Jones wiped his hands on the thighs of his jeans as he came toward her. He was smiling, but his eyes were guarded—as if he wasn't quite certain of his welcome.

He was correct to be uncertain. "What do you think you're doing?" Melody asked.

He turned to glance back at the tent as if double-checking exactly what he'd erected there. "The inn's a bit pricey," he told her. "I figured since I'm going to stay awhile, it'd be more economical to—"

"How long, exactly, are you planning to stay?" Melody couldn't keep her voice from shaking. How dare he just set up camp in her backyard where she would be forced to look at him, to notice him, to talk to him if she wanted to tend to her gardening?

Jones propped a foot up on one of the back steps and rested his arms on his knees as he gave her his best smile. "As long as it takes for you to agree to marry me."

She sat down on the top step. "Gonna get pretty cold in a couple of months, living in a tent. But after a few years, you'll probably get used to it."

He laughed. "Honey, there's no way you and I could live this close to each other for even a few weeks, let alone a few years, without one or both of us spontaneously combusting."

Melody snorted. "Get real, Jones. Have you looked at me lately? Unless you have a fetish involving beach balls, I'm not likely to set your world on fire any time soon."

"Are you kidding? You're gorgeous. It's very sexy...."

Melody closed her eyes. "Jones, please don't do this."

She never should have closed her eyes. She didn't see him settle on the step next to her, and by the time she felt him put his arms around her, it was too late. She was trapped.

She hadn't forgotten how strong his arms felt, how safe she felt inside his embrace. And when she looked up at him, she found she hadn't forgotten the little flecks of brown and gold floating in the always changing green ocean of his eyes either. And she hadn't forgotten the way the mysterious darkness of his pupils widened, seemingly enough to swallow her whole, right before he bent to kiss her.

He tasted like coffee, two sugars, no cream. He tasted like Paris in the moonlight, like the rough feel of bricks as he covered her mouth with his and pressed her up against a house that had been built four hundred years before Columbus had sailed west to reach the Far East and discovered America instead.

He tasted like chocolate, like expensive wine, like a second helping of dessert. He tasted like everything she'd ever wanted but had taught herself to refuse for her own sake.

He kissed her so gently, so sweetly, almost reverently as if he had missed her as much as she'd pretended not to miss him. And, God, she had missed him. There was a place in her chest that had felt hollow and cold for all these months—until now. Now she felt infused by warmth, both inside and out.

She felt him touch her, the warmth of his palm lightly pressing against her extended belly.

"My God," he breathed. "It's really all you, isn't it?"

Melody saw it then. Jones made an effort to smile as she looked up at him, but he couldn't hide the fact that he was thoroughly unnerved. She was having his baby, and as long as he was with her, there was no way he was going to forget that. She could see from his eyes how disconcerted he was, how unsettled he felt

And just like that, the hollowness was back, making her feel emptier than ever.

She knew with a dead certainty that if Jones were granted only one wish, it would be that he'd had a condom on that flight to Paris. She knew that being tied down with a wife and a child was the last thing on earth that this man wanted. She knew that the last place in the world that he wanted to be was here, sitting on her porch, talking her into doing something he himself didn't want to do.

And yet here he was. She had to admire him for that.

She could see the determination in his eyes as he leaned toward her one more time. His lips were so soft as he kissed her again. She was reminded just how very astute he was when it came to reading her needs. He somehow knew that these gentle, almost delicate kisses would get him much further than the intensely passionate, soul-sucking inhalations of desire they'd shared time and again in Paris.

Of course, it was entirely possible that he was kissing her without that explosion of passion because he no longer felt passion for her.

And why should he? She was a constant reminder of his obligations and responsibilities. And on top of that, she was about as sexy as a double-wide trailer.

Still, he kissed her so sweetly, she felt like melting.

Melody was in deep trouble here. Lt. Cowboy Jones was a warrior and a psych expert. While other men might well have been put off by her constant rejections, he was unswervable. And it was more than obvious that he had a battle plan as far as she was concerned. He'd figured out that she wasn't immune to him. He'd realized that he was still firmly entrenched under her skin and he'd dug in to wait her out. Time and her traitorous hormones were on his side. She was going to have to be even stronger.

She was going to have to start by pulling away from this delicious kiss that was making her knees feel even more rubbery than usual. She was going to have to unlock her fingers from the thick softness of his hair. She was going to have to be tougher than this.

Melody stood up, slipping free from his embrace. "Excuse me," she said. It was amazing how she could sound so calm when inside she was experiencing an emotional tornado. "I have to go inside." He stood up, too. "Alone," she added.

He tried to hide his frustration by taking a deep breath and smiling. "Mel, honey, what do I have to do to convince you—"

"I think the presence of your tent on my property constitutes trespassing. I'll thank you very much to remove it."

He laughed at that. "I figured this way it was hidden behind the house. I thought the fewer people who knew about it, the better. But if you insist, I'll move the tent over into the Romanellas' yard. Vince said that would be okay. Of course, then everyone in town will be able to see it from the street."

"I don't care," Melody said. "Odds are everyone in town knows it's there already."

He took a step toward her and she took a step back. "Mel." He held out his hands, palms facing down as if he were calming a wild animal. "Think about this for a minute. We're both on the same side here. We're both trying to find the best solution for this situation."

"Jones, I know you don't really want to marry me," she said. "What I don't know is how you'd be able to make yourself say those wedding vows. It would all be a lie. 'Til death us do part. Yeah, right. Until divorce us do part is more like it. You know it as well as I do."

He leaned back against the porch rail, folding his arms across his chest. "You're right about the fact that I don't want to get married," he admitted. "But if I've got to marry someone, I'd just as soon have it be you."

"And I'd just as soon have it be someone normal—" She cut herself off. "God, haven't we had this conversation already?"

"Yes," he said. "And I'm going to say it again. I'm no different from any other man."

"Except for the fact that when you get in a knife fight with four-to-one odds against you, you win." Melody shook her head. "Jones, don't you see how incredibly out of place you are here?"

"I'm a SEAL," he said. "I've been trained to adapt to any environment or culture. Appleton, Massachusetts, shouldn't be that big a deal." He straightened up. "Where's the edge trimmer? In the garage?"

She blinked. "What? Why?"

He adjusted his baseball cap as he went down the steps and started walking backward along the path toward the garage as he talked. "You said you couldn't picture me using an edge trimmer. I'm going to help you out by actually letting you watch me use one."

Melody's laughter was on the verge of being hysterical. "You're not going to leave, are you? You're just going to stay here forever and torment me."

He stopped walking. With the sun shining down on him, glistening off his tanned skin, gleaming off his gold-streaked hair, he looked invincible. "That depends on your definition of 'torment.'"

Melody sat down on the steps, fighting the urge to burst into tears. She was so tired. She had all that she could handle working three-quarters time during these past few months of a difficult pregnancy. There was no way she could do that and go one-on-one in a battle of wills with a man who didn't know what it meant to quit.

Jones came back toward the porch, his eyes darkening with concern. "Honey, you look a little tuckered out." His voice was soft. "Maybe we should skip the lawn-care demonstration so you can go on upstairs and catch a nap before dinner, huh?"

She knew what he was doing. He was trying to show her that he knew the words and music to the middle-class, suburban song. He was trying to be normal. His words sounded as if they'd been married for years.

But all he'd proved was that he'd watched a few dozen reruns of *The Cosby Show*, or *Family Ties*. It was one thing to mimic and play pretend games. It was another thing entirely to keep up the pretence of being happily married for the rest of his life.

Melody hauled herself to her feet. "You are not normal," she told him. "You'll never be normal. And don't kiss me," she added. "Ever again."

Another of his smiles slipped out as he reached for her again, but she escaped into the house, locking the screen door behind her.

"Thank you for hanging the curtains in the nursery," she told him stiffly through the protection of the screen. "But the next time you come into my house uninvited, I will have you arrested."

If Jones's smile faltered at all, she didn't see it.

Chapter 8

"You did what?"

"I gave him a key," Brittany repeated calmly as she checked the rice and turned on the burner underneath the wok, bending over to adjust the gas flame.

Melody's knees were so weak she had to sit down. "To the house?"

"Of course to the house." Brittany added some oil to the pan and went back to cutting up the vegetables for the stir-fry. "What good would an open invitation to use the bathroom and the shower be without a key to the house?"

Melody put her head in her hands. "Brittany, what are you doing to me?"

"Sweetie, your SEAL'S been living in the backyard for almost a week now—"

"Thanks to your first asinine invitation!" Melody proceeded to give a ridiculously unflattering imitation of her sister's voice: "No, Lieutenant, of course we don't mind your tent in our backyard. Of course, Lieutenant, you're welcome to stay as long as you like.' I was waiting for you to offer to do his laundry and lay a chocolate out on his pillow each night. Jeez Louise, Britt, didn't you even consider the fact that I might not want him underfoot twenty-four hours a day?"

Her sister was not fazed. "I'm not convinced you know what you want."

"Whereas you do?"

The oil was hot enough, and Brittany tossed thin slices of celery into the wok. "No."

"Yet you insist on encouraging him to stay."

"My encouragement hardly makes up for your discouragement. But since he hasn't gone away yet," Brittany said, "I think it's a pretty strong indication that he intends to stay until you give in."

"I'm not going to give in."

Brittany turned to face her, knife in hand. "That's right. You're not going to give in—if you keep doing what you're doing. When you leave for work in the morning, you make a beeline for your car. When you come home, you make a beeline for your room. You haven't let the poor man say more than three sentences to you in the past four days."

Melody lifted her head. "The 'poor man'?"

Brittany returned some of her attention to her cooking, adding broccoli and thinly cut strips of zucchini squash to the wok. "I'm with Estelle and Peggy on this one, Mel. I know that's hard to believe—those two seeing eye to eye with me—but it's true. We think you should stop thinking only of yourself and marry the man."

Melody sat up even straighter. "You swore when I first told you that I was pregnant that you wouldn't lecture me. You said you'd support me whatever I decided to do."

"What I just told you wasn't a lecture," Brittany said firmly, stirring the vegetables. "It was an opinion. And I am supporting you, the best way I know how."

"By giving Jones a key to the house and an open invitation to just walk hi whenever the mood strikes him?"

"The man is a gem, Mel. This yard has never looked so good!"

Of course the yard looked good. Every time Melody turned around, Jones was outside her window, raking the leaves or tinkering under the hood of Brittany's car or lifting enormous amounts of weights. Every time she turned around, she caught a flash of sunlight reflecting off smooth, deeply tanned muscles.

Whether it was sunny and sixty degrees or drizzling and barely fifty, Jones went outside without a shirt on. Whether he was working in the yard or sitting and reading a book, he was naked from the waist up. You'd think that after a while she'd get used to the sight of all those muscles rippling enticingly in the sunshine or gleaming wet from the rain.

Yeah, right. Maybe in her next lifetime...

"And I don't know what your lieutenant's done to my car, but it hasn't run this well in years," Brittany added. "You really should let him look at yours."

"He's not my lieutenant. And if a smoothly running car is what you're after," Melody said hotly, "maybe I should marry Joe Hewlitt from the Sunoco station instead."

"You're impossibly stubborn," Brittany complained.

"Can we talk about something else?" Melody pleaded. "Isn't there something going on in the world that's more interesting than my nonrelationship with Harlan Jones?"

Brittany made room at the bottom of the sizzling wok for the cubes of tofu she'd cut. "Well, there's always the latest installment in the Andy Marshall adventure."

Melody braced herself. "Oh, no. What did he do this time?"

The stove timer buzzed, and Brittany turned off both it and the heat beneath the rice. "Tom Beatrice caught him outside the liquor store on Summer Street. He'd just given Kevin Thorpe ten bucks to buy him a six-pack of beer and a pack of cigarettes."

"Oh, Andy, you didn't..." Melody sighed, resting her chin in the palm of one hand. "Damn, I thought he was finally adjusting to Appleton."

She'd seen Andy out in the yard, hanging around Jones while he worked. Jones always had time to talk. Sometimes he even stopped to toss a ball around with the kid. She'd been secretly impressed with his patience and hoped that Andy had finally latched on to a man who was, indeed, a worthy role model.

There was no doubt about it. The boy was starved for affection and attention. Melody had ran into him a few times downtown over the past week.

The first time they talked, he'd hesitantly reached out to touch her belly again, smiling almost shyly when the baby kicked.

The second time, she'd bumped into him—literally. His cheek was scraped and his lip was swollen, and although he'd insisted he'd fallen off his bicycle, she knew Alex Parks and his friends had been giving the younger boy trouble again. The third time, he'd actually greeted Melody with a hug. He'd said hello to the baby by pressing his face against Mel's stomach—and got kicked in the nose for his trouble. That sent him rolling on the ground with giddy laughter.

He was a good kid. Melody was convinced that deep inside he had a sweet, caring soul. He shouldn't be trying to grow up so fast, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes. "He's only twelve. He probably doesn't even like the taste of beer."

"He's twelve going on thirty," Brittany said grimly, "which, at the rate he's going, is how old he'll be when he finally gets out of jail. It's a wonder Tom didn't lock the little jerk up."

"Who's Tom and which little jerk didn't he lock up?"

Melody's shoulders tensed. Just like that, merely at the sound of Jones's voice, she was an instant bundle of screaming nerves.

He was standing on the other side of the screen door, looking into the kitchen.

"Tom Beatrice is the Appleton chief of police. And the little jerk is the kid who's running for Troublemaker of the Year—Andy Marshall. Come on in," Brittany called from the stove. "Dinner's almost ready."

Melody stood up, crossing to stand next to her sister. "You invited him to dinner?" she whispered through clenched teeth.

"Yes, I invited him to dinner," Brittany said evenly. "There's beer in the fridge," she told Jones. "Help yourself. And if you don't mind, would you grab one for me and pour a glass of milk for Mel?"

"It'd be my pleasure. Hey, Mel." Jones had dressed for the occasion. He was actually wearing a T-shirt with his jeans, and his hair was pulled back from his face in a single neat braid. "How're you feeling?"

Betrayed. Melody sat down at the kitchen table and forced a smile. "Fine, thanks."

"Really?" He sat down directly across from her, of course, where she wouldn't be able to keep from looking at him while they ate. Why did he have to be so utterly good-looking? And why did he have to smile at her that way all the time, as if they were constantly sharing a secret or a very personal private joke?

"Mel's been having trouble with backaches again," Brittany announced as she set the wok on a hot pad in the middle of the table.

Jones took a sip of his beer directly from the bottle as he gazed at Melody. "I'm available any time you want a back rub."

She remembered his back rubs. She remembered them too well. She looked everywhere but into his

eyes. "Thanks, but a soak in the tub'll take care of it"

Jones took the serving bowl filled with steaming rice that Brittany handed to him. "Thanks. This looks delicious. What's up with Andy Marshall?"

"The little fool was caught trying to get his hands on beer and cigarettes," Melody told him.

Jones paused as he dished out the rice onto his plate, stopping to look up at her. "Shoplifting?"

She shook her head. "No. He paid Kevin Thorpe to buy them for him."

Jones nodded, passing her the heavy bowl. "At least he wasn't stealing."

Their fingers touched, and Melody knew damn well it wasn't an accident. Still, she ignored it. Her heart could not leap when he touched her. She simply would not let it. Still, she had to work to keep her voice even. "He shouldn't be drinking or smoking. Whether or not he stole the beer and cigarettes is a moot point."

"No, it's not. It's—"

The phone rang, interrupting him.

Brittany excused herself and stood up to answer it "Hello?"

Jones lowered his voice. "I think the fact that Andy didn't simply go into the store and walk out with a stolen can of beer in his pocket says a lot about him."

"Yeah, it says that he wanted more than one can of beer. He wanted an entire six-pack."

"It says he's not a thief."

"I'm sorry," Brittany interrupted. "That was Edie Myerson up at the hospital. Both Brenda and Sharon called in sick with the flu. I'm going to have to go over and cover for at least two hours—until Betty McCreedy can come in."

Melody looked up at her sister in shock. She was leaving her alone with Jones? "But—"

"I'm sorry. I've got to run." Brittany grabbed her bag and was already out the door.

"Where's Andy now? Do you know?" Jones asked, barely missing a beat in their conversation, as if the situation hadn't just moved from embarrassingly awkward to downright impossible to deal with. He took a mouthful of the stir-fry. "Man, this is good. After a week of Burger King and KFC, my body is craving vegetables."

Melody set down her fork. "Did you and Brittany plan this?"

He washed down his mouthful of food with a sip directly from his bottle of beer. "You really think I'd stoop to lying and subterfuge just for a chance to talk to you?"

"Yes."

Jones grinned. "Yeah, you're right. I would. But that's not what this is. I swear. Your sister invited me for dinner. That's all."

The stupid thing was, she believed him. Brittany, on the other hand, had probably planned to leave right from the start.

Melody picked up her fork but couldn't seem to do more than push the food around on her plate as Jones had a second helping. Her appetite had vanished, replaced by a nervous flock of butterflies that took up every available inch of space in her rolling stomach.

"So how's work?" he asked. "Are you always this busy?"

"It's going to get frantic as the election gets closer."

"Are you going to be able to keep up?" He gazed at her steadily. "I got some books about pregnancy and prenatal care out of the library, and they all seem to agree that you should take care not to push yourself too hard these last few months. You know, you look tired."

Melody took a sip of her milk, wishing he would stop looking at her so closely, feeling as if she were under a microscope. She knew she looked tired. She was tired and bedraggled, and this dress she had on made her resemble a circus tent. How had Andy described her? Fat and funny-looking. "I'll be fine."

"Maybe I could come to work with you—act as your assistant or gofer."

Melody nearly sprayed him with milk. Come to work with her? God, wouldn't that be perfect? "That's really not a very good idea." It was the understatement of the century.

"Maybe we should compromise," he suggested. "I won't come to work with you, if you stop ignoring me."

He was smiling, but there was a certain something in his eyes that told her he wasn't quite kidding.

"I haven't been ignoring you," she protested. "I've been practicing self-restraint."

He leaned forward, eyebrows rising. "Self-restraint?"

She backed off, aware that she'd already slipped and told him too much. She had to get out of here before she did something really stupid—like throw herself into his arms. "Excuse me." She pushed her chair back from the table and stood up, then carried her plate to the kitchen sink.

Cowboy took another long sip of his beer, hiding the relief that was streaming through him. He could do this. He could actually succeed in this mission.

He'd been starting to doubt his ability to get through to her, starting to think she just plain disliked him, but in fact the opposite was true. Self-restraint, she'd said.

Hell, she liked him so much she couldn't stand to be in the same room with him, for fear she wouldn't be able to resist his attempts to seduce her.

Yes, he could win this war. He could—and he would—convince her to marry him before his leave was up.

His relief was edged with something else. Something sharp and pointed. Something an awful lot like fear. Yeah, he could take his tune and make her see that marrying him was the only option. But then where would he be?

Saddled with a wife and a baby. Shackled with a ball and chain. Tied down, tied up, out of circulation, out of the action. A husband and a father. Two roles he'd never thought he would ever be ready to play.

But he had no choice. Not if he wanted to live with himself for the rest of his life.

Cowboy took a deep breath. "Mel, wait."

She turned to look warily back at him.

Cowboy didn't stand up, knowing that if he so much as moved, she'd run for the stairs. Damn, she was that afraid of him—and that afraid of the spark that was always ready to ignite between them.

Still, he'd made her trust him before, under even more difficult circumstances. He could do it again. He had to do it again, no matter how hard, no matter how much fear of his own he felt. This was too important to him.

He took a deep breath. "What if I promised...?" What? That he wouldn't pull her into his arms? Wouldn't try to kiss her? He needed to do both of those things as much as he needed to keep breathing. Keeping his distance from this woman was going to be hard to do. Nevertheless, he had no choice. It was gonna hurt, but he'd done hard and painful things before. "What if I swore I wouldn't touch you? You pick a distance. Two feet, three feet, six feet, whatever, and I promise I won't cross that line."

She wasn't convinced He could see her about to turn him down, but he didn't give her a chance to speak.

"I also promise that I won't say a single word tonight about weddings or obligations or responsibilities or anything heavy. We'll talk about something entirely different. We'll talk about—" he was grasping at straws here, but she hadn't left the room yet "—Andy Marshall, all right? We'll figure out what we're going to do about him."

She turned to face him. "What can we do?"

Cowboy already knew the best way to deal with Andy—directly, ruthlessly and mercilessly. He'd been intending to call on Vince Romanella later tonight and ask his permission to spend part of tomorrow with the kid.

But why not teach Andy his lesson tonight?

"There's a place in the woods, up by the old quarry," he told Melody, willing her to sit back down at the table, "that's always littered with beer bottles and cigarette butts. My guess is that's where Andy was going to go with his six-pack."

Melody actually sat down, and Cowboy used all of his self-control to keep from reacting. He had to play it really cool or she'd run.

"I know the place you mean," she said. "It was a popular hangout spot back when I was in high school,

too. But Andy's only twelve. He wouldn't exactly be welcome there."

"He would if he showed up with a six-pack of brew under his arm."

"Why on earth would Andy want to make friends with high school seniors?" Melody wondered.

"That kid he's always fighting with," Cowboy said. "What's his name? Parks?"

"Alex Parks."

"He's only a freshman or a sophomore, right?"

Melody nodded. She was actually looking into his eyes. She was actually sitting there and talking to him. He knew it was only a small victory, but he'd take 'em where he found 'em.

"Well, there you go," he concluded. "It seems like a pretty sound strategy to me. Make friends with people who can crush—or at least control—your enemy. Andy's not stupid."

"Then the six-pack was really just an offering to the gods, so to speak. Andy wasn't really going to drink it."

Her eyes begged him to tell her she was right. He wished he could agree so that she would smile at him, but he couldn't.

"I'd bet he wasn't planning to drink all of it," he told her, "but he was certainly intending to drink some. Probably enough to give him a good buzz. And to come out of it thinking the entire evening was a positive experience. Which would leave him wanting to go back and do it again."

Melody nodded, her face so serious, her eyes still glued to his as if he held all the wisdom and knowledge in the universe.

"So what we've got to do," Cowboy continued, "is make sure his first experience with a six-pack of beer is a nightmare."

She blinked. And then she leaned forward. "I'm not sure I understand."

"Remember Crash?" Cowboy asked. "William Hawk? My swim buddy?"

"Of course."

"To this day, he doesn't drink. At least I assume he still doesn't. He didn't during the time we were going through BUD/S training. Anyway, he told me he wasn't much older than Andy when his uncle caught him sneaking a beer from the downstairs refrigerator." It was one of the few stories about his childhood that Crash had told Cowboy. And he'd told it only to convince Cowboy that no, he didn't want a beer, thank you very much. "Crash's uncle taught him a thing or two that day, and we, in turn, are going to run the same drill with Andy." He smiled ruefully. "It's a lesson I could've used myself, but the admiral wasn't around enough to know what kind of trouble I was getting myself into."

She was watching him. "I thought you told me your father was really strict."

"He was—when he was home. But after we moved to Texas, he was hardly ever home. There were a

few years he even missed Christmas."

He had her full attention and he kept going. She claimed they didn't know each other. And as hard as it was to talk about his less-than-perfect childhood, it was important that she understood where he came from—and why walking away from her and this baby was not an option for him.

"You know, I used to be like Andy," he continued, "always making excuses for my old man. He had to go where he was needed. He was very important. He had to be where the action was. Even though—during the Vietnam conflict—he'd more than earned the chance to sit back and relax, he wouldn't ask to be assigned to a cushy post like Hawaii. Hawaii wasn't exactly what my mother wanted, but she would have settled for it. But old Harlan wanted to keep moving forward in his career.

"I always used to think he had such a tough job—going out to sea for all those months, being in charge of all those men, knowing that if an aggressive action started, he'd be right in the middle of it. But the fact is, that stuff was easy for him. We were the hard stuff. A wife who honestly didn't understand why he didn't retire from the Navy and take a job selling cars with her Uncle Harold. A kid who needed more than constantly being told that B's and B plusses weren't good enough. You know, I could work my butt off, cleaning my room for him, making it shipshape, and he would focus on the one spot of dust I'd missed. Yeah," he repeated softly, "we were the hard stuff, and he ran away from us."

She didn't say anything, but he knew she read his message loud and clear. He wasn't going to run away.

Cowboy pushed back his chair, still careful to move slowly. "Mind if I use your phone?"

She shook her head, distracted, as if she were still absorbing all that he'd told her. But then she looked up. "Wait. You haven't told me exactly what Crash's uncle did that day."

"Do you have Vince Romanella's number—?" Cowboy scanned the list of neighbours' and friends' numbers posted on a corkboard near the kitchen phone. "Here it is. And as for Crash's uncle..." He smiled at her. "You're just going to have to wait and see." He dialed Vince's number.

She laughed in disbelief. "Jones. Just tell me."

"Hey, Vince," he said into the phone, "it's Jones—you know, from the Evanses next door? I heard about the trouble Andy got into this evening. Is he there?"

"He's probably in his room, grounded for a week and writing a twenty-page paper on why he shouldn't drink beer," Melody said, rolling her eyes. "Vince's heart is in the right place, but something tells me all the essay writing in the world isn't going to have any impact on a kid like Andy Marshall."

Across the room, Jones smiled again. "You're right," he mouthed to her, shaking his head as he listened to Vince recount the evening's excitement—and the subsequent ineffective punishment.

"Yeah," Jones said into the phone, "I know he's grounded, Vince, but I think I know a way to make sure he doesn't drink again—at least not until he's old enough to handle it." He laughed. "You heard of that method, too? Well, a friend of mine told me that when he was a kid... Yeah, I can understand that. As his official foster parents, the state might not approve of... But I'm not his foster parent, so..." He laughed again.

The way he was standing, leaning against the kitchen counter, phone receiver held easily under his chin, reminded Melody of Paris. He'd stood the same way in the hotel lobby, leaning back against the

concierge's desk as he took a call. Except back then, he'd been wearing a U.S. Navy uniform, he'd been speaking flawless French and he'd been looking at her with heat simmering in his eyes.

There was still heat there now, but it was tempered by a great deal of reserve and caution. In Paris, the idea of an unwanted, unplanned pregnancy had been the furthest thing from either of their minds. But here in Appleton, the fact that they'd made an error in judgment was kind of hard to avoid. She carried an extremely obvious and constant reminder with her everywhere she went.

And as much as he was pretending otherwise, Melody knew that Jones didn't really want to marry her.

"Okay," he said into the telephone now. His slightly twangy Western drawl still had the power to send chills down her spine. "That'd be great. There's no time like the present, so send him over." He hung up the phone. "Andy's on his way."

Melody forced the chills away. "What are you planning to do?"

Jones smiled. "I'm going to wait and tell you at the same time I tell Andy. That way, we can get a good-cop, bad-cop thing going that'll sound really sincere."

"Jones, for crying out loud..."

His smile turned to a grin. "I thought pregnant women were supposed to be really patient."

"Oh yeah? Guess again. With all these extra hormones flying around in my system, I sometimes feel like Lizzie Borden's crazier sister."

"One of the books I was reading said that during pregnancy most women feel infused with a sense of calm."

"Someone forgot to give me my infusion," Melody told him.

Jones opened the door to the pantry. "I'm ready with a back rub at any time. Just say the word."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Hey, you promised—"

"I did, and I'm sorry. Please accept my apology." He pulled the string and the pantry light went on. "Do you have any beer that's not in the fridge?"

"Brittany keeps it in there, on the bottom shelf," Melody directed him. "Why?"

"Yup, here it is." He emerged from the pantry with a six-pack of tallboys. "Nice and warm, so the flavour is...especially enhanced. Tell your sister I'll replace these. But right now, Andy needs it more than she does."

"Andy needs...? Jones, what are you—"

"We better go out on the patio." He flipped the light switches next to the kitchen door until he found the one that lit the old-fashioned stone patio out back. "This will get messy. It's better to be outside."

"Please just tell me—"

Melody broke off as she saw Andy standing defiantly at the bottom of the porch stairs. "Vince said you want to see me."

"Yes, we certainly do." Jones held open the back door for Melody.

"He said to give you this." The boy spoke in a near monotone as he held out a half-empty pack of cigarettes. "He said they're from three months ago, when his brother came to visit. He said to tell you that they're probably stale but that he didn't think you'd mind."

Andy tossed the pack into the air, and Jones caught it effortlessly in his left hand. "Thanks. Heard you were hoping to do some partying tonight."

Melody grabbed her jacket from the hook by the door and slipped it on as she went out into the cool evening air. "Hello, Andy." The boy wouldn't meet her gaze. He wouldn't even glance up at her.

"So what? It's not that big a deal," Andy sullenly told Jones.

"Yeah, that's what I figured you'd say." Jones set the beer down on the picnic table that sat in the centre of the patio. He brushed a few stray leaves from one of the chairs for Melody. "You just wanted to have some fun. And it was only beer. What's the fuss, right?"

There was a flash of surprise in Andy's eyes before he caught himself and settled back into sullen mode. "Well, yeah," he said. "Right. It's only beer."

Melody didn't sit. "Jones, what are you doing?" she whispered. "Are you actually agreeing with him?"

"All I'm saying is that people get uptight about the littlest things. Sit down, Andy," Jones commanded. "So you're a beer drinker, huh?"

Andy slouched into a chair, a picture of feigned nonchalance. His nervousness was betrayed by the way he kept fiddling with the wide leather band of his beloved wristwatch. "It's all right. I've had it a few times. Like I said, it's no big deal."

Jones took one of the cans off the plastic loop that held the six-pack together. "Drinking some brew and having a few smokes. Just a regular old, no-big-deal Saturday night. You were planning to go up to the quarry, huh?"

Andy gave Jones a perfect poker face. "Up where?"

"To the quarry." Jones exaggerated his enunciation.

Andy shrugged. "Never heard of it."

"Don't try to con a con artist. I know you know where the quarry is. You've been up there while I was doing laps. You don't really think I didn't notice you—sneaking up on me like a herd of stampeding elephants."

"I was quiet!" Andy was insulted.

"You were thunderous."

"I was not!"

"Well, okay, so you were relatively quiet," Jones conceded, "but not quiet enough. There's no SEAL on earth who would've missed hearing you."

Melody couldn't stay silent a moment longer. "You swim laps in the quarry?"

"First he runs five miles," Andy told her. "I know, because I clocked it on my bike. Then he swims—sometimes for half an hour without stopping, sometimes with all of his clothes on."

It was Jones's turn to shrug. "Every so often in the units, you take an unplanned swim and end up in the water, weighed down with all your clothes and gear. It's good to stay in practice for any situation."

"But the water up there's cold in August," Melody argued. "It's October, and lately we've had frost at night. It must be freezing."

Jones grinned. "Yeah, well, lately I've been swimming a little faster."

"And then after you swim, you run another five miles back here," Andy said, "where you work out with your weights."

Melody knew about the weights. She'd been getting dressed each morning for the past week to the sound of clinking as Jones bench-pressed and lifted enormous-looking weights. But she'd had no idea that he ran and swam before that. He must've been up every morning at the very first light of dawn.

"Even though I'm on vacation, it's important to me that I stay in shape," he explained.

She nearly laughed out loud. This was the man who was going to prove to her how average and normal he truly was?

"But we're getting sidetracked here," Jones continued. "We were talking about beer, right?" He held one of the cans out to Andy. "You want one?"

Andy sat straight up in surprise.

Melody nearly fell over. "Jones! You can't offer him that—he's twelve years old."

"He's clearly been around the block a few times," Jones answered, his eyes never leaving Andy. "Do you want it, Andy? It's not particularly a great brand, but it's not bad, either—at least as far as American beers go. But you probably already know that, right? Being a beer drinker."

"Well, yeah. Sure." Andy reached for the can, but Jones wouldn't let go.

"There's a catch," the SEAL told the boy. "You can't have just one. You have to drink the entire six-pack right now. In the next hour."

Melody couldn't believe what she was hearing. "There's no way Andy could possibly drink an entire six-pack by himself in an hour."

Andy bristled. "Could, too."

Cowboy leaned forward. "Is that a yes?"

"Damn straight!" the boy replied.

Cowboy popped the top open and handed him the can. "Then chug it on down, my friend."

"Jones," Melody hissed, "there's no way Andy could drink that much without getting..." She stopped herself, and Cowboy knew that she'd finally caught on.

She was right. There was no way this kid could drink two cans of warm beer, let alone an entire six-pack, in an hour without getting totally, miserably, horrifically sick.

And that was the point.

Cowboy was going to make damn sure that Andy would associate the overpoweringly bitter taste of beer with one of the most unpleasant side effects of drunkenness.

He watched as Andy took a tentative sip from the can, then as the kid wrinkled his nose at the strong beer taste.

"Gross. It's warm!"

"That's how they serve beer in England," Cowboy told him. "Chilling it hides the taste. Only sissies drink beer cold." He glanced at Mel. She was giving him an "Oh yeah?" look, complete with raised eyebrow. He'd had a chilled beer with dinner tonight himself. He shot her a quick wink. "Come on, Andrew. Bottoms up. Time's a-wasting, and you've got five more cans to drink."

Andy looked a little less certain as he took a deep breath and a long slug of beer, and then another, and another. The kid was tougher than Cowboy had thought—he was actively fighting his urge to gag and spit out the harsh-tasting, room-temperature, totally unappealing beverage.

But Andy wasn't tough enough. He set the empty can on the table, burping loudly, looking as if he was about to protest as Cowboy opened another can and pushed it in front of him.

"You don't have time to talk," Cowboy said. "You only have time to drink."

Andy looked even more uncertain, but he picked up the can and started to drink.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" Melody asked softly, sliding into the seat next to him.

It was already working far better than he'd hoped. Melody was sitting beside him, talking to him, watching him, interacting with him. He was aware of her presence, aware of the heavenly blue of her eyes, aware of her sweet perfume—and more than well aware that he still had a hell of a long way to go before he gained her total trust.

But that wasn't what she'd meant. She'd been talking about Andy.

"Yes," he told her with complete confidence. It would work. Especially with the cigarette factor.

Taking a lighter from the pocket of his jeans, he picked up the half-empty pack Vince had sent over. They were old and stale, Andy had said. Yes, this was definitely going to work.

Cowboy held out the pack to Andy, shaking it slightly so that one cigarette appeared invitingly.

Andy thankfully set down the can of beer and reached for the smoke. He may or may not have wanted it—but Cowboy knew what he was thinking. Anything, anything to take a break from having to drink that god-awful beer.

Cowboy could hear Melody's disbelieving laughter as he leaned across the table to give Andy a light. "Good Lord," she said, "I can't believe I'm sitting here giving beer and cigarettes to a child."

Andy couldn't argue with her use of the word child. He'd taken a drag of tobacco smoke and was now coughing as if he was on the verge of asphyxiation.

Cowboy handed him his can of beer. "Here, maybe this'll help."

He knew damn well it wouldn't. It only served to turn Andy a darker shade of green.

"I can't...drink any more," he gasped when he finally found some air.

"Are you kidding?" Cowboy said. "You've got to finish that one and drink four more. We had a deal, remember?"

"Four more?" Now Andy looked as if he was on the verge of tears.

Cowboy opened another can. "Four more."

Melody put her hand on his arm. "Jones, he's just a kid...."

"That's the whole point." He lowered his voice, leaning closer to her so Andy couldn't hear. "He's a kid—who wants to hang out with high school seniors who are too young to drink themselves. It's dangerous in those woods, the way that quarry's flooded. If those kids are going to be walking around up there in the dark, they should be doing it sober, not drunk." He turned to Andy. "You're not even a third done. Get busy, Marshall."

Melody's grip on his arm tightened. "But he's—"

"On the verge of learning an important lesson," Cowboy interrupted. "I don't want him to stop until he's got to stop. Believe me, it won't be long now." She was about to protest and he covered her hand with his. "Honey, I know this seems harsh to you, but the alternative is far harsher. Imagine how awful you'll feel if some Sunday morning we've got to go and drag that quarry because the boy genius over there was out staggering around drunk and stupid the night before and fell in and drowned."

She hadn't considered such dire possibilities, and he could see the shock in her eyes. She was close enough for him to count the freckles on her nose, close enough to kiss....

Her thoughts must've been moving in the same direction because she quickly straightened up, pulling her hand out from underneath his.

She'd touched him. He saw her realize that as a flush of pink tinged her cheeks. All that talk about keeping his distance—and she was the one who couldn't keep her hands off him.

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

"I know that wasn't about you and me," he quickly reassured her. "That was about your concern for Andy. I didn't read it the wrong way, so don't worry, all right?"

But before she could reply, Andy bolted from the table and lunged for the bushes.

Cowboy stood up. "Go on inside, Mel. I'll take care of him from here on in. I think it's probably best not to have an audience—you know, save the last shreds of his manly pride."

The sound of Andy throwing up a second time seemed to echo in the stillness of the night. Melody winced as she got up and moved toward the kitchen door. "I guess I should go in before I join him in sympathy."

"Oh, hell, I'm sorry—I didn't even think of that possibility."

"I was making a joke. Granted it was a bad one, but..." She smiled at him. It was just a little smile, but it was a smile just the same. His heart leaped crazily at the sight of it. "Are you sure I can't get you anything? A towel or maybe some wet washcloths?"

"No. Thanks. I've got a spare towel in my tent. No sense making you do extra laundry." A joke. She made a joke. He managed to make her feel comfortable enough to make a joke. "Go on, Andy'll be fine. I'll see you later."

Still, she hesitated, looking down at him from the back porch of the house. Cowboy would've liked to believe it was because she was loathe to leave his sparkling good company. But he knew better, and when he looked again, she was gone.

"Hey, Andy," he said as he gently picked the boy up from the dirt under the shrubbery. "Are we having fun yet, kid?"

Andy turned his head and, with a groan, emptied the rest of his stomach down the front of Cowboy's shirt and jeans.

It was the perfect topper to a week that had already gone outrageously wrong.

But Cowboy didn't care. He didn't give a damn. All he could think about was Melody's smile.

Chapter 9

The baby was working hard on his tap-dancing routine.

Melody looked at the clock for the four millionth time that night. It read 1:24.

Her back was aching, her breasts were tender, she had to pee again, and every now and then the baby would twist a certain way and trigger sciatic nerve pain that would shoot a lightning bolt all the way down her right leg from her buttocks to her calf.

Melody swung her legs out of bed. The only way she was going to get some sleep was if she got up and

walked around. With any luck, the rocking movement would lull the baby to sleep.

She shrugged her arms into her robe and slipped her feet into her slippers and, after a brief stop in the bathroom, headed downstairs. She actually had a craving for a corned beef sandwich and she knew there was half a pound of sliced corned beef in the fridge. If she was really lucky, she'd manage to make herself a sandwich and eat half of it before the craving disappeared.

But the light was already on in the kitchen, and she stopped in the doorway, squinting against the brightness. "Brittany?"

"No, it's me." Jones. He was sitting at the kitchen table, shirtless, of course. "I'm sorry, I was trying to be quiet—did I wake you?"

"No, I was just...I couldn't sleep and..." Melody tried to close her robe to hide the revealingly thin cotton of her nightgown, but it was useless. The robe barely even met in the front.

Her urge to flee was tempered by the fact that she no longer was merely hungry—she was starving. Her craving for that sandwich had grown out of control. She eyed the refrigerator and gauged the distance between it and Jones.

It was too close for comfort. Heck, anything that put her within a mile of this man was too close for comfort. She turned to go back upstairs, aware of the irony of the situation. The baby had been quieted simply by her walk down the stairs, but now she wouldn't be able to sleep because she was restless.

But Jones stood up. "I can clear out if you want. I was just waiting for my laundry to dry."

She realized that he was wearing only a towel. It was fastened loosely around his lean hips, and as she watched nearly hypnotized, it began to slip free.

"Andy did the psychedelic yawn on my last clean pair of jeans," Jones continued, catching the towel at the last split second and attaching it again around his waist.

Melody had to laugh, both relieved and oddly, stupidly disappointed that he wasn't now standing naked in front of her. "I've never heard it called that before. As far as euphemisms go, it sounds almost pleasant."

He smiled as if he could read her mind. "Believe me, it wasn't even close to pleasant. In fact, it was about four hundred yards beneath unpleasant, way down in the category of awful. But it was necessary."

She was lingering in the doorway. She knew she was, but she couldn't seem to walk away. The towel was slipping again, and he finally gave up and just held it on with one hand.

"How is Andy?" she asked.

"Feeling pretty bad, but finally asleep. He had the added bonus of the dry heaves after Vince and I got him cleaned off and into bed."

His hair was still wet from his own shower. If she moved closer, she knew exactly how he would smell. Deliciously clean and dangerously sweet. Jones had the power to make even the everyday smell of cheap soap seem exotic and mysterious.

"Why don't you come sit down?" he said quietly. "If you're hungry, I could make you something to eat. Same rules apply as during dinner. We talk, that's all."

Melody could remember staying up far later into the night with this man, feeding each other room-service food and talking about anything that popped into their heads. Books, movies, music. She knew he liked Stephen King, Harrison Ford action flicks and the country sounds of Diamond Rio. But she didn't know why. Their conversations had never been that serious. He'd often interrupted himself mid-sentence to kiss her until the room spun and to bury himself deeply inside her so that all talk was soon forgotten.

He'd told her more about himself this evening than he'd had the entire time they'd been in Paris. She could picture him as a boy, looking a lot like Andy Marshall, desperate for his father's approval. She could imagine him, too, getting into the kind of trouble that Andy attracted like a high-powered magnet. She was dying to find out how he'd turned himself around. How had he gone from near juvenile delinquent to this confident, well-adjusted man?

Melody stepped into the room. "Why don't you sit down?" she told him. "I'm just going to make myself a sandwich."

"Are you sure I can't help?"

"I'd rather you sat down. That way, I know your towel won't fall off."

He laughed. "I'm sorry about this. I honestly didn't have anything clean to put on."

"Just sit, Jones," she ordered him. She could feel him watching her as she got the cold cuts and mustard from the refrigerator. She set them on the table. "What I really want is a Reuben—you know, a grilled sandwich with corned beef, sauerkraut and Swiss cheese on rye? Thousand Island dressing dripping out the sides. Except we don't have any Swiss cheese or Thousand Island dressing."

"Salt," he said. "What you crave is salt. But I read that you're not supposed to have a lot of salt while you're pregnant."

"Every now and then, you've just got to break the rules," Melody told him as she took two plates from the cabinet.

"If you want, I'll run out to the store," he volunteered. "There's got to be a supermarket around here that's open twenty-four hours."

She glanced at him as she got the bread from the cupboard. "I can picture you at the Stop and Shop wearing only your towel."

He stood up. "I'll put my jeans on wet. It doesn't bother me. Believe me, I've worn far worse."

"No," Melody said. "Thanks, but no. By the time you got back, the craving would be gone."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. It's weird. I get these cravings, and then as soon as I'm face-to-face with the food, I get queasy—particularly if it's something that takes me awhile to prepare. Suddenly, the food I was craving becomes absolutely the last thing I want to get anywhere near my mouth. I stand a better chance if I can make it and start eating it quickly." She sat across from him at the table to do just that. "Help yourself."

"Thanks." Jones sat back down. He pulled one of the plates in his direction and took several slices of bread from the bag.

"So what happens next with Andy?" Melody asked.

"I'm going to get him up early," Jones told her, reaching for the mustard. "Let him experience the joys of a hangover. And then we're going to go over to the library and get some statistics on the correlation between starting to drink at age twelve and alcoholism." He glanced up at her, licking his fingers. "I think it would be a really good idea if you came along."

"What possible good can I do for Andy by coming with you?"

"Oh, it's not for Andy. It's for me. I want you to come because I enjoy your company." He smiled as he took a bite of his sandwich.

Melody tried not to feel pleased. She knew his words were just part of his effort to charm her.

"I don't know," she said. "Saturday's really the only morning I have to sleep late."

"Andy and I'll be at the library for a while," he told her. "You could meet us over there."

"I don't know..."

"You don't have to tell me now. Just think about it. See how you feel in the morning." He watched as she took a tentative bite of her own sandwich. "How is it?"

It tasted...delicious. "It's good," she admitted. "At least that bite was good."

"It must be so bizarre to be pregnant," Jones mused. "I can't even imagine what it would feel like to have another person inside me."

"It was really strange at first, back when I first felt the baby move," Melody said between bites. "I wasn't even really showing that much, but I could feel this fluttering inside me—kind of as if the grilled cheese sandwich I had for lunch had come alive and was doing a little dance."

Jones laughed. "I've felt that. It's called indigestion."

"No, this is different. This doesn't hurt. It just feels really strange—and kind of miraculous." She couldn't keep from smiling as she rested her hand on her belly—on the baby. "Definitely miraculous."

"The entire concept is pretty damn amazing," Jones agreed. "And terrifying. I mean, you've still got a month and a half to go before that baby decides he wants to get shaken loose. But by then, he's going to be three inches taller than you. I swear, I look at you, Melody, and I get scared to death. You're so tiny and that baby's so huge. How exactly is this going to work?"

"It's natural, Jones. Women have been having babies since the beginning of time."

He was silent for a moment. "I'm sorry," he finally said. "I promised we wouldn't talk about this. It's just...I don't like it when things are out of my control."

Melody put her half-eaten sandwich back down on her plate. Her appetite was gone. "I know how hard this must be for you," she told him. "I know it must seem as if-in just one split second-your entire life's been derailed."

"But it happened," Jones pointed out, "and now there's no turning back. There's only moving ahead."

"That's right," Melody agreed. "And what lies ahead for you and what lies ahead for me are two entirely different paths."

He laughed, breaking the sombre mood they'd somehow fallen into. "Yeah, yeah, different paths, yada, yada, yada. We've talked about this before, honey. What I want to know is, who's going to be your labor coach? You are planning to use Lamaze, aren't you?"

Melody blinked. "You know so much about this...."

"I've been reading up. I'd like to be considered for position of coach. That is, if you're still accepting applications."

"Brittany's already agreed to do it," she told him, adding a silent thank God. She could just imagine having Cowboy Jones present in the delivery room when she was giving birth. Talking about double torture.

"Yeah, I figured. I was just hoping..." He looked down at her unfinished food. "I guess you hit the wall with your sandwich, huh?"

Melody nodded as she stood up. "I better get to bed."

"You go on up. I'll take care of the mess." Jones smiled. "This was nice. Let's do it again sometime—like every night for the rest of our lives." He smacked himself on the top of his head. "Damn, there I go again. Of course, as you pointed out yourself—every now and then you've got to break the rules."

"Good night, Jones." She let her voice drip with exaggerated exasperation.

He chuckled. "Good night, honey."

As Melody went up the stairs, she didn't look back. She knew if she looked, she'd see Jones smiling at her, watching as she walked away.

But she knew that his smile would be a mask, covering his frustration and despair. This was hard enough for him, considering that marrying her was not truly what he wanted to do. It would've been hard enough to set the wheels in motion and simply follow through. But for him to sit there night after night, day after day, and try to convince her that marriage was for the best when he didn't quite believe it himself...

She felt sorry for him.

Almost as sorry as she felt for herself.

"Hey, guys. Find out anything good?"

Cowboy glanced up from the library computer to see Brittany Evans standing behind Andy's chair. He turned, looking past her, making a quick sweep of the library, searching for her sister. But if Melody was there, she was out of sight, hiding among the stacks.

"She's outside," Brittany answered his unspoken question. "She was feeling a little faint, so she's taking a minute, sitting on one of the benches out front."

"You left her alone?"

"Only for a minute. But I figured, instead of me sitting with her... Well, I thought you might want to switch baby-sitting jobs."

"Yeah," Cowboy said as he stood up. "Thanks."

Andy glared. "Hey. I don't need no baby-sitter."

"That's right," Brittany said tartly to him as she slid into the seat Cowboy had left empty. "You don't. You need a warden. And a grammar instructor, apparently. So what are you researching here? The statistics of alcohol overdoses among minors, resulting in fatalities? Kids who've died from drinking too much. Fascinating subject, huh? How's your stomach feeling this morning, by the way?"

Cowboy didn't wait to hear Andy's retort as he crossed the library foyer, pushed open the heavy wooden door and stepped outside.

Mel was sitting on a bench, just as Brittany had said. The sight of her still had the power to make him pause. She was beautiful. Her golden hair cascaded down around her shoulders, reflecting the bright autumn sun. And although the air was cool, she'd taken off her sweater and wore only a sleeveless dress. Her arms were lightly tanned and as slender as they'd ever been. In fact, he was certain he could encircle both of her wrists with the thumb and forefinger of one hand. That is, if she would let him get close enough to touch her.

As he moved toward the bench, he was surprised that she didn't leap up and back away—until he realized that behind her sunglasses, her eyes were closed.

Her face was pale, too.

"Honey, are you all right?" He sat down beside her.

She didn't open her eyes. "I get so dizzy," she admitted. "Even just the walk from the car..." She opened her eyes and looked at him. "It's totally not fair. My mother was one of those ridiculously healthy people who played tennis the day before I was born. Two kids, and she didn't throw up once."

"But you have more than just your mother's genes," Cowboy pointed out. "You're half your father, too."

She smiled wanly. "Yeah, well, he never had morning sickness, either."

The breeze ruffled her hair, blowing a strand across her cheek. He wanted to touch her hair, to brush it back and run his fingers through its silk.

"You don't talk about him much." Cowboy reached down and picked up a perfect red maple leaf that the wind had brought right to their feet. "I remember when we were in Paris, you told me about your

mother getting remarried and moving to Florida, but you never even mentioned your father."

"He died the summer I was sixteen." Melody paused. "I never really knew him. I mean, I lived in the same house with him for sixteen years, but we weren't very close. He worked seven days a week, eighteen hours a day. He was an investment broker. If you want to know the awful truth, I don't know what my mother saw in him."

"Maybe he was dynamite in bed."

Melody nearly choked. "God, what a thought!"

"Hey, you and Brittany came from somewhere, right? Parents are people, too." He smiled. "Although I have to admit that the idea of my mom and the admiral together is one very scary concept."

Melody was chewing on her lower lip speculatively as she gazed at him. "How come we always end up talking about sex?"

"Maybe because it's been more than seven months now since I've had some," he admitted. "It's kind of on my mind a lot."

"You can't be serious." She was shocked.

Cowboy shrugged. He hadn't meant for it to be such a big deal. "You want me to get you a soda or something to help settle your stomach?"

Melody wouldn't let herself be distracted. "You're telling me honestly that since we were together in Paris, you haven't...? Not even once?"

"No." He was starting to get embarrassed. He stood up. "Why don't I run down the street and get us a couple ginger ales?"

"Jones, why?" Her eyes were wide. "I can't believe you didn't have plenty of opportunities to... I mean..." She laughed nervously. "Well, I've seen the way women look at you."

Cowboy sighed as he sat down again. He should have known she wouldn't simply let this go. "Yeah, you're right. Over the past months, I've been in bars where I've known for a fact that I could've gone home with some girl." He held her gaze. "But I didn't want just some girl. I wanted you." He twisted his mouth into a crooked smile, aware that he'd revealed far more than he'd intended. "Pretty powerful for a feeling based only on lust and relief, don't you think?"

He saw the confusion in her eyes as she tried to process all that he'd just told her. He willed her to reach for him, to surrender to the truth, to admit that he was right—that there was more between them than pure physical attraction. He wanted her to whisper that she, too, hadn't taken another lover since they'd last been together. He couldn't believe that she had, but he didn't know for certain, and he wanted to hear her say it.

But most of all, he wanted her to kiss him.

She didn't.

So Cowboy did the next best thing. He leaned forward and kissed her.

She didn't pull away, so he kissed her again, coaxing her mouth open, pulling her closer, pressing the palm of his hand against the sensual fullness of her belly. She was so sweet, her lips so soft. He felt himself melt inside, felt his muscles turn liquid with desire, felt his soul became infused with new hope.

He was going to have another chance to make love to her. Maybe soon. Maybe even—please, God—today.

"I've dreamed about kissing you like this." He lifted his head to whisper, hoping to see a mirror image of his own breathless passion in her eyes.

She was breathless all right, but when he lowered his head to kiss her again, she stopped him. "God, you're good, aren't you?"

"I'm what...?" But he understood what she meant the moment the words left his lips. Melody thought that everything he'd said, everything he'd done, was all just part of his elaborate plan to seduce her.

In a way, she was right. But she was wrong, too. It was more than that. It was much more.

But before he could open his mouth to argue, he felt it. Beneath his hand, Melody's baby—his baby—moved.

"Oh, my God," he said, his mouth dropping open as he gazed into Mel's eyes, all other thoughts leaving his head. "Mel, I felt him move."

She laughed at his expression of amazement, her accusations forgotten, too. She slid his hand around to the side of her belly. "Here, feel this," she told him. "That's one of his knees."

It was amazing. There was a hard little knob protruding slightly out from the otherwise round smoothness of her abdomen. It was his knee. It was their baby's knee.

"He's got a knee," Cowboy breathed. "Oh, my God."

He hadn't thought about this baby in terms of knees and elbows and arms and legs. But this kid definitely had a knee.

"Here." Melody brought his other hand up to press against her other side. "This is his head, over here."

But just like that, the baby shifted, and Cowboy felt a flurry of motion beneath his hands. That was not Melody doing that. That was...someone else. Someone who hadn't existed before he and Melody had made love on that plane to Paris. He felt out of breath and tremendously off balance as the enormity of the situation once again nearly knocked him over.

"Scary, huh?" Melody whispered.

He met her eyes and nodded. "Yeah."

"Finally," she said, smiling slightly, sadly. "Real honesty."

"I've never even really seen a baby before, you know, except in pictures," Cowboy admitted. He wet his suddenly dry lips. "And you're right, the idea of there being one that belongs to me scares me to death."

But the baby moved again and he couldn't keep from smiling. "But God, that is so cool." He laughed with amazement. "He's swimming around in there, isn't he?"

She nodded.

He was still touching her, but she didn't seem to mind. He wished they were alone in the privacy of her kitchen rather than here on a bench outside the very public library.

She closed her eyes again, and he knew she liked the sensation of his hands on her body.

"I know you think you're winning, but you're not," she said suddenly, opening her eyes and looking at him. "I'm as stubborn as you are, Jones."

He smiled. "Yeah, well, as a rule, I don't quit and I don't lose. So that leaves really only one other option. And that's winning."

"Maybe there's a way we can both win."

He tightened his grip on her, leaning closer to nuzzle the softness of her neck. "I know there is. And it involves going back to your house and locking ourselves in your bedroom for another six days straight."

Melody pulled away from him. "I'm serious."

"I am, too."

She shook her head impatiently. "Jones, what if I acknowledge you as the father and grant you visitation rights?"

"Visits?" he said in disbelief. "You're going to give me permission to visit the kid two or three times a year, and I'm supposed to think that means I've won?"

"It's a compromise," she told him, her eyes a very earnest shade of blue. "It wouldn't be a whole lot of fun for me, either. So much for the clean end to our relationship I'd hoped for. And imagine how awful it's going to be for the man I finally do marry—you showing up, flashing all your big muscles around two or three times each year."

Cowboy shook his head. "No deal. I'm the baby's father. And a baby's father should be married to that baby's mother."

Melody's eyes sparked. "Too bad you weren't feeling quite so moral on that flight to Paris. If I remember correctly, there was no talk of marriage then. If I remember, just about all that you had to say concerned how and where I should touch you, and the most efficient way to rid ourselves of our clothing in that tiny bathroom."

He couldn't hide a laugh. "Don't forget our three point five seconds discussion about our lack of condoms."

She frowned at him. "This isn't funny."

"I'm sorry. And you're right. I've picked a hell of a time to join the moral majority." He picked up her hand and gently laced their fingers together. "But, honey, I can't help the way I feel. And I

feel—particularly after spending the morning with Andy—that it's our responsibility, for the sake of that baby, at least to give marriage a try."

"Why?" She turned slightly to face him as she gently pulled her hand free from his grasp. "Why is this so important to you?"

"I don't want this kid to grow up like Andy," Cowboy told her soberly. "Or me. Honey, I don't want him growing up the way I did, thinking my old man simply didn't give a damn." He gave in to the urge to touch her hair, pulling a strand free from where it had caught on her eyelashes and wrapping it around one finger. "You know, I honestly think this morning is the first time Andy's ever been inside a library. He didn't know what a library card was—I'm not sure he can read half of what we pulled up on that computer screen. And I know for a fact that boy has never held a book in his hands outside of school. Tom Sawyer, Mel. The kid's never read it, never even heard of it. 'Mark Twain, who's he?' Andy said. Damn. And I'm not saying that if his father was around, it'd be any different, but fact is, it's hard to like yourself when one of the two most important people in your life deserts you. And it's hard as hell to get ahead when you don't like yourself very much."

Cowboy took a deep breath and continued. "I want that baby you're carrying to like himself. I want him to know without a shadow of a doubt that his daddy likes him, too—enough to insist upon marrying his mom and giving him a legitimate name."

Melody met his gaze as she pulled herself to her feet, and he hoped his plea had made an impact.

"Think about it," he told her. "Please."

She nodded. And changed the subject as he followed her into the library. "We better go rescue Andy. Britt's not one of his all-time favourite people."

But as Cowboy looked, he saw Andy and Mel's sister sitting where he'd left them, in front of the computer, heads close together.

The two of them barely glanced up as Cowboy and Melody approached. They were playing some kind of bloodthirsty-looking computer game they'd no doubt found while surfing the Net.

"This would be so much better on my computer at home," Britt was telling Andy as she skillfully used the computer keyboard to engage a pack of trolls in mortal combat. "The graphics would be much clearer. You should drop by some time—I'll show it to you if you want."

"Can your computer do an Internet search like this one did?" Andy asked.

Brittany snorted. "Yeah, in about one-sixteenth the time, too. Wait'll you see the difference. I swear, this library computer is from the Stone Age."

Melody looked at Cowboy, her eyebrows slightly raised.

He had to smile. If Brittany and Andy could form a tentative alliance, there was definite hope that he and Melody could do the same.

As Melody moved off to glance at a shelf filled with new books, Cowboy watched her.

She had no idea how beautiful she was.

She had no idea how badly he wanted her.

She also had no idea how patient he could be.

He'd once gone on a sneak and peek-an information—gathering expedition—with Blue McCoy, Alpha Squad's XO. They'd been assigned to scope out a vacation Haus in Germany's Schwarzwald that was, according to FInCOM sources, to be inhabited at the end of the week by a terrorist wanted in connection with a number of fatal bombings in London.

The Fink sources had been wrong—the tango showed up five days early, leaving McCoy and Cowboy pinned down in the bushes next to the front door and directly beneath the living-room window. They'd been trapped between the house and the brightly lit driveway, hidden by the shadow of the foliage but unable to move without immediate detection from the teams of security guards and professional soldiers that constantly patrolled the premises.

They'd lain on their bellies for three and a half days, counting soldiers and guards and listening to conversations auf deutsch and in various Arabic dialects from the living room. They'd relayed all the information to Joe Cat over their radio headsets and they'd waited—and waited and waited—for Alpha Squad to be given permission to apprehend the terrorists and to liberate McCoy's and Cowboy's butts.

He'd come away from that little exercise smelling really bad and hungry beyond belief, but knowing that he could outwait damn near anything.

Melody Evans didn't know it, but she didn't stand a chance.

Chapter 10

Melody woke up, aware that her afternoon nap had stretched on far past the late afternoon. It was dark in her room and dark outside, as well. Her alarm clock read 11:14 p.m.

Someone had come into her room while she was asleep and covered her with a blanket. But that someone couldn't have been her sister, who had been called away to the hospital before Melody had gone up for a nap, and who, from the obvious emptiness of Britt's room and the quietness of the house, had not yet returned home.

Melody glanced out the window at the tent in the backyard. It was dark. No doubt Jones had gone to sleep himself after he'd tucked her in.

Either that, or it had been Andy. The boy had been spending a great deal of time over at their house, working—or playing—with Britt on her computer. In the week since Jones had done his "tough love" Intro to Drinking 101 session, Andy had been acting less like a twenty-three-year-old ex-con and more like a twelve-year-old boy.

He and Brittany had really hit it off—which was good for both of them. Ever since Britt's divorce, she'd been more likely to focus on the negative instead of the positive. But when Andy was around, Melody heard far more of her sister's musical laughter.

Oh, Britt complained about him. Crumbs around the computer. Dishes left out on the kitchen table. But

she gave the kid his own screen name on her computer account and let him use it even while she was doing the evening or night shift at work.

He was a nice kid, despite his bad reputation. He had a natural charm and a genuine sense of humour. But there was no way he would've left Britt's computer long enough to come upstairs and throw a blanket over her. It had to have been Jones who'd done that.

In the past week, he'd been up every morning, sitting in the kitchen while she'd had her breakfast before going to work. After watching her half-heartedly eat dry toast for several days in a row, he'd actually cooked her bacon, eggs, pancakes and oatmeal in the hopes that one of those foods would be something that she would want.

He'd been waiting when she'd returned home from work, as well. She'd gotten into the habit of sitting on the front porch with him, talking quietly and watching the setting sun turn the brilliant autumn leaves even more vivid shades of red and orange.

Jones was always around for dinner, too. Just like Andy, he'd managed to totally charm Brittany. And as for Melody, well, she was getting used to him smiling at her from across the kitchen table.

She was waiting for him to kiss her again—the way he'd done out in front of the library. But as if he sensed her trepidation, he was keeping his distance, giving her plenty of space.

But more often than not, when their eyes met, there was a heart-stoppingly hot spark, and Jones's gaze would linger on her mouth. His message was very clear. He wanted to kiss her again and he wanted to make sure that she knew it.

The thought of Jones up in her room, covering her with a blanket and watching her as she slept was a disconcerting one, and she tried to push it far away. She didn't want to think about that. She didn't want to think about Jones at all. She focused instead on her hunger as she went downstairs to the kitchen. She was, as they said in Boston, wicked hungry.

Melody nibbled on a soda cracker as she searched the refrigerator, then the pantry, for something, anything to eat. With the flu still running rampant through the nursing staff at the hospital, Brittany hadn't had time to pick up groceries. There was nothing in the house to eat. Correction—nothing Melody wanted to eat.

She would've gone shopping herself, but Britt had made her promise under pain of death that she wouldn't try to wrestle both the shopping cart and the crowds at the Stop and Shop until after the baby was born.

Of course, if Britt had her way, Melody would spend the next few months in bed. And from the way he'd been talking last week outside the library, Jones was of the same mind-set. But he wanted her to stay in bed for an entirely different reason.

Melody couldn't quite believe that his motive was pure passion. She wasn't exactly looking her sexiest these days—unless, of course, one was turned on by a pumpkin. Andy's words, "fat and funny-looking," sprang immediately and quite accurately to mind. No, she had to believe that Jones wanted her in bed only because he knew that once he got her there, he'd be that much closer to his goal of marrying her.

For the baby's sake.

With a sigh, she took her jacket from the hook by the door, checking to make sure her car keys and her wallet were in the pockets. Brittany may have made the supermarket off-limits, but the convenience store up by the highway was fair game.

Maybe if Melody wandered through the aisles she'd see something she actually wanted to eat—something besides an entire sleeve of chocolate chip cookies, that is.

She unlocked the door and stepped out onto the porch, nearly colliding with Jones. He caught her with both arms, holding her tightly against him to keep them both from falling down the stairs.

His body was warm and his hair was dishevelled as if he, too, had just woken up. She'd seen him look exactly like this in Paris. She couldn't remember how many times she'd slowly awakened underneath warm covers, opening her eyes to see his lazy smile and sleepy green eyes.

Time had lost all meaning back then. They'd slept when they were tired, eaten when they were hungry and made love the rest of the time. Sometimes when they woke, it was in the dark hours of the early morning. Sometimes the warm light of the afternoon sun slipped in beneath the curtains.

But it never mattered. The rest of the world had ceased to exist. What was important was right there, in that room, in that bed.

"I saw the light go on," he said, his voice still husky from sleep, his drawl more pronounced. "I thought I'd come over, make sure you were okay."

"I'm okay." Melody stepped back, and he let her go. The night air had a crisp chill to it, and she missed his warmth almost immediately. "I'm hungry, though. I'm making a run to the criminal."

He blinked. "You're...what?"

She started down the steps. "Going to the Honey Farms—the convenience store on Connecticut Road."

Jones followed her. "Yeah. But...what did you call it?"

"The criminal. You know, because the prices they charge are criminal."

He laughed, genuine amusement in his voice. "Cool. I like that. The criminal."

Melody couldn't help but smile. "Boy, it doesn't take much to make you happy, does it, Jones?"

"No, ma'am. And right now it would make me downright ecstatic to go to the criminal for you. Just hand me the keys to your car, tell me what you want and I'll have it back here for you inside ten minutes."

Melody looked around. "Where's your car?"

"It was, um, getting costly to keep a rental car for all this time." He fished a pony tail holder out of the front pocket of his jeans. Raking his hair into some semblance of order with his fingers, he tied it back at the nape of his neck. "I returned it about a week and a half ago."

"God, and I didn't even notice."

Jones held out his hand. "Come on. Give me the keys and your dinner order."

She stepped past him, heading toward her car. "Thanks, but no thanks. I don't know what I want. I was intending to go and browse."

"Do you mind if I come along?"

"No," Melody said, surprised that it was true. "I don't mind."

She opened the front door of her car, but he moved to block her way. "How about I drive?"

"Do you know how to drive a stick shift?"

Jones just looked at her.

"Right," she said, handing him the keys. "Navy SEAL. God, can you believe I almost forgot? If you can fly a plane, you can certainly handle my car, as particular as it is."

It was much easier getting in the passenger side without the steering wheel in her way. Jones waited to start the engine until after she closed the door behind her and fastened her seat belt.

"The clutch can be really temperamental," she started to say, but stopped when he gave her another pointed look.

But he smiled then, and she found herself smiling, too. She always found herself smiling when he was around.

Jones managed to get the car down the driveway and onto the main road without stalling, without even hiccuping. He drove easily, comfortably, with one hand on the wheel and the other resting lightly on the gearshift. He had nice hands. They were strong and capable-looking, just like the man himself.

"I was thinking," he said, finally breaking the silence as they approached the store, "that tomorrow might be a good day to put your garden to bed for the winter. It's supposed to be in the high fifties and sunny." He glanced at her. "I could help you do it after church, if you want."

Melody didn't know what to say.

"I'm afraid I've never been much of a gardener. I'm not really sure what needs to be done." He cleared his throat. "I figure the best way to do the job is for me to act as your hands and back. You tell me what to do, what to lift, what to carry, and I'll do it for you."

There was only one other car in the convenience-store parking lot and it was idling over by the telephones. Jones slid Melody's car neatly into one of the spots near the doors and turned off the engine. But he shifted slightly to face her rather than climb out.

"What do you think?" he asked.

Melody looked into his eyes and smiled. "I think you heard about the charity apple picking that's going on up at Hetterman's Orchards tomorrow after church, and you want to make sure you have a really good reason not to go."

Jones laughed. "No, I haven't heard anything about anything. What's the deal? Apple picking?"

"Hetterman's has always had a problem hiring temporary help to pick the last of the apples. It's a self-service farm, and people come out from the city all season long to pick their own apples, but there's always a lot left over. About seven years ago, they made a deal with one of the local Girl Scout troops. If the girls could get twenty people to come out and pick apples for a day, Hetterman's promised to award one of the high school kids a five-hundred-dollar scholarship. Well, the girls outdid themselves. They got a hundred people to come and got the job done in about three hours instead of an entire day. And in the seven years since then, it's become a town tradition. Last year, four hundred people turned out for the event, and they finished in less than two hours. And the five hundred dollars from Hettennan's has been matched by Glenzen Brothers Hardware, the Congregational Church, The First City Bank and a handful of private benefactors, making the scholarship a full five thousand dollars."

She laughed at herself. "Listen to me. I sound like such a Pollyanna. I can't help it, though. The thought of all those people working together like that for such a good cause just makes me all goose bumpy and shivery. I know, I know, I'm a sap."

"No, you're not." Jones was smiling at her very slightly. "I think it's cool, too. It's real teamwork in action." He was watching her closely, paying careful attention, as if what she had told him was the most important piece of news in the universe. Being the centre of the tight focus of all his intensity was somewhat overwhelming, though.

The yellowish parking-lot lamps shone dimly through the car windows, creating intricate patterns of shadow and light on the dashboard. It was quiet and far too intimate. She should get out of the car. She knew she should.

"This year, they're trying to get six hundred people to participate and do the whole thing in under an hour. They want to try to set a record."

He reached forward to play with one of her curls. Touching but not touching. "Then we better plan to show up, huh?"

Melody laughed, gently pulling her hair free from his grasp, trying to break the mood, knowing that she had to. She had no choice. If she didn't do something, it wasn't going to be long before he leaned over and kissed her. "Somehow I just can't see you spending even half an hour picking apples." She unfastened her seat belt, but Jones still made no move to get out of the car.

"Why not?"

"Get serious, Jones."

"I am serious. It sounds like fun. Serious fun."

"Apple picking isn't exactly your speed."

"Yeah, well, maybe I don't know anything about that," he drawled, "but I do know all about working in a team, and it sounds as if this is one team I'd be proud to be a part of."

Melody got out of the car, fast. She had to, or else she was going to do something really stupid—like kiss him.

But he must've been able to read her mind because he followed and caught her hand before she even

reached the convenience-store door.

"Come on," he said, his eyes daring her to take a chance. "Let's make this a plan. We'll do the apple-picking thing, have lunch, then come home and tackle the garden." He smiled. "And then in the evening, if you're feeling really adventurous, we can take a walk down at the Audubon Bird Refuge."

Melody laughed, and Jones leaned forward and kissed her.

She knew exactly what he was doing, what he had been doing over the past week. He was wearing her down little by little, piece by piece. He was actively trying to make her fall in love with him. He was taking everything really slowly. He was making a point to be extraordinarily gentle.

Except this was no languorous, gentle kiss. This time, he took her by storm, claiming her mouth with a hunger that stole her breath away. She could taste his passion along with the sweet mint toothpaste he must've used right before he came out of his tent to meet her.

She could feel his hands in her hair, on her back, sliding down to cup the soft fullness of her rear end. He'd held her that way in Paris, pressing her tightly against him so that she would be sure to feel the evidence of his arousal, nestled tightly between them.

But the only thing nestled between them now was her watermelon-sized stomach.

She heard him half growl, half laugh with frustration. "Making love to you is going to be really interesting. We're going to have to get kind of creative, aren't we?"

Melody could feel her heart pounding. She was breathing hard as she looked up into his eyes, but she couldn't seem to pull away. She didn't want to pull away. She actually wanted him to take her home and kiss her that way again. She wanted to make love to him. God, she was weak. He'd broken down her defences in just a little over fourteen days. But maybe she had been crazy ever to think she could resist this man.

But instead of pulling her back toward the car, Jones reached for the criminal door. "Let's get what we came for."

He stood back to let her go through first.

Melody reached up to touch her lips as she went into the store. That kiss had been so scalding it should, by all rights, have marked her. But as far as she could tell, her lips were still attached.

The overhead lights were glaring compared to the dim parking lot, and she squinted slightly as she looked around the depressingly bleak little store.

Isaac Forte was clerking tonight. He always handled the night shift-which seemed appropriate. With his pale, gaunt face and painfully thin, almost skeletal frame, he reminded her of a vampire. If daylight ever actually came in contact with him, no doubt he would crumble into dust. But she, too, had become a creature of the night over the past few months. And her odd cravings had made her a frequent customer of the Honey Farms, so she'd come to know Isaac rather well. He had his problems, but having to drink human blood to stay alive wasn't one of them, thank goodness.

"Hi, Isaac," she said.

Two men in black jackets were at the checkout counter. Isaac was waiting on them and—

Jones moved so fast he was almost a total blur.

He kicked, and something went flying to the other side of the room.

A gun. One of these men had had a gun, and Jones had disarmed him, knocking it out of reach before Melody had barely even noticed it.

"Get out of here!" he shouted as he slammed one of the men down onto the floor, forcing the one to trip up the other.

The first man was dazed, but the second scrambled away, trying to reach the fallen gun. Melody could see it, gleaming and deadly, on the floor in front of the popcorn and corn chips.

"Melody, dammit, go!" Jones bellowed even as he grabbed for the second man, his hand closing around the leather of the thug's jacket.

He was talking to her. He wanted her to get to safety.

A rack of paperback books crashed to the floor as the man furiously fought to get free, to reach the gun. Melody watched, hypnotized with icy fear, as Jones fought just as hard to hang on, not even stopping for a second as he placed a well-aimed kick behind him that dropped the first man, the dazed man, to the floor with a final-sounding thud.

There was nothing even remotely fair about this wrestling match. No rules were being followed, no courtesies allowed, no time-outs granted. Jones slammed the gunman's head against the floor even as the man continued his own barrage of blows. Elbows, knees, hands, feet—it was meant to drive Jones back, but the SEAL was unstoppable. He just kept on coming.

The look on Jones's face transformed him, and his eyes sparked with an unholy light. He looked more like beast than man, his lips pulled back in a terrifying snarl of rage.

He kicked the gun even farther away as he flung the man violently in the opposite direction. Cheerios boxes exploded everywhere as he followed, pounding the man, hitting him hard again and again until there was no doubt in anyone's mind that the robber wasn't going to get up. At least not right away.

Outside in the parking lot, the car that had been idling sped away with a squeal of tires.

Even though both men were down and still, Jones moved quickly, going for the gun. Melody nearly collapsed with relief as his hands closed around it. He was safe. She wasn't going to have to stand there and watch him get pumped full of bullets.

She could hear police sirens in the distance. Isaac, no doubt, had triggered the alarm when the fight had started. He now peered warily over the top of the counter, his eyes wide as he gazed at Jones.

Jones checked the gun, removing the clip and releasing the chambered round. And then he looked at her, his eyes still lit from within with the devil's own anger.

"The next time I give you an order, dammit, you do it!" He was breathing hard, his chest still heaving as he fought to suck in enough air. His nose was bleeding and the front of his T-shirt was stained bright red

with blood, but he didn't even notice.

"An order? But—"

"No buts." He slammed the empty gun down on the checkout counter. Melody had never seen him like this. Not even during the hostage rescue. He was furious. With her. "These scumbags had a weapon, Melody. If that dirtwad over there—" he gestured toward the man who'd put up a fight "—had managed to get his hands on it, he damn well would've used it! And these days, honey, you aren't exactly the tiniest of targets!"

Stung, Melody turned and walked out of the criminal.

"Now you leave," he said, pulling the door open to follow her. "Perfect."

She spun back to face him. "I don't take orders from you. I'm not one of your SEAL buddies-I don't know how to take orders!"

"You managed just fine in the Middle East."

"Yeah, well, look around you, Lieutenant. This isn't the Middle East. This is Appleton, Massachusetts. And/ haven't trained myself to react instantly when I walk into the middle of a convenience-store stickup." Her voice caught on something that was half laughter, half sob. "God, and I was just starting to think that maybe you were just a normal guy. Yeah, you're normal—and I stand a shot at winning the Miss America swimsuit competition. What a joke!"

The night was getting downright frosty. Or maybe it wasn't the chill in the air that was making her start to shake.

"I'd like my car keys," she said, lifting her chin, determined to keep from crumbling in front of him. "I want to go home now."

He ran his hands back through his rumpled hair, closing his eyes and pressing the heels of his hands against his temples, visibly trying to bring himself out of combat mode. And when he spoke, his voice was more even. "I don't think I can just leave. They're going to want a statement—"

"I'm not asking you to leave. I'm sure one of the police officers can give you a lift when you're done."

Jones reached for her. "Melody..."

She stiffened, closing her eyes and refusing to feel anything as he put his arms around her. "I don't want you to touch me," she told him through clenched teeth.

He backed off, but only a little. He took a deep breath, forcing even more of his anger to dissipate. "Honey, you gotta understand. I saw that revolver and—"

"You did what you had to do," she finished for him. "What you've been trained to do. You attacked. You're very good at that, I'll give you that much." She stepped out of his embrace. "Please tell Chief Beatrice that I'll stop by the station tomorrow to give my statement. But right now, I have to go home."

He held the car keys in his hand. "Why don't you let me drive you?" He glanced up as the first of the police cars pulled into the lot, and he raised his voice to be heard over the wailing siren. "I'll just tell these

guys that I'll be back in a second." The siren cut off, leaving him shouting in the stillness, "I don't want you to have to drive."

She took the keys from him. "I'm fine. I can drive myself."

Isaac Forte came out to meet the policemen and all three men approached Jones. Melody used the opportunity to get into her car. But she should have known Jones wasn't going to let her just drive away. He came to the side of the car and waited until she opened her window.

"I won't be too long," he told her. He looked down as if noticing the blood on his shirt for the first time. He had an angry-looking scratch on his arm, as well, and he was gingerly touching the inside of his lips with his tongue as if he'd cut himself on his own teeth. "Can we talk when I get back?"

She looked out the windshield, afraid to meet his eyes. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Mel, please? I know I had no right to speak to you that way, but I was scared to death you were gonna get hurt—"

"I'm tired, Jones," she lied. "I'm going to grab a bowl of soup and go back to sleep." He was leaning with both hands braced on the top of her car, so she couldn't just drive away. She did put the car into gear, though. She knew he could see that the reverse lights had come on. But when he still didn't step back, she finally looked up at him. "I want to go now," she said, fighting to keep her voice from shaking.

All of his earlier anger was gone, and he looked worn-out and beaten—as if he'd lost the fight instead of won.

"I'm sorry," he told her, straightening up. If she didn't know better, she might've thought those were tears in his eyes. "Mel, I'm deeply sorry."

"I am, too," she whispered.

Melody released the clutch and backed out of the parking lot. She only stalled once as she pulled onto the road that took her home.

"What's up?"

Cowboy glanced up from his book to smile at Andy. "Hey, kid. I'm getting Mel's garden ready for winter."

"No, you're not," Andy scoffed. "You're sitting there reading a book."

Andy had a swollen lip and a nasty-looking scrape on his jaw-line. He'd been in another fight, probably with that older kid—Alex Parks—who took such pleasure in tormenting him.

Andy's brown eyes dared him to comment on his injuries.

"Well, yeah, I'm reading a book," Cowboy said, purposely saying nothing. "That's the first step. See, first I have to learn how to do it—you know, figure out what kind of tools and supplies I need."

"That book tells you all that?"

"It does. Believe it or not, all the information I need to do damn near anything is two miles down that road in the town library. Need your refrigerator fixed? Piece a cake. Just get me a book. I can learn another language, build a house from the foundation up, shoe a horse—you name it, the knowledge I need to get the job done is in the library, guaranteed. Especially now that they're plugged into the Internet."

Andy looked at the garden bed, at the plants that had shrivelled and turned brown in the cool night air, then at the last of the beans that were still clinging stubbornly to life. He looked back at Cowboy, clearly unimpressed. "So what's there to do? Everything's dead. You can't plant anything new until spring anyway."

"Ever hear of mulching?" Cowboy asked.

"No."

"Me, neither. At least not more than really vaguely before I picked up this book. But apparently, it's good to do. I haven't quite reached the part that tells me why, but I'm getting there."

Andy rolled his eyes. "You know, there's a much easier way to do all this."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. Just ask Melody what she wants done."

Ask Melody. That was a damned fine idea. But unfortunately, Cowboy couldn't ask Melody anything until she stopped hiding from him again.

It had been nearly three days since the incident at the Honey Farms convenience store. The criminal, she'd called the place. And the name fit. They'd certainly run into some criminal activity, that was for sure.

God, he'd never known fear like that hot-and-cold streak of terror that had shot through him when he'd seen that revolver. He'd had about one-tenth of a second to decide what to do, and in that fraction of a moment, for the first time in his life, he'd actually considered backing down. He'd actually thought about surrendering.

But he couldn't tell in that heartbeat of time if the men were using or not. He didn't know for sure from that one quick glance if they were out of their minds, high on some chemical substance, or strung out, desperate and ready to eliminate anyone who so much as looked at them crooked.

All he knew was that in his experience, when he carried a weapon, he was always prepared to use it. He had to assume the same was true for these clowns. So he'd attacked in that one split second when the revolver was pointing away from the clerk, catching the assailants off guard.

The entire fight had lasted all of eighty-five seconds.

But it had been eighty-five seconds of sheer hell.

Melody had just stood there, staring at him. She hadn't even ducked for cover. She just stood there, a target, ready to be knocked over or shot full of lead if that bastard had gotten hold of his revolver.

It had taken Cowboy twice as long as it should have to subdue the enemy and gain control of the weapon. His fear that Melody would be hurt or killed had gotten in the way. And he'd lashed out at her afterward because of it. He'd shouted at her when all he really wanted to do was drag her into his arms and hold her until the end of time.

But she'd been less than thrilled with his performance—in more ways than one. And she'd run away again.

Before they'd gone into that store, Melody had been ready to invite him up to her bedroom to spend the night—he'd been almost certain of that. He'd been so close to relief from this hellish frustration.

Of course, now the frustration was ten times as bad. He hadn't even seen her in three days. The hell with the lack of sex. Just not seeing her was driving him damn near crazy.

"You want me to ask Melody for you?" Andy asked. "I'm going inside—Britt said it was okay if I used her computer to do an Internet search."

"What are you searching for?"

Andy shrugged. "Just some stuff about the Army."

"Oh yeah? What kind of stuff?"

Another shrug. "I dunno."

Cowboy gazed at the boy. "You thinking about enlisting?"

"Maybe."

"Only way to become a SEAL is to join the U.S. Navy, not the Army."

"Yeah," Andy said, "I know. You running again tonight?"

Cowboy had taken to working out both in the evening as well as the early morning in an attempt to run some of his frustration into the ground. "Why? You want to try again?" Andy had run along with him yesterday evening. The kid had only made it about two miles before he'd dropped out.

"Yeah, I do."

"You know, if you start getting in shape now, you'll be a monster by the time you graduate high school."

Andy kicked at a clump of grass. "I wish I could be a monster now."

Cowboy acknowledged the boy's scraped face. "Alex Parks again, huh?"

"He's such a jerk."

"If you want, I can help you out with your PT," Cowboy volunteered. "You know, physical training. And, if you want, I can also help you learn to fight."

Andy nodded slowly. "Maybe," he said. "What's the catch?"

Cowboy grinned. This boy was a fast learner. "You're right. There is a condition."

The kid groaned. "I'm going to hate this, aren't I?"

"You have to promise that after I teach you to beat the crap out of Alex Parks, you use what you've learned only to defend yourself. And after he figures out that you're ready and able to kick his butt, you turn and walk away."

Andy looked incredulous. "What good is that?"

"That's my deal. Take it or leave it."

"How do you know I'll even keep my promise?"

"Because if you don't, I'll break you in half," Cowboy said with a smile. "Oh, and there is one other catch. You need to learn a little self-discipline. You need to learn to follow orders. My orders. When I say jump, you jump. When I say chill, you cool it. You give me any attitude, any garbage, any whining, any moaning of any kind, and the deal's off."

"Gee, you're making this sound too good to pass up," Andy said, rolling his eyes.

"Oh yeah. One other thing. If I ask you a question, you answer me straight. You say, 'Yes, sir,' or 'No, sir.'"

"You want me to call you sir?"

"Yes, I do." God knows Andy could learn a thing or two about showing respect.

Andy was silent.

"So do we have a deal?" Cowboy asked.

Andy swore. "Yeah, all right."

"Yes, sir," Cowboy corrected him.

"Yes, sir. Jeez." Andy turned toward the house. "I'll tell Melody you could use her help with the garden."

"Thanks, kid, but that's not going to get her out here. She's been hiding from me for days."

"I'll tell her you're sorry, too. Sir. God."

"Sir is good enough, Marshall. You don't have to call me God, too," Cowboy teased.

"Sheesh." Andy rolled his eyes again as he headed toward the kitchen door.

In truth, Cowboy was sorry. He was sorry about a lot of things. He was sorry that he hadn't gone into the house and hammered on Melody's bedroom door after he'd gotten home that night. He was sorry he still hadn't found a way to force the issue, to make her sit down and talk to him.

He wasn't quite sure what he would tell her, though. Cowboy wasn't sure he was ready to share the fact that after she'd left the Honey Farms, right as he was giving his statement to Tom Beatrice, the Appleton chief of police, he'd had to excuse himself. He'd gone into the men's room and gotten horribly, violently sick.

At first, he'd thought it might've been the flu—people all over town were falling victim to a virulent strain of the bug. But as the night wore on and he didn't get sick again, he'd been forced to confront the truth.

It was the residual of his fear that had made him bow to the porcelain god. His fear for Melody's safety had squeezed him tight and hadn't let go, making his gut churn and his blood pressure rise until he'd forcefully emptied his stomach.

It was weird. His career as a SEAL involved a huge amount of risk taking. And he was fine about that. He knew he would survive damn near anything if surviving entailed fighting. But if his survival depended on something outside his control—like the intrinsic danger they all faced every time they jumped out of a plane, knowing that if their chute failed, if the lines got tangled or the cells didn't open right, they would end up as a mostly unrecognizable stain on the ground—if his survival depended on a twist of fate like that, Cowboy knew he would either live or die as the gods saw fit. No amount of fear or worry would change that, so he rarely bothered with either.

But he found he couldn't be quite so blasé when it came to Melody's safety. Whenever he thought about that revolver aimed in her direction, even now, three days later, he still felt sick to his stomach.

It was similar to the sensation he felt when he thought about her having to give birth to that baby she was carrying.

As was his usual method of operation when forced to deal with something he knew nothing about, he'd taken a pile of books about pregnancy out of the library. He'd read nearly every one from cover to cover, and frankly, the list of possible life-threatening complications resulting from pregnancy or childbirth made his blood run cold.

Women went into shock from pregnancy-related diabetes. Or they had strokes caused by the strain on their system. Some women simply bled to death. The mortality rates reported in the books shocked Cowboy. It seemed impossible that even in this day and age of enlightened, modern medicine, women died simply as a result of bearing children.

He'd wanted to go into the hospital and donate blood to be set aside and used specifically for Melody in case she needed it. He was a universal donor, but he knew that all of the inoculations he'd had as he'd travelled around the world would make him ineligible.

He'd just approached Brittany to find out if her blood type matched her sister's—to see if she might be willing to donate blood and help soothe some of his fear. She'd looked at him as if he was crazy, but she'd agreed to do it.

Cowboy looked toward the house, up at the window he knew was Melody's room. He willed the curtain to shift. He hoped to see a shadowy form backing away or a hint of moving light, but he saw nothing.

Melody was staying far from the window.

And his patience was running out.

Chapter 11

Melody heard the doorbell ring from up in her bedroom.

She focused all of her attention on her book, determined to keep reading. It was Jones. It had to be Jones.

It had been five days since she'd driven away from him at the Honey Farms, and she'd been bracing herself, waiting for him to run out of patience and come confront her.

Andy was downstairs, using Britt's computer. Melody had told him she was going to take a nap. She closed her eyes for a moment, praying that he would send Jones away.

But then she heard voices—a deep voice that didn't sound very much like Jones, and then Andy's, higher-pitched and loud. She couldn't hear the words, but he sounded as if he was angry or upset.

The lower voice rumbled again, and she heard what sounded like a chair being knocked over. No, that was definitely not Jones down there with Andy.

Melody unlocked her bedroom door and hurried down the stairs to the kitchen.

"It wasn't me," Andy was shouting. "I didn't do nothin'."

Tom Beatrice, the police chief, stood between Andy and the door, ready to catch the boy if he ran. "It'll go easier on you, son, if you just tell the truth."

Andy was shaking with anger. "I am telling the truth."

"You're going to have to come with me, son."

"Stop calling me that! I'm not your son!"

Neither of them had noticed that Melody stood in the doorway. She raised her voice to be heard. "What's going on here?"

"That's what I was wondering, too." Jones opened the screen door and stepped into the kitchen.

The police chief glanced at them both apologetically. "Vince Romanella said I'd find the boy over here. I'm afraid I need to bring him down to the station for questioning."

"What?" Melody looked at Andy, but he was silent and stony-faced. She tried not to look at Jones at all, but she could feel his eyes on her from across the room. "Why?"

"House up on Looking Glass Road was broken into and vandalized several nights ago," Tom explained. "Andy here was seen up in that area at about 9:00—about the time the break-in occurred."

"That's pretty circumstantial, don't you think, Chief?" Jones voiced Melody's own disbelief.

"Oh, there's other evidence, too, that points in his direction." Tom shook his head. "The place is trashed. It's a real mess. Windows and mirrors broken. Spray paint everywhere."

Jones briefly met Melody's gaze, then he turned to the boy. "Marshall, did you do it?" His voice was soft, almost matter-of-fact.

Andy straightened his shoulders. "No, sir."

Jones turned back to Tom. "Chief, he didn't do it."

Tom scratched the back of his head. "Well, Lieutenant, I appreciate your faith in the boy, but his fingerprints are all over the place. He's going to have to come down to the station with me."

"Fingerprints?" Jones echoed.

"Inside and out."

Jones's eyes pinned the boy in place. This time when he spoke, his voice was harder, more demanding. "Marshall, I'm going to ask you that question again. Did you have anything to do with vandalizing that house?"

Andy's eyes had filled with tears. "I should've known you wouldn't believe me," he whispered. "You're really no different from the rest of them."

"Answer my question."

Andy answered with a blisteringly foul suggestion. Like an afterthought, he added, "sir." He turned to Tom Beatrice. "Let's get this over with."

"Andy, I'm on your side..." Jones started to say, but Andy just pushed past him, Tom's hand on his arm.

Melody stepped forward. "Go with him," she urged Jones. "He's going to need you."

Jones nodded, taking in her tentlike dress, her unbrushed hair, the blue nail polish on her toes, before looking in her eyes. "I was scared I'd lose you, Mel," he said. "That night—I shouted at you because I was more scared than I've ever been in my life. It was wrong, but so's not letting me apologize."

He turned and went out the door.

"Jones."

Cowboy sat up in his tent, suddenly wide-awake, wondering if his mind was finally starting to snap. He could've sworn he'd heard Melody's voice calling his name. Of course, he had been dreaming a particularly satisfying and sinfully erotic dream about her....

"Jones?"

It was her. He could see her unmistakable silhouette outside of the tent. He reached up to unzip the flap.

"Mel, are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She was wearing only a nightgown and a robe and she shivered slightly in the chill night air. "But we just got a phone call from Vince Romanella." She peered into the darkness of his tent. He was glad for the darkness, and glad for the sleeping bag that still covered most of him—including an extremely healthy arousal, the direct by-product of that dream. "Jones, Andy's not in here with you, is he?"

"No." He opened the flap a little wider. "Honey, it's freezing outside. Come on in."

"It feels like it's freezing in there, too," she pointed out, not moving any closer. He couldn't quite see her eyes in the darkness. "I don't know how you stand it."

"It's not that bad." His sleeping bag was nice and warm. And the dream he'd been having about Melody had been hot enough to heat the entire state of Massachusetts.

"Jones, Andy's missing. Vince said he heard a noise, and when he got up to check it out, he looked in on Andy, and his bed was empty."

Cowboy reached for his jeans, swiftly slipping them on, wrestling with the zipper, willing his arousal away. "What time is it?"

"Nearly 4:00. Vince thinks Andy's been gone since around midnight, when he and Kirsty went to bed. Tom Beatrice is organizing a search party."

He pulled on his boots and grabbed a T-shirt and a jacket. "Can I use your phone?"

"Of course." She moved aside to let him come out of the tent. "Do you know where he might've gone?"

He sealed the flap to keep any stray animals out, then straightened up, pulling on his T-shirt as they walked toward the house. "No. He wouldn't talk to me down at the police station. And all he said to the chief was that he'd been set up and framed." With impatient fingers, he tried to untangle a knot that was in his hair. "I might've believed it if his fingerprints had only been found on, you know, something like a single can of soda, or a few things here and there." He gave up on his hair as he opened the door for Melody, then followed her into the brightly lit warmth of the kitchen. Brittany was awake, too, and talking on the phone. "But according to the police report, his prints were on the furniture, on the walls, in every single room. He was in that house, there's no denying it."

"But he is denying it," Melody said, her blue eyes wide. "And rather vehemently, I've heard." She lowered herself into one of the kitchen chairs, shifting uncomfortably, as if her back was hurting again. What else was new? Never mind the fact that he knew how to give a killer back rub—she wouldn't let him near enough to give her one.

But despite her obvious discomfort, she looked particularly lovely tonight. She'd put her hair in a single braid down her back, but while she'd slept, several tendrils had escaped. They floated gracefully, delicately, around her face. Without any makeup on at all, she looked fresh and sweet-barely old enough to babysit, let alone have a baby of her own.

As he watched, she chewed on her lower lip. She had gorgeous lips—so full and red even without the help of cosmetics. In his dream, she'd smiled at him almost wickedly before she'd lowered her head and...

Don't go there, Cowboy admonished himself. As much as he would've liked to, he couldn't let his thoughts continue in that direction right now. He had to think about Andy Marshall instead of that damn fool kid. What the hell was he trying to prove?

"Running away like this is a pretty strong admission of guilt," Cowboy pointed out.

"Sometimes people run because they're afraid." Melody was talking about more than Andy—he knew because she suddenly wouldn't meet his gaze.

"Sometimes people don't realize that everyone in the world is afraid of something," he countered. "Best thing to do is face your fear. Learn all you can about it. Then learn to live with it. Knowledge goes a long way when it comes to declawing even the scariest monsters."

"Is that what you've been doing here with me?" she asked, no longer even pretending to talk about Andy. "Learning to live with your fear? Facing the terrors of a lifetime commitment? And don't try to pretend that the thought of marrying me doesn't scare you to death—I know it does."

He went for the truth. Why not? He had nothing to lose. "You're right," he said. "It does frighten me. But I've done frightening things before and come out a better man because of them."

Before Melody could respond, Brittany grimly hung up the phone. "They're starting the search up by the quarry," she announced. "Alex Parks just told his father that Andy had called him and told him to meet him in the woods up there just after midnight. Alex is claiming he never went, but my gut feeling is that we haven't gotten the full story from this kid yet. Anyone who's willing and able is supposed to meet out at the end of Quarry Road."

Melody stood up. "I'm going to go change."

"Willing and able, sweetie," Brittany said. "Not willing and seven and a half months pregnant."

"But I want to help!"

"Help by giving the lieutenant your car keys and waving goodbye," Brittany told her sister. "You don't really think Cowboy'll be able to give the search for Andy his full attention if you're there for him to worry about, do you?"

Melody looked directly at him. "So...just don't worry about me."

Cowboy smiled ruefully. "Honey, that's kind of like telling me don't breathe."

She looked as if she was going to cry. "My keys are by the door," she told him. "Take my car. But call as soon as you hear anything."

By 7:45, Melody had gotten tired of waiting. Jones hadn't called. He still hadn't called. Fortunately, Brittany had gotten tired of waiting, too.

By 8:00, Britt was driving her down to the end of Quarry Road. The narrow road was lined on both sides with parked cars for about a good half mile.

"You get out here," Britt told her. "I'll park and walk back."

"Are you sure?" Melody asked.

Brittany raised her eyebrows. "Do you honestly believe that I would bring you up here in the cold, and then make you walk an extra half mile? I should have my head examined for driving you over here in the first place—and all for the sake of some stupid kid."

"He's not stupid." Melody opened the door.

"He's incredibly stupid," Britt argued. "He didn't call me before he ran away. I know he didn't vandalize that house."

Melody stared at her sister. "You do?"

"Yeah, and I realized as we were driving here that I can prove it, too. The kid's been on-line, using my computer every night this week, right? I was working the night of the break-in, and you were probably already in bed, but Andy was at our house, at my computer. I just realized I got E-mail from him at work that night. Unless he scheduled a flash session, I can give him a solid alibi. And whether or not there was a flash session scheduled should be easy enough to prove. I just have to access my account information. I'll prove he was logged on and actively using the Net that night."

"You seriously believe Andy's innocent—?"

Brittany shrugged. "Well, yeah. He said he didn't do it. The kid may be a royal pain the butt, but I've gotten to know him pretty well over the past few weeks, and he's not a liar."

"But all those fingerprints..."

"I know. I haven't figured that out yet, but if Andy says he didn't do it, he didn't do it."

"I think you should tell this to Tom Beatrice right now," Melody said. She had to smile. "Of all people, I wouldn't have thought you'd be Andy's champion."

"Yeah, well, I was wrong about him. He's an okay kid." Worry flickered across her face. "I hope he's okay."

"Jones'll find him," Melody told her sister as she hauled herself out of the car. She had total faith in the SEAL. This was what he was good at. Rescuing hostages and disarming gunmen and finding missing little boys would all fall under the category labeled "piece a cake."

"Don't go any farther than the quarry," Brittany said threateningly, leaning across the seat to look up at her. "If I get back here and find out that you've done something insane, like join a search party, I swear I'll never let you leave the house again."

"I won't join a search party. I promise." It was then that Melody saw them. "Oh, God!"

"You all right?"

"Boats, Britt." There were two trucks parked at haphazard angles, both of which had boat trailers behind them. They were empty, which meant the boats were in use. "They're dragging the quarry."

Brittany put the car in park and shut off the engine. She opened the door, then stood looking across the

roof of the car at the telltale trailers. Her face was pale, but she shook her head in denial. "It doesn't mean that. Not necessarily."

Melody blinked back tears. "Yes, it does. You know it."

Brittany slammed the car door, leaving the vehicle right there, blocking in at least four other cars. "No, it doesn't." Her voice rang with determination.

Mel followed her sister down the trail that led to the flooded quarry.

A crowd had gathered. She could see Estelle Warner and Peggy Rogers, surrounded by other members of the Ladies' Club decked out in their hiking boots and jeans. Tom Beatrice and nearly all of Appleton's police force were talking to several state troopers as Vince and Kirsty Romanella hovered nearby. Even Alex Parks was there, sitting on a rock, looking as if he'd been crying. And standing off to the sides were all the people who had volunteered to help search the woods for Andy. The turnout was nearly bigger than last weekend's apple picking at Hetterman's. They were talking in hushed voices, sombrely watching the boats.

"They're not dragging the water." Brittany shielded her eyes with her hand, trying to see past the glare of the early-morning sun. "What are they doing?"

Jones was out on one of the boats. Although he was too far away to see clearly, Melody recognized him from his easygoing posture. That, the baseball cap he wore on his head and the fact that, even though it was only forty chilly degrees out, he wore his jacket unbuttoned more than tipped her off.

The man was totally immune to the cold.

"The water's too deep to drag in many places." Melody turned to see Estelle Warner standing behind them. "They're using some kind of sonar contraption to try to get a reading on anything that might be a body down at the bottom of the pit," the elderly woman said. "This old quarry's three hundred feet deep in some places. Maybe even deeper in others."

"They can't be sure he's in there." Melody's heart was in her throat. "Aren't they searching anywhere else?"

"Considering the fact that an eyewitness saw the boy go into the water, and that the searchers found his clothes exactly where that witness said they'd be..."

"Oh, no..." Brittany reached for Melody's hand.

Estelle looked even more dour than usual. "I'm afraid so. It seems the Parks boy met Andy Marshall up here late last night. From what he says, Andy was always trying to pick a fight, and this time was no different. Andy dared the Parks boy to swim across the quarry, and when the Parks boy backed down, Andy took of his own clothes and dove into the water. Had to have been close to freezing, but that wild kid just dove right in."

Both boats were heading to shore. Jones took off his baseball cap and raked his hair back out of his face, refastening his ponytail. As Melody watched, he put his hat back on, making sure it was securely on his head. As he got closer, she could see that his face was decidedly grim.

"Apparently, the Parks boy didn't see young Andy come back up," Estelle told them. "He says he

searched for a while, calling to Andy, but there was no reply. Of course, it was dark and hard to see much of anything. It's likely the boy dove in the wrong spot, hit his head on a rock. Or maybe the cold just got to him."

Brittany was squeezing Melody's fingers. "Please don't let them have found something," she whispered.

"That lieutenant of yours," Estelle told Melody. "He took one look at Andy's clothes—left right where the Parks boy had said they were—and he made a few phone calls to Boston. And this other man, the tall black fellow, he was out here within a few hours with this sonar whatever. Brought diving gear with him, too."

Harvard. Harvard was on that boat with Jones. Melody could see him now, towering over everyone—even Jones. His shaved head gleamed exotically in the sunlight. His expression, like Jones's, was less than pleased.

Melody saw Jones spot her as he climbed out of the boat. She saw him hesitate, glancing quickly back at Harvard, and she knew. He hadn't told his friend that she was pregnant.

It would have been funny if the situation weren't so deadly serious.

Still, he came toward her, and Melody knew when she looked into his eyes that Harvard's reaction to her pregnancy was the least of his worries.

He didn't say hello, didn't mince his words. "Honey, we think he's down there."

Brittany sank to the ground. Estelle knelt next to her, holding her tightly—two mortal enemies allied once again, this time through the death of a child.

"No," Melody whispered. But she could see the truth written clearly in the stormy green of Jones's eyes. He was stony-faced, sternly angry.

"It's my fault." His voice was raspy and as dry as his eyes. "I thought he was ready to learn some discipline. I'd been taking him out, running him through some PT. I told him that SEALs had to condition themselves against cold water. I told him about Hell Week—about having to sit in that freezing surf and just hang on. He wanted to try it—try swimming in the quarry, so I let him do it. We just jumped in and jumped out. I thought I'd let him get a taste of what cold really was."

He stopped, taking a deep breath before he continued. "That was my mistake. I didn't let him stay in. I just pulled him back out. I didn't let him cramp up or find out how hard it is to swim when every muscle in your body is cold and stiff. I think I must've given him the false confidence to try it again."

"That still doesn't make this your fault." Melody wanted to reach for him, to put her arms around him, but he seemed so distant, so unanimated and still, so grim and hard and unreachable.

Harvard had come to stand beside them, and she could feel his curious eyes on her, but she didn't look away from Jones. She couldn't look away. He truly blamed himself for this tragedy.

"It is my fault. I told him about swim buddies—about how SEALs never swim or dive without another team member, but I know he saw me breaking the rules by swimming alone in the quarry."

"Junior, we should probably make that dive," Harvard said quietly. "If we've got to go down to 175 feet,

it's going to take awhile." When Melody finally glanced at him, he nodded. "How are you, Melody? You're looking very...healthy."

"Will you tell him, please, that this is not his fault?"

"The lady says it's not your fault, Jones."

Jones's expression didn't change as he turned away. "Yeah, right. Let's get this over with."

Melody couldn't stand it a second longer. She reached for him, catching his hand in hers. "Harlan—"

There was a flash of surprise in his eyes, surprise that she'd actually used his given name, surprise that she'd actually touched him, but that emotion was quickly turned into stone, along with everything else he was feeling. Even his fingers felt cold.

She knew this stony anger was his defence against having to go down into that water and possibly—probably—bring up the lifeless body of the boy they'd all come to love over the past few weeks. But she knew just as well that everything he felt—all the blame and the fear and the awful, paralyzing grief—was there inside him. His anger didn't cancel his feelings out; it merely covered them.

She knew him quite well, she realized. Over the past few weeks, despite her attempts to keep her distance, she'd come to know this man's vast repertoire of minutely different smiles—what they meant, how they broadcast exactly how and what he was feeling. She'd come to know his silences, too. And she'd had a firsthand look at his method of dealing with fear.

He hid it behind icy cold anger.

"Be careful," she whispered. A local diving club had frequented the quarry several years ago—until someone had gotten killed and it had been deemed too dangerous a place to dive.

His eyes told her nothing—nothing but the fact that underneath all that chill, he was hurting. He nodded and even tried to force a smile. "Piece a cake."

"We'll be down for a while," Harvard told her. "Diving at this depth requires regular stops both on the way down and coming back up. It's time-consuming, and for you, waiting up here on the surface, it'll seem as if it takes forever. You might want to go home and wait for a phone call."

"Jones has forgotten how to use the phone," Melody said, still gazing into his eyes.

"I'm sorry I didn't call you," he said quietly, "but all I kept getting was bad news." Emotion shifted across his face, and for a heartbeat, Melody thought he was about to give in to all of his pain and crumple to the ground just as Brittany had. But he didn't. "It seemed senseless to make you worry until I knew for sure Andy was dead." He said the word flatly, bluntly, using it to bring back his anger and put his other emotions in check.

"We still don't know that for sure." Melody squeezed his hand. But her words were pure bravado. She could see Jones's certainty in his eyes.

"Go home," he told her.

"No," she said. If he did find Andy down there, he was going to need her to be here—as badly as she

was going to need him. "I'll wait for you to come back up. We can go home together."

She couldn't believe the words that were coming out of her mouth. Go home together...

His expression didn't change. For a moment, he didn't even move. But then, in one swift movement, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her hard on the mouth. She clung to him, kissing him back just as ferociously, wanting him, needing him—and needing him to know it.

He pulled away, breathing hard. He didn't say a word about that incredible kiss. He just took off his jacket and handed it to her. "Spread this on the ground so you'll have something dry to sit on." His voice was harsh, and his eyes were still so angry, but he gently touched the side of her face with one finger. "I don't want you catching cold."

It was almost as if he loved her. It was almost as if they were lovers who had been together for years.

"Be careful," Melody said again.

As he gazed at her, his eyes suddenly looked bleak. "It's too late," he told her quietly. "When it came to dealing with Andy, I wasn't careful enough, and now it's too damn late."

Melody tried not to cry as he turned and walked away.

Chapter 12

Cowboy usually loved to dive, but this was sheer hell. He and H. were heading nearly straight down, using a marked rope to gauge their distance, stopping at regular intervals to let their bodies adjust to the increasing pressure of the water.

The time spent stopping and waiting dragged on interminably.

It was necessary, though. If they moved too quickly from the surface to a depth below a hundred feet, and then back, they could—and would—get the bends.

Cowboy had seen a guy who hadn't believed how crippling the bends could actually be. The stupid SOB had gotten brain damage from bubbles of nitrogen expanding in his system. He still couldn't walk to this day.

Despite the fact that SEALs were known for breaking the rules, this was one rule they never even bent. Even when they were in as big a hurry as he was.

Contrary to what he'd told Melody, this dive was anything but a piece of cake. At this depth, he and Harvard had to breathe from special tanks of mixed gas to prevent nitrogen narcosis—also known as the rapture of the deep. As if that wasn't dangerous enough, there was a definite time limit to how long they could remain at that depth. And the number and lengths of decompression stops they would have to make on the way back to the surface were intensely complicated.

With the scuba gear on, he and Harvard couldn't talk. And at this depth beneath the surface, it was very, very cold and very, very dark. He couldn't even see Harvard next to him. He could only sense his presence.

Out of all the men in Alpha Squad, Cowboy was glad it was the senior chief who'd been just a short drive away, visiting his family in his hometown just outside Boston. Unlike some of the guys, Harvard knew when not to talk.

As they'd pulled on their cold-water diving suits, Harvard had had only a brief comment to make about Melody's pregnancy. He'd said, "When you told me you had a situation to deal with, you weren't kidding. You don't do anything halfway, do you, Junior?"

"No," Cowboy had replied.

"I assume you're going to do right by the girl?"

"Yeah," Cowboy had answered automatically. For so long now, his single-most goal had been to marry Melody and be a real father to their baby. But that was before he'd failed so utterly with Andy. Who was he trying to fool here anyway? He knew less than nothing about parenting. The fact that he was diving in this quarry in hopes of recovering Andy's drowned body was proof of that.

Cowboy floated in the darkness, uncertain of what to wish for. He hoped they weren't going to find Andy's body, but at the same time, if the kid had drowned in this quarry, he hoped that they'd find him right away. It would end the waiting and wondering. And it would be far better than never finding him, never quite knowing for sure.

He shone his flashlight straight down, knowing that the light couldn't possibly cut through the murky depths to that place where the sonar camera had found an object the approximate size and density of a human body.

back into the deprivation-tank-like darkness. They had to save their flashlight batteries for when they were really needed.

He closed his eyes. He knew he could do anything if he had to. But watching the beam from his light reflect off Andy Marshall's pale, water-swollen face was going to be one of the hardest things he would ever have to do.

It was going to be almost as hard as admitting that maybe Melody had been right all along, almost as hard as it would be to walk away from her sweet smile.

Cowboy was going to do right by her. Only now that he knew better, he was going to do it by leaving her alone.

"It was only a bundle of trash," Melody heard Jones report to Tom Beatrice as she inched closer to the group of men. "There was an outcropping of rocks. We searched that area as extensively as possible, given our time limit at that depth." His mouth was still a grim, straight line. "However, that was only one part of the quarry."

She had nearly fainted with relief when she'd seen Jones's and Harvard's heads break the surface of the water.

Jones must've known she'd be watching, worried out of her mind, because he'd turned to search for her,

picking her out in the crowd on the shore. As he'd treaded the icy quarry water, he'd looked at her, touching the top of his head with the tips of his fingers, giving her the diver's signal for okay. He was okay, thank God. And the blip they'd picked up on the sonar wasn't Andy's body. It was only a bag of trash.

"How long do you have to wait before you can make another dive?" Tom Beatrice asked.

"The earliest we could do it would be late tonight," Jones told the police chief.

"But it would be smarter and safer to wait until morning," Harvard added. He met the other SEAL'S eyes. "You know as well as I do, Jones—a four—or five—hour delay isn't going to matter one bit to that boy if he's down there."

Jones glanced around the sombre crowd, at the Romanellas, at Estelle Warner and Brittany. His gaze lingered on Melody before he turned back to the police chief. "I'm sorry, Tom," he said. "Senior Chief Becker's right. We'd better wait and continue the search in the morning."

"That's fine, son," Tom told him. "It's risky enough diving down there in daylight." He looked around at the men who'd brought the boats. "We'll meet back here at 8:00 a.m. Let's get those boats up and out of the water!"

Brittany touched Melody's arm, pulling her aside. "I'm leaving."

"I'm waiting for Jones," Mel told her sister.

"I know," Brittany said. Her eyes were rimmed with red, but she managed a watery smile. "It's nice to know that something good will come of this."

Melody shook her head. "Britt, don't get the wrong idea here. Just because I care about Jones doesn't mean I intend to marry him. Because I don't. This isn't about that. We're friends."

She wasn't certain herself what it was about. Friendship, maybe. Or comfort. Comfort and friendship with a healthy dose of attraction. Yeah, when it came to Cowboy Jones, her intense attraction to him was always a part of the equation.

Brittany was looking at her with one eyebrow elevated skeptically. "Friends?"

Melody blushed, remembering how he'd kissed her, right there in front of everyone, remembering the way she'd clung to him—returning all of his passion and then some. But whatever she'd been thinking, whatever she'd been feeling, the moment had passed. Her sanity has returned.

She hoped. "I'd like Jones to be my friend. Of course, based on our history, it's bound to be a little confusing as we iron things out..."

Brittany didn't look convinced. "Whatever. I'm going in to work—try to keep my mind off Andy. I have the afternoon shift. You and your 'friend' will have the house to yourselves."

Melody sighed. "Britt, I'm not going to..."

But her sister was already gone.

The crowd had moved off, too, leaving Jones and Harvard to stow their diving gear and strip out of their bulky dry suits.

For the first time since Melody had met him, Jones actually looked cold. The water had been icy, and he'd been submerged in it an endlessly long time. He was shivering despite a blanket someone had put around him.

His fingers fumbled on the zipper, and she moved toward him. "Do you want me to get that?"

He smiled tightly. "The irony here is incredible. It's only after I screw up beyond belief that you want to undress me."

"I was...I thought..." She blushed. The truth was that she'd wanted to undress him from the moment she saw him again. But God help her if he ever realized that.

His smile faded with the last of his anger, and he looked dreadfully tired and impossibly unhappy. "I'm not sure exactly what's happening here between us, honey, but I've got to tell you—I sure as hell don't deserve any kind of consolation prize today."

"I didn't hear any of that," Harvard singsonged, peeling his own dry suit off his well-muscled body and nearly jumping into his jeans, pulling them on directly over the long woollen underwear he'd worn underneath. "I am so not listening. Got water in my ears, can't hear a damn thing." In his haste, he didn't bother with his shirt. He just yanked his winter coat over his undershirt. "In fact, I'm so outta here, I've already been gone for ten minutes. I've got all the gear except for your suit, Junior. You get that dried out, and I'll get the tanks filled for tomorrow."

"Thanks, H."

"Melody, girl, you don't need my admonishment to be careful around this man. Clearly, you two have already taken the concept of being careful, packed it in a box and tied a big red ribbon around it." Harvard took one look at Jones's face and backed away. "Like I said, though, I'm gone. I'll be back in the morning."

And then he was gone, leaving Jones and Melody alone.

"Jones, I didn't mean to imply..." she started lamely. She took a deep breath. "When I said that about us going home, I'm not sure I really meant to make it sound as if—"

"Okay," he said. "That's okay. I misinterpreted. I'm sorry. That kiss was my mistake."

No, it wasn't. And he hadn't misinterpreted. At the time, Melody had meant what she'd said. She was just too cowardly to admit it now. Obviously, she'd been swept along by the rush of high emotions. Now that she was thinking clearly again, the thought of taking him home and bringing him up to her room scared her to death.

She could not let herself fall in love with him. She absolutely couldn't.

"One step forward, two steps back," Jones added softly, almost as if he was talking to himself, almost as if he was able to read her mind. "This is your game, honey. You make up the rules and I'll follow them."

He had managed to unzip his diving suit and he pushed it off his body. Like Harvard, he had long

underwear on underneath. He pulled that off, too, covering himself rather halfheartedly with the blanket, uncaring of who might be watching.

Melody quickly turned away and picked up his jeans from the rock he'd left them on. But when she started to hold them out to him, still carefully averting her eyes, she realized that they were at least six sizes too small.

She knew what must have happened even before Jones spoke. She was holding Andy's jeans.

"Someone must've put those over here by mistake," he said.

Andy's jeans and Andy's sweatshirt. The clothes Andy had been wearing before he'd jumped into the quarry. The clothes he had taken off just moments before he'd drowned.

Jones found his own jeans and pulled them on as Melody slowly sat down on the rock.

The woods around the quarry had been searched for quite some distance. If Andy had managed somehow to crawl out of the quarry and collapse in the bushes, he would have been found. And if he'd crawled out of the quarry and hadn't collapsed—well, it was hard to imagine him running around the woods in only his underwear.

Andy had drowned. He'd gone into the water and he hadn't come back out. As she sat holding his clothes, the reality hit her hard. Andy Marshall was dead.

Melody had been hanging pretty tough all day, but now the realization hit her, and she couldn't hold back her tears. Try as she might, she couldn't keep them from escaping. One after another, they rolled down her face.

Jones sat down next to her, close but not quite touching. He'd put on his T-shirt and pulled on his cowboy boots. He still had that blanket wrapped around his shoulders for warmth, and without a word, he drew it around her shoulders, too.

They sat for a moment, watching the noonday sun reflecting off the surface of the flooded quarry.

"I feel like I'm never going to be warm again," he admitted

Melody wiped ineffectively at her tears. She couldn't stop them—they just kept on coming. "We should go home, get you something warm to drink."

It was as if he hadn't heard her. "Melody, I'm so sorry." He turned to her, and she saw that he had tears in his eyes, too. "If I hadn't come to town, this never would've happened."

She took his hand underneath the blanket. His fingers were icy. "You don't know that for certain."

"I thought I could help him," Jones told her. His eyes were luminous as he held her hand tightly. "I thought all he really needed was someone who cared enough to help get him in line. Someone to set some limits, and at the same time, make some demands that were above and beyond what he'd been asked to do in the past." He stared back out at the water, his jaw muscles jumping. "I remembered what joining the Navy—joining the SEALs—had done for me, and I thought I could give him a taste of that. I thought..."

He trailed off, and Melody finished for him. "Piece of cake?"

Jones looked at her and laughed, half in disbelief, half in despair. He wiped at his eyes with the back of his free hand. "Sweet Lord, was I ever wrong about that." He shook his head. "I can't believe he lied to me about breaking into that house on Looking Glass Road."

"He wasn't lying," Melody told him. "At least Britt doesn't think so. She thinks she can prove that he was using her computer that night. She claims he was at our house, surfing the Net on the night the vandalism took place."

"If he didn't do it, how did his fingerprints get all over the place?"

Melody shook her head. "I don't know. But I do know that he stuck to his story. He insisted he didn't do it. What I'd like to know is why he called Alex Parks. And why would Alex agree to meet Andy out here after midnight?"

"I should've believed the kid. Why didn't I?" The muscles in Jones's jaw were clenching again. "He said he didn't do it. I asked, and he answered me. I should've stuck by him. I should have trusted him unconditionally."

Now it was Melody's turn to gaze out at the water. "It's hard to trust someone unconditionally," she told him. "Even the most powerful trust has its limits. I should know." She forced herself to look at him, to meet his eyes. "I would—and I did—trust you with my life. But I found myself unable to trust you with my heart. I expected you to hurt me and I couldn't get past that."

His eyes were so green in the early-afternoon light. "You really expected me to hurt you?"

Melody nodded. "Not intentionally, but yeah."

"That's why you didn't want to see me again. That's why you didn't give what we had going a chance."

"Yes," she admitted.

"I probably would've," he admitted, too. "Hurt you, I mean. Like you said, not intentionally, but..."

She didn't want to talk about this. Nodding again, she pushed on, hoping he would follow. "In the same way, you expected Andy to mess up. So when it seemed as if he was lying, you went with your expectations."

"God, I really blew it." The tears were back in Jones's eyes. "I thought I knew what I was doing, but the truth is, I was really unprepared to deal with this kid. I did everything wrong."

"That's just not true."

But he wasn't listening. "When we hit 175 feet, we weren't quite on target and had to search for the object that the sonar picked up." He was talking about the dive he'd made in the quarry with Harvard. "It took us so long to get down there with all the stopping and waiting, but once we were there, I was scared to death. I just wanted to close my eyes and sink to the bottom myself. I didn't want to look, I didn't want to know. And then my light hit something, and it reflected back at me, and for one split second, Mel, I saw him. My eyes played a nasty trick on me, and I saw Andy's face down there."

Melody didn't know what to say, so she said nothing. She just kept holding his hand.

"Tomorrow, I'm going to have to go back down there," he continued. "And tomorrow, I probably am going to find him."

He was shaking. Whether it was from the wintry chill of the air or the darkness of his thoughts, Melody wasn't sure. She did know it was time to bring him home, though.

She stood up, tugging him gently to his feet, escaping from the confines of his blanket. "Let's go, Jones." She paused. "Do you still have my car keys?"

"Yeah." He gathered up his diving suit. "They're in my pocket."

Melody folded Andy's jeans, putting them back on the rock. "I wonder if we should try to contact Andy's father. Andy was running some searches on the Internet—he told me he thought he might've located his father at an Army base up in New Hampshire and—"

She realized what she was saying at the exact same moment Jones did.

"What did you just say?" he asked, turning to face her.

"He was looking for his father on the Net."

"And he thought he found him in New Hampshire."

Transfixed, Melody stared into the sudden glaring intensity of Jones's eyes. "Do you think...?" she breathed.

Jones grabbed Andy's jeans, searching quickly through the pockets. "Honey, did you see his watch? Was his watch here with the rest of his clothes?"

"No." Melody was afraid to get too excited. Although Andy never went anywhere without that watch, he certainly wouldn't have worn it into the water. So why wasn't it here? "It's possible Alex Parks took it. I wouldn't trust that kid any farther than I could throw him."

"Yeah, you're right. It's possible Alex has it. But..." Jones ran his hands through his damp hair. "Last week at the library, I talked Andy into checking out a copy of Tom Sawyer. He told me that he liked it—so he must've been reading it."

"Oh, my God." Melody turned to look at the quarry. "He might've set this whole thing up to make it look as if he'd drowned."

Jones grabbed her hand. "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"You're going home. I'm going to New Hampshire."

Melody's back was killing her.

Cowboy shook his head in disgust, amazed that he'd let her talk him into coming along with him. It was an hour-and-a-half drive up to New Hampshire—each way.

She was careful not to mention her discomfort. Of course not. This was the woman who had walked for eight hours across the desert, the back of her heels raw from blisters, without complaining even once. No, she didn't say a word, but her constant shifting in her seat gave her away.

"We're almost there," she said, looking up from the map into the mid-afternoon glare.

The town was small, clearly built as an afterthought to the neighbouring U.S. Army base. There were a series of bars and pool halls along the main strip, along with a tired-looking supermarket, a cheap motel, a tattoo parlour, a liquor store and a bus station with a sputtering neon sign.

Cowboy did a U-turn, right there in the middle of town.

"What are you doing? The base is in the other direction."

"Just following a hunch."

"But—"

"This whole thing—driving all the way up here without even being able to talk to Private Marshall on the phone—is a long shot, right?" He'd used a contact he had at the Pentagon to locate Andy's father, Pvt. David Marshall, here at the Plainfield, New Hampshire, Army Base.

Plainfield wasn't any kind of cushy silver-bullet assignment. In fact, it was the opposite. Men were assigned to Plainfield as a punishment just short of a jail sentence. And according to Cowboy's Pentagon friend, David Marshall had had plenty of reasons to be reprimanded. He had a rap sheet a mile long, filled with unsavoury charges including sexual harassment and use of excessive violence in dealing with civilians.

When Cowboy had called Plainfield, he was told that Private Marshall was not available. He couldn't even get the unfriendly voice on the other end of the line to verify if the man was still stationed at the base. From the tone of the phone call, though, he suspected the elder Marshall was currently in the middle of a severe dressing-down—or maybe even in the lockup.

If Private Marshall was at Plainfield, assuming Andy had even been able to see him, it wasn't too hard to imagine his reaction as he came face-to-face with the son he'd abandoned twelve years earlier. There weren't going to be many kisses and hugs, that much was for sure.

Cowboy pulled into the potholed parking lot next to the bus station.

"You think Andy's father won't want anything to do with him," Melody guessed correctly. "But do you really think Andy would have enough money to buy a bus ticket out of here? He probably spent everything he had getting here from Appleton."

"I think he probably doesn't even have enough to buy himself dinner, but the bus station's warm and dry. He can stay here all night if he needs to. He can even sleep on one of the benches if he pretends he's waiting for an arriving bus."

She was watching him closely in the shadowy dusk as he pulled up the parking brake and turned off the engine. "You sound as if you're speaking from experience."

Cowboy gazed into her eyes. It felt as if it had been a million years since they shared a smile. The trip from Massachusetts had been a quiet one. In fact, this entire day had been the furthest thing from a laughfest he'd ever known. "I think maybe you know me a little too well."

"How many times exactly did you run away when you were a kid?"

"I don't know—I lost count. The dumb thing was, no one ever really missed me. So I finally stopped running. I figured I could tick my parents off more by being around."

Melody shifted in her seat. "But you ran away again when you were sixteen, right? You told me you went to see a rodeo and just never went home."

"That wasn't running away. That was growing up and leaving home." He managed a wan smile. "Well, maybe not growing up. I'm still not sure I've managed to do that yet."

"I think you've done just fine." Her eyes were soft in the rapidly fading light, and Cowboy knew with a sudden certainty that all he had to do was lean forward and she would let him kiss her. Despite everything that she'd said about misinterpretation and mistakes, with very little effort on his part, she would belong to him.

He couldn't figure it out. Certainly if Andy was dead, but even if the kid was alive, Cowboy had proven himself to be irresponsible and incapable of dealing with a child. It didn't make sense. He screws up and now he gets the girl? What he'd done should've made her want to put even more distance between them. He just didn't get it.

Maybe it was only based on comfort, on shared grief—or hope. Or hell, maybe it was only his imagination. He'd find out soon enough by kissing her again, by lowering his mouth to hers and...

It was funny. All this time, he would've risked damn near anything for a chance to take this woman into his arms and lose himself in her sweet kisses. But now, as badly as he wanted to feel her arms around him, he was going to have to deny himself the pleasure. They'd come here hoping to find Andy. He should be looking for the kid, not kissing Melody.

But God, he wanted to kiss her. He was drowning in the ocean blue of her eyes, wondering just how much comfort she'd be willing to give him, how much comfort she'd be willing to take in return....

"We're stalling," she told him, breaking the spell. "We should go inside."

Cowboy nodded, realizing he was gripping the steering wheel so hard his knuckles had turned white. He pried his fingers free. "I know." He was stalling. Truth was, he was afraid of going into that bus station and finding out his hunch was wrong. He was afraid this entire trip was just the result of wishful thinking and that Andy really was down at the bottom of that quarry.

Melody unfastened her seat belt. "I'll go. You stay here."

Cowboy snorted at that. "I don't think so."

He helped her out of the car, and as he closed the door behind her, she held on to his hand. He'd been

on quite a few difficult missions since he'd become a SEAL, but this was the first time he'd had a hand to hold as he took the point. And odd as it was, he was glad for it, glad she was there.

"Please, God, let him be here," she murmured as they started toward the door.

"If he is here," Cowboy told her, "do me a favour. Don't let me kill him."

She squeezed his hand. "I won't."

He took a deep breath, pushed open the door and together they went inside.

It was vintage run-down bus station. The odour of cigarette smoke and urine wasn't completely masked by the cloyingly sweet chemical scent of air freshener. The bleak walls were a hopeless shade of beige, and the industrial-bland floor tiles were cracked and chipped in some places, revealing triangles of the dirty grey concrete beneath. The men's room had a sign on the door saying Out Of Order—Use Facilities Near Ticket Agents. The snack bar had been permanently shut down, replaced by vending machines. The cheery orange and yellow of the hard plastic chairs had long since been dulled by thousands of grimy fingers.

And Andy Marshall, a picture of dejection, sat in one of them, shoulders slumped, elbows on knees, forehead resting in the palms of his hands.

Relief roared in Cowboy's ears. It made the bus station, and the entire world with it, seem to shift and tilt on its axis.

The relief was followed by an icy surge of anger. How could Andy have done this? The little bastard! He'd had them all worried damned sick!

"Jones." He turned and looked down into Melody's eyes. They were brimming with tears. But she blinked, pushing them back as she smiled up at him. "I think he's already been punished enough," she said as if she could read his mind, as if everything he was feeling was written on his face.

Cowboy nodded. It was obvious that the kid's last hope had been ripped from him without any anaesthetic. It wasn't going to do either Andy or Cowboy the slightest bit of good to foam at the mouth and rage at him.

"I'm going to go call Tom Beatrice," he told Melody, knowing that he had to attempt to regain his equilibrium before he confronted the boy. "I want to give Harvard a call, too. Tell him we found Andy alive."

She held on to his hand until the last possible moment. "Call Brittany, will you? Please?"

"I will." He went to a row of beat-up pay phones, punching in his calling-card number and watching as Melody approached Andy.

She sat down next to him, and even then the kid didn't look up until she spoke. Cowboy was too far away to hear what she said, but Andy didn't seem surprised by her presence.

He watched them talk as he made his calls. Tom was quietly thankful. Harvard was out, and Cowboy left a message for him with his father. Brittany cried and then cursed the boy for his stupidity in the same breath in which she thanked God for keeping him safe.

As Cowboy hung up the phone, Andy glanced warily in his direction. The flash of his pale face called to mind that other ghastly image he'd thought he'd seen 175 feet beneath the surface of the flooded quarry.

Andy's face looked much better with life glistening in his eyes.

And just like that, Cowboy's anger faded. The kid was alive. Yeah, he'd made a pile of very huge mistakes, but who was Cowboy to talk? He'd made some whopping mistakes here himself.

Starting seven and a half months ago in that 747 bathroom with Melody. With barely a thought, he'd gambled with fate and lost—and changed her life irrevocably.

She looked up at him as he approached, and he could see trepidation in her eyes. He tried to smile to reassure her, but it came out little better than a grimace. Great big God, he was tired, but he couldn't even consider slowing down. He had a ninety-minute drive back to Appleton that he had to make before he could even think about climbing into bed.

Climbing into Melody's bed.

If she let him. Hell, if he let himself, knowing what he now knew for certain—that he had no right to be anyone's father.

He laughed silently and scornfully at himself. Yeah, right. Like he'd ever turn Melody down. Whether it was comfort, true love or sheer lust that drove her into his arms, he wasn't going to push her away. Not in this lifetime.

"I'm sorry," Andy said before Cowboy even sat down.

"Yeah," Cowboy told him, "I know. I'm glad you're okay, kid."

"I thought maybe my father would be like you." Andy kicked once at the metal leg of the chair. "He wasn't."

"I wish you had told me what you were planning to do." Cowboy was glad he'd made those phone calls first. His voice came out even and matter-of-fact rather than harsh and shaking with anger. "I would've come up here with you."

"No, you wouldn't've." The boy's words were spoken without his usual cheeky attitude or resentment. They were flat, expressionlessly hopeless. "You didn't believe me when I said I didn't mess up that house."

"Yeah," Cowboy said. He cleared his throat. "Lookit, Andy, I owe you a major apology on that one. I know now that you didn't do it. Of course, now is a little bit late. Still, I hope you can forgive me."

There was a tiny flare of surprise in Andy's eyes. "You know I didn't...?"

"Brittany believed you," Melody told him. "And she figured out a way to prove you were telling the truth. The account information from her computer is going to show that someone—you—were on-line that night. And although that probably wouldn't hold up as an alibi in a court of law, it'll go far in convincing Tom Beatrice he's caught the wrong kid."

"Brittany believed me, huh?" Andy looked bemused. "Man, there was a time when she would've been organizing a lynch mob." He looked up at Cowboy and squared his narrow shoulders. "Maybe I am at least partly guilty, though. I did go into that house about two weeks ago. One of the upstairs windows was open a crack. I knew the place was empty, so I climbed up and went inside. I didn't break anything, though, and I didn't steal anything. I just looked."

"And touched," Cowboy added.

Andy rolled his eyes. "Yeah. I left my fingerprints everywhere. What a fool. Someone must've seen me go in and told Alex Parks. He did the spray painting and broke the windows and mirrors and stuff. He told me last night up by the quarry. He told me he'd made sure I was going to leave town. He told me he'd reserved a room for me at juvy hall." He smiled grimly. "I scared the hell out of him when I jumped into the quarry."

"You scared the hell out of all of us,"

"It was a stupid, dangerous thing to do," Melody admonished him hotly. "You might have really drowned."

Andy slouched in his seat. "Yeah, like anyone would've missed me. Like anyone in the world gives a damn. My father doesn't—that's for sure. You know, he didn't even know my name? He kept calling me Anthony. Anthony. And he stood and talked with me for five lousy minutes. That's all he could spare me in all of twelve years."

"Forget about your father," Melody said fiercely. "He's an idiot, Andy. You don't need him because you have us. You've got me and Brittany and Jones—"

"Yeah, for how long?" There were actually tears in Andy's eyes. He couldn't keep up the expressionless act any longer. His voice shook. "Because after this mess, Social Services is going to pull me out of the Romanellas' house so fast I won't even have time to wave goodbye."

"We won't let them," Melody said. "I'll talk to Vince Romanella and—"

"What are you going to tell him to do?" Andy sneered. "Adopt me? That's about the only thing I can think of that would keep me around. And I'm so sure that would go over really well." He shook his head, swearing softly. "I bet Vince already has my stuff packed into boxes."

"Someone at Social Services must have the authority to give you a second chance," Cowboy said. "Alex Parks is the one who should be thrown into the brig for this, not you."

Andy wiped savagely at his tears. "What do you care? You're going to leave town yourself in a few weeks!"

Cowboy didn't know what to say. The kid was right. He wasn't going to stay. He was a SEAL. His job pulled him all over the world. Even under the best of circumstances, he'd often be gone for weeks at a time. He glanced up, and Melody made a point of not meeting his gaze.

"I don't know why you're so hot to marry her," Andy continued, gesturing with a thumb toward Melody, "when you're only going to see her and the kid a few times a year. My father might've been a real jerk, but at least he didn't pretend he was doing anything besides giving me his name when he married my mother."

Melody stood up. "I think we'd better get going," she said, "It's getting late."

"You know, Ted Shepherd's got a thing for you," Andy said to Melody.

"Andy, I changed the subject." Melody's voice sounded strained. "We need to go, and we need to stop talking about this now."

Andy turned to Cowboy. "The guy she works for has the hots for her. You didn't know that, did you? The guy's got money, too. He could take care of her and the kid, no problem. Brittany told me he's going to be governor some day. But as long as you're around, she doesn't stand a chance of getting anything started with him. And if you marry her—"

"Home, Andrew," Melody said in that tone that she used when she had reached the absolute end of her rope. "Now."

Chapter 13

"Your Lamaze class starts tonight." Brittany was in the dining room, rifling through the sideboard drawers, searching for something. "Seven o'clock. At the hospital. In the West Lounge."

Melody sank into a chair at the kitchen table, aware of Jones watching her from the other side of the room. Lamaze class. God. It was nearly six. She would barely have enough time to take a shower. "Britt, I'm beat I'm just going to stay home."

Brittany stopped her search long enough to poke her head through the door. "Abigail Cloutier has a waiting list a mile long for this class. If you don't show up, she'll fill your slot, and then you'll be stuck waiting for the next session, which doesn't start until next month. You'll probably end up having your baby before you're halfway through." She disappeared again. "I made some pea soup—it's on the stove. And there's bread warming in the oven."

"Wait a minute," Melody said, sitting up straight. "Aren't you coming with me?"

"Here's my passport," Brittany said triumphantly. She slammed the drawer shut and came into the kitchen, adjusting her hair. "I need it as a second form of ID."

"You aren't coming with me, are you?" Melody looked at her sister, fighting her panic. If Brittany didn't come as her coach, then that left Melody going solo, or... She didn't look at Jones. She refused to look at Jones.

But Britt was all dressed up, and it was obvious it wasn't for Abigail Cloutier's benefit. She was wearing a dark suit, complete with panty hose and her black heels that meant business. Her blond hair was pulled up into a French braid and she actually wore makeup.

"Sweetie, Social Services is intending to take Andy back to Boston tonight. I've been on the phone with Vince Romanella and at least twelve different social workers since Cowboy called this afternoon. There's a meeting at 6:00 at the Romanellas'," she told them, turning to look at Jones, who was silently leaning against the kitchen counter. "I expect it to drag on until quite late, so no, Mel, I can't go to the Lamaze class with you tonight."

"I'll go," Jones said. Melody closed her eyes.

Britt laughed. "I figured you'd be willing to volunteer as temporary coach."

God, the last thing Melody wanted to do was sit with Jones in a room with a dozen other expectant, married couples. But that wasn't the worst of it. She'd seen childbirth classes portrayed on TV, and all of them had demanded a certain amount of physical intimacy—touching at the very least—between the mother-to-be and her coach.

It was obviously all she could do to keep from throwing herself at Jones even under normal circumstances. Add any strong emotions into the churning pot of passion, and she would be on the verge of meltdown. Add a situation in which Jones would be forced to touch her, and she would be lost.

"Jones, you look even more exhausted than I feel," Melody countered, knowing that no matter what she said, he wouldn't quit. He didn't know how to quit. He'd never quit before in his entire life.

He gave her a crooked smile. "Honey, is it going to be harder than diving to 175 feet?"

"No." Melody realized that for the first time since he'd arrived in Appleton all those weeks ago, he was wearing a sweatshirt. She'd honestly thought he didn't have one. Before today, she'd thought he wasn't capable of feeling the cold.

"Well, there you go. As long as it doesn't involve breathing a tank of mixed gas, it'll be a—"

"Piece of cake," Melody finished for him with a sigh. "Speak for yourself," she muttered.

He straightened up, concern darkening his eyes. "Mel, if you're really feeling too tired to go, I'll go for you. I can take notes and tomorrow I can tell you everything you missed."

He was serious. He looked a total mess, but he stood ready to help her however he could, and the effect was touching. She tried to look away. When it came to Jones, she shouldn't be thinking words like "touching."

But his chin glinted with golden brown stubble, and although he looked exhausted to the bone, and as if by all rights he should be sitting rather than standing, he looked...undeniably touchingly adorable. Melody couldn't help but glance at him, and he mustered a tired smile. She knew him well enough to believe he would be ready and willing to run ten miles if it was asked of him. Twenty if she asked him.

Brittany pulled on her overcoat. Her purse was by the door, and she gathered it up. "If you're not going to go, call Abby now," her sister told her.

Melody closed her eyes. "I'm going to go." With Jones. Oh, God. The feeling that gripped her was more than pure dread. In fact, the dread was laced with stomach-flipping, roller-coaster-style excitement.

Brittany opened the door, but as a seeming afterthought, she turned back. "Oh, just so you know, I'm planning to begin the preliminary paperwork tonight to adopt Andy."

Melody nearly fell out of her chair. "What?"

"You heard me."

"I can't believe you're serious."

Britt bristled. "If you can be a single mother, then I can, too. And it's not as if we don't have four empty bedrooms in this house."

Melody shook her head. "I'm not criticizing you," she told her sister. "I'm just...amazed. A few weeks ago, Andy's name was interchangeable with Satan's."

"Well, yes, but that was before I got to know him."

"Britt, you don't really know Andy Marshall," Melody countered. "I mean, you might think you do, but—"

"I know all that I need to know," Brittany said quietly. "I know that right now the one thing that boy needs more than anything in the world is someone who loves him and wants him, truly wants him. I know he's not perfect. I know he's going to give me headaches over things I can't even imagine, but I don't care. I don't care! Because you know what? The thought of my life without that kid around...well, it just feels cold-like spring will never come again. I've thought about it long and hard. I honestly want him, Mel."

"It's not going to be that easy to cut through the red tape," Melody cautioned. "A single woman trying to adopt a kid who's a known troublemaker... I can imagine Social Services deciding that he's going to need a strong father figure and turning you down."

"Even if it doesn't work out," Brittany told her, "at least Andy will know that someone wanted him. At least I can give him that much."

Melody stood up and gave her sister a hug. "You go and fight for him," she whispered, blinking back tears.

And then Brittany was gone, leaving her alone in the kitchen with Jones. Jones and his stormy green eyes...

"I better shower and change if we're going out," he said.

She nodded. "I have to, too."

"Are you certain you just don't want to let me go?" he asked.

Melody was certain of nothing anymore. "The class is only an hour and a half," she told him. "It'll be over before we know it."

She hoped.

Jones was helping himself to a cup of coffee as Melody returned from the ladies' room. Abby Cloutier, the Lamaze instructor, had called a ten-minute washroom break—a definite necessity for a class filled with hugely pregnant women.

So far, they'd sat on folding chairs in a darkened room and watched a movie that focused on giving birth. She'd barely been able to pay attention with Jones sitting so close to her. Having him here was a thorough distraction. He smelled good and looked even better.

But he hadn't had to touch her.

Not yet.

Jones was smiling as he listened to another man talk. He was standing in a group of about five men, most of whom were helping themselves to cookies from the snack table. He'd broken out his Dockers and polo shirt for the occasion, and with his hair neatly pulled back into a pony tail at the nape of his neck, and his chin freshly shaven, he looked impossibly handsome. But even though he was dressed nearly the same as the other men, he stood out in the crowd. He might as well have been wearing his dress whites.

"Is that your Navy SEAL?" a voice behind Melody asked. She turned to see Janette Dennison, one of Brittany's high school friends who was pregnant with her fourth child. Janette peered across the room at Jones. "Dear Lord, he's bigger than Hank Forsythe!"

Hank owned the local gym. His wife, Sandy, was pregnant with their first. "Jones is taller," Melody pointed out.

"Your Lieutenant Jones is more than taller," Janette countered. "Your Lieutenant Jones is...beyond description, Mel. Haven't you noticed every single woman in this place looking at you as if you've won the lottery?"

Melody had noticed. But she was well aware that everyone's envy would fade rapidly as soon they were told exactly what a U.S. Navy SEAL did for a living. She'd heard several women complaining in the ladies' room about husbands who had to fly to Boulder or Los Angeles or Seattle on business and were gone for days, sometimes even weeks, at a time.

They didn't know how lucky they were. Their husbands weren't going to be parachuting out of airplanes or helocasting—jumping from low-flying helicopters into the ocean below—as they inserted into enemy territory. Their husbands carried briefcases, not submachine guns. Their work didn't expose them to physical dangers. Their husbands would always be returning safe and sound. There was no chance of their being brought back home strapped to some medic's stretcher, bleeding from gunshot wounds, or—worse yet—zipped inside a body bag.

"Did he really rescue you from that embassy where you were being held hostage?" Janette asked. "That is so romantic."

Melody smiled. But Janette was wrong. Yes, Jones had saved her life. But he'd saved Chris Sterling's and Kurt Matthews's lives, as well. He would've saved anyone's life. It wasn't personal—it was his job. And because of that, the fact that he'd saved her wasn't particularly romantic.

What Melody found truly romantic was the image of Jones, up on a step stool in the baby's nursery, hanging curtains patterned with brightly coloured bunnies and teddy bears.

Romantic was the wondrous look in his eyes that she'd seen when he'd touched her and felt their baby move.

Romantic was Jones, driving home from New Hampshire after they'd found Andy, furtively wiping tears

of relief from his eyes when he thought she wasn't looking.

Romantic was the way he could gaze at her from across the room—the way he was gazing at her right now—as if she were the most beautiful, most desirable woman on the entire planet. His eyelids were slightly lowered, and the intensity of the expression on his face would be a little frightening if not for the small smile playing around the corners of his lips.

She'd seen that smile before. In Paris. And she knew for a fact that Jones had the ability and the wherewithal to make everything that little smile promised come true.

She turned away, her cheeks heating with a blush. She didn't want this man, she reminded herself. She didn't love him. God help her, she didn't want to love him....

"Gentlemen," Abby Cloutier announced, "grab a floor mat and some pillows and find your ladies. We're going to do some simple breathing and relaxation exercises to get you started."

Across the room, Jones waited patiently for a chance to take a mat from the pile. As if he felt Melody watching him, he looked up at her again and smiled. It was a tentative, apologetic smile, as if he knew what was coming and how much the thought of his touching her scared her.

Scared her and exhilarated her.

"Gentlemen, sit down on the mat and use your bodies and the pillows to make as comfortable a nest as you possibly can for your ladies," Abby continued.

Jones set the mat and the pillows toward the back of the room, giving them what little privacy he could. No doubt he was well aware of the curious glances they'd been receiving all evening long. Appleton was a fairly conservative community, and they were the only unmarried pair in the group—although a few of the younger couples looked as if there had been a shotgun present at their nuptials.

He sat down, imitating their classmates as he spread his long legs for her to sit nestled against him, as if they were riding a toboggan.

Knowing it would be far worse if she hesitated and stood there gaping at him like some landed fish, Melody lowered herself to the mat. At least this way, she would keep her back to him. At least this way, he wouldn't see the blush that was heating her cheeks. At least this way, she wouldn't have to gaze into his eyes or watch his lips curve up into one of his smiles. At least this way, she wouldn't be tempted to do something foolish, such as kiss him.

She gingerly inched her way back, bumping against the inside of his knee. "Oh, I'm sorry!"

"That's all right, honey. Keep coming on back."

She didn't dare look at him. "Are you sure? It's a little warm in here, and I'm not exactly a lightweight these days."

"Mel. You're supposed to lean against me. How're you going to relax if you're not leaning back?"

How was she supposed to relax, leaning back against this outrageously sexy man's solid chest, her legs against the inside of his thighs?

"Come on," he whispered. "I promise it won't be that bad."

Bad wasn't what she was afraid of. She was afraid it was going to be irresistibly good.

"Get comfortable, ladies," Abby ordered.

Melody inched farther back, closing her eyes as Jones took control and pulled her in close. Too close. He put his arms around her, the palms of his hands against her belly, and she felt both impossibly safe and in terrible peril. She felt his breath, soft against her ear. She felt his heart beating against her back. She didn't want to move, didn't want to talk. She just wanted to sit there with him like this. Forever.

And that was absolutely the wrong thing to be thinking.

"This makes me really uncomfortable," she whispered. It was both a lie and the understatement of the year.

"Sorry—I'm sorry." He removed his hands but then didn't know quite where to put them.

God, now she'd gone and made him tense, too.

Abby's voice was just a drone in the background. She was saying something about breathing, about the importance of taking a deep cleansing breath before and after contractions. Melody inhaled deeply through her nose, releasing her breath through her mouth, along with the rest of the class.

She tried her best to follow the breathing exercises but knew without a doubt that she was retaining absolutely nothing. Come tomorrow morning, she would remember none of this—except for the way Jones smelled, and the warmth of his body pressed against her, and...

"...back rub while she's doing this." Abby's voice cut into her thoughts. "Come on, guys, make her feel good."

"At last," Jones said, trying to make light of it. "I'm finally going to get a chance to give you a back rub."

Melody closed her eyes. There was nothing even remotely funny here. She remembered his back rubs far too well. They had involved a great deal more of both of their anatomies than simply her back and his hands.

She felt him move aside the mass of her long hair, felt his hands touch her shoulders, his fingers gently massaging the too tense muscles in her upper back and neck. She tried to focus on her breathing, but with him touching her that way, she could barely get a breath in, let alone push one out.

"Tell her how wonderfully she's doing, gentlemen," Abby urged. "Tell her how beautiful she is. Tell her how much you love her. Don't hold back. Practice letting her know. When she's in labour, she's going to need to hear all these little things you take for granted."

"Don't you dare say anything," Melody said from between clenched teeth.

His husky laughter moved the hair next to her ear. "Are you kidding?" he asked. "I wouldn't dream of it. I'm supposed to be relaxing you, not getting you more tense. I know you pretty well by now, Mel—enough to know that when you look into a mirror, you don't see what I see. I happen to think you're crazy, but this is not the time to debate the issue."

"...called effleurage," Abby was saying. "It's a French word, meaning to stroke or lightly massage. Gentlemen, when your lady is in labour, it may comfort her to stroke her abdomen very lightly in a circular motion. Ladies, let him know the right amount of pressure. Tell him what feels good. Don't be shy."

Melody closed her eyes tightly as Jones's long fingers caressed the mountain that was her belly. Somehow he knew exactly how to touch her. Watching those powerful-looking hands touch her so exquisitely gently was enough to make her dizzy.

"Is this all right?" he asked. "Am I doing this right?"

She managed to nod. Right was not quite the word for what he was doing.

"How's your lower back?" he asked, using his other hand to reach between them and massage her. "This is where you're always hurting the most, isn't it?"

She nodded again, unable to speak.

"Are you focusing on the breathing?" he asked, his voice soft and soothing in her ear. "If I know you, you're not. You're thinking about something else entirely—about Brittany and Andy, about what's going on over at the Romanellas'. You're always thinking and worrying about someone else, but right now, you've got to clear your mind and think only about yourself. Relax and breathe and just shut everything else out." He laughed softly. "I know that's hard because I'm probably the one problem you'd like to shut out the most, right?"

Wrong. Jones was wrong. He was incredibly, impossibly, amazingly, totally wrong. Melody realized with a sudden startling clarity that she didn't want to shut him out. She'd tried, but he'd been doggedly persistent, and somehow, somehow, over the past few weeks, he'd gone from former lover and near stranger to dear friend.

He'd been patient and he'd let her see that although he would never be called average or normal, there was a part of him that could be content just sitting on the porch, talking and watching the sunset. He'd taken his time and told her stories about himself as a boy, about growing up, so she felt she had a good sense of him, of why he did the things he did. And his dealings with Andy had told her even more about the kind of man he'd become.

He was the kind of man she could fall in love with.

The kind of man she had fallen in love with.

I know you pretty well by now, he'd said. If I know you... He did know her. And she knew him.

Oh, she didn't know him completely. Even if she spent the rest of her life with him, there'd still be secrets she knew he'd never share with her. And even the parts of him she did know, she'd never totally understand. His need to risk his life, to be a SEAL. But even though she didn't understand it, she could appreciate it. And God knows he was good at what he did.

She was starting to believe that if he did marry her, he would stick by her—for the rest of his life, if need be. If he made a vow, he wouldn't break it. He had the strength and the willpower to keep to his word, no matter how hard.

But would that be enough for her? Knowing that he was with her not out of love, but out of duty? Was it possible that her own feelings for him were strong enough to sustain them both?

She didn't think so.

She knew he liked her. And although she couldn't quite believe it, he seemed to desire her. But unless he loved her, truly loved her, she couldn't marry him. Could she?

"Mel, you're tightening up again," Jones whispered. "Just let it go. Whatever you're wrestling with, just give it up, throw it away."

"We're out of time," Abby announced. "The next class is about to break down the doors, so just leave your mats and pillows where they are. Next week, we're going to work on Modified-Paced Breathing and the Progressive Relaxation Exercise, so read over those sections in your books—it'll save us a little time. Ladies, remember to do your stretches and your Kegels!"

Jones helped Melody to her feet. He would've held on to her hand, but she pulled away, afraid he would somehow know the awful truth just from touching her. She'd done what she'd sworn she wouldn't do. She'd fallen in love with him. She was doomed.

A shadow flickered in his eyes, and all at once he looked about as tired as she felt. "You're never going to be able to relax around me, are you?" It was a rhetorical question, and he didn't wait for her to answer. "It was stupid to think I could be your labour coach. Come on, let's get you home. You look beat."

He was careful not to touch her again as he opened the door for her. And he was noticeably silent in the car on the way home. And it wasn't until they pulled into the driveway that Melody gathered up the nerve to speak.

"Jones, I'm sorry...I, um..." What could she possibly say? I love you? She wasn't sure she'd ever be able to tell him that. Not with words anyway. Not in this lifetime.

He pulled up the parking brake and turned to face her. "Mel, look, I've been thinking about...a lot of things. Andy. Our baby. You and me. You—what you want and what you don't want." The muscle in his jaw was jumping. "As in me."

"Jones—"

He stopped her by holding up one hand. "I need to say this, so please let me talk. I think it's kind of obvious that my parenting skills need a lot of work. I'm not sure anymore that I should help you raise our child.

"But I keep coming back to the fact that I don't want this kid growing up thinking I don't give a damn. Because I do. I do." His voice broke, and he took a deep breath, steadying himself. "I care about him, but I care about you, too. And what Andy said is right. If you marry me, you'll never find someone that you can really love, someone who can be a real father to our baby."

"Jones—"

"Hush and let me finish. I'm giving you your deal, Melody. You acknowledge that the baby's mine, put my name on his birth certificate, let me come and visit a couple times a year. I'll want to pay child

support, too, but we can have our lawyers work that out."

He cleared his throat. "My only other condition is that I'd like to be there when the baby's born. I know there's no real way to be certain when that's going to take place, but it's not likely to happen within the next three weeks. So I figure what I'll do is pack up and head back to base as soon as possible. I'll apply for additional leave at the start of December, and then we'll just cross our fingers and hope it happens sooner rather than later."

Melody was speechless. He was accepting her deal. He had it all figured out, down to being there when the baby was born. He was capitulating, backing down, giving in. She could barely believe it.

Didn't he realize that she was on the verge of surrender herself?

But there was no need to worry anymore. She'd won.

So why did she feel as if she'd lost?

Chapter 14

Cowboy stood on the steps of the porch, waiting while Melody unlocked the front door. He was making sure she got safely inside before he returned to his tent. He'd grab a combat nap—just enough to refresh him—and then he'd pack up and walk over to the gas station by the highway, bum a ride off someone heading into Boston. Once in town, he'd take the T to Logan Airport. By sunup, he'd be wheels up, heading back to base.

Harvard had told him most of Alpha Squad had long since returned to Virginia. After a great deal of bitching and moaning, FInCOM was ready to negotiate with Joe Cat about the counter-terrorist training session. It looked as if FInCOM would keep its rule book with the understanding that the program was going to happen on a trial basis only. Although latest word was that the combined SEAL/FInCOM training program wouldn't happen until spring—May or June at the earliest.

Which left Alpha Squad with a looong time to prepare. But as they waited, of course, they were ready to go wherever they were needed at a moment's notice.

The moon had risen above the trees, and its silvery light made Melody's face seem exquisitely otherworldly as she pushed open the door and then turned to face him. "Good night."

"You are beautiful, you know."

She closed her eyes. "Jones, we're done. We've come to an agreement. There's no need for you to—"

"Yeah, I know," he interrupted. "I figure that's why I can say it. I don't have to worry anymore about you freaking out and running away. Hell, I don't have to stop there. I can tell you that despite what you think, you're the sexiest lady I've ever known."

She tried to make a joke of it. "Well, sure, you're a SEAL. After spending all that time in the ocean, it's no wonder you'd be attracted to someone who reminds you of a whale."

Cowboy didn't laugh. "You know what you remind me of?"

"A circus tent?"

He refused to acknowledge her attempts at humour. He continued as if she hadn't spoken. "You remind me of the hottest, most powerful sex I've ever had in my life. Every time I see you, I think about what we did to make you look that way. I think about locking myself in that bathroom with you on board that 747. I think about the way you made me feel, about the fact that for the first time in my entire life, I honest to God didn't care that I didn't have a condom."

He lowered his voice. "I think about the way you kissed me when you climaxed so you wouldn't cry out. I look at you, Melody, and I remember every stroke, every touch, every kiss. I look at you, and all I can think about is how badly I want another chance to make love to you like that again."

Melody was silent, just staring at him, her eyes wide.

"So," Cowboy said, "now you know."

She still didn't say a word. But she didn't run away, either.

He took a step toward her, and then another step, and she still didn't move. "I may be way out of line here—no, I know I'm way out of line, but I figure as long as I'm being brutally honest, I have to tell you that I've spent these past few weeks damn near tied in knots from wanting you so badly. I wanted you and I thought I needed you, but I found out today that wanting and needing aren't the same thing. Need's not about sex, is it? Not really. Because today I needed you more than I've ever needed anyone, and you were there for me." He forced a smile. "And what do you know? We had our clothes on the entire time."

He touched her hair, touched the softness of her cheek. "Look at me," he said. "Still putting the moves on you. We've reached an understanding, made an agreement. We've achieved a friendship of sorts, and I still can't seem to back away. I still want you more than I've ever wanted any woman,"

She was trembling. He knew damn well that kissing her wasn't the gallant, gentlemanly thing to do, but he couldn't keep himself from lowering his mouth to hers.

She tasted so sweet, so perfect. Her lips were deliciously soft, exquisitely inviting. He pulled her closer, and the tautness of her belly pressed against him. He loved the way she felt beneath his hands, loved the way she seemed to sigh and melt against him as he kissed her again, deeper, longer, but just as slowly and gently.

"Come inside," she whispered. Her eyes were soft and dreamy as she gazed up at him. "Please?" Her fingers were laced through his hair, and she tugged his head down toward her to kiss him again.

She kissed him.

Cowboy knew he should turn and walk away. He knew nothing had changed. He was still going to have to leave tomorrow. But hell, it was entirely possible that she was doing this because he was leaving.

He broke free from her kiss. "Mel, are you sure?"

"Yes."

Yes. It wasn't something he needed to hear twice.

She took his hand and drew him into the house. She didn't say another word as she led him toward the stairs and up to her bedroom.

Cowboy felt compelled to speak. "Honey, I don't have any condoms. Again."

She glanced back at him. "Jones, it's not as if you're going to get me pregnant," she said. "Again."

"Still, I was reading this whole huge debate about whether or not women should have sexual relations in the eighth and ninth months of their pregnancies," he told her. "The consensus was unless the pregnancy was high risk, anything goes. Except there was a minority who seemed to think unprotected sex increased the risk of potential infection to the baby."

She'd gone into her room without turning the light on and now stood there in the moonlight, gazing at him. "Sometimes I think you go a teeny bit overboard with your research. My garden, for instance. It looks as if it's ready for a Siberian winter. All I really needed was someone to clear out the dead plants and throw down a little mulch." A smile softened her words. "Thank you for taking care of it, by the way."

"You're welcome. But yeah," he agreed, "I've definitely read far more than I should have about the potential dangers of pregnancy. Eclampsia. God. Just the thought of it scares me to death."

Damn, he was nervous. He'd wanted her for so long, but now all he could do was stand here and talk. Yada, yada, yada. He couldn't seem to make himself shut up. He cleared his throat, fighting the urge to ask her about her blood pressure. She was fine. He knew she was fine. With the exception of the relentless morning sickness she suffered, she was healthy. Melody's was not a high-risk pregnancy. He'd already discussed it with Brittany, and she'd reassured him. She was a nurse; she should know.

He cleared his throat again. "May I lock your door?"

Melody nodded. "Please."

The door had an old-fashioned hook-and-eye lock, and he fastened it. It wouldn't do much against an invading horde, but for privacy, it would work just fine. When he turned around, she was closing the curtains. Without the moonlight, the room was very, very dark. He switched on the light.

"Oh," she said, "please don't."

He turned it off. She must've had some kind of room-darkening shades because it was nearly as dark in there as it had been down at 175 feet in the quarry. "Mel, I'm going to need night-vision glasses to see you."

She was a disembodied voice, lost in the shadows on the other side of the room. "That's the idea."

"Oh, come on. Weren't you paying attention to anything I said downstairs on the porch?"

"Yes," she said. "And it got you this far. It was...very nice. But... You know that cover Demi Moore did for Vanity Fair when she was pregnant?"

"You mean the one where she was naked?"

"Yeah. Pregnant and naked. She looked amazingly beautiful" She paused. "I don't look anything like that."

Cowboy had to laugh. "How will I ever know?"

She laughed, too. She had a musical laugh that brushed over him like velvet in the darkness. "My point exactly."

"How about we turn on the light in the bathroom? Nothing too bright?"

"How about you come over here?"

It was an invitation he couldn't refuse. He moved toward her, sensing more than seeing that she'd climbed into bed. He reached for her, and with an explosion of pleasure, discovered that in the darkness she'd rid herself of her clothes. Every last little stitch was gone.

It was a total surprise, and as he touched her, he realized that with the lights off and the room so very dark, his other senses were heightened. Making love in the dark this way might not have been exactly what he'd wanted, but it was going to be very, very, very good.

He kissed her, her skin smooth beneath his still-exploring fingers. Her breasts were so full, they rested on the enormous bulge of her belly—the bulge that held their baby.

She moaned as he kissed her harder, deeper, filling her mouth with his tongue and his hands with the softness of her breasts. Her nipples were hard peaks pressed against the palms of his hands, a sensation that was impossibly delicious.

And apparently, it felt as good from Melody's end.

She pulled his shirt free from the waist of his pants, slipping her hands underneath and sliding her fingers up along the muscles of his chest as they knelt there together on her bed.

"You have no idea how long I've wanted to touch you like this," she whispered. "All those weeks of watching you run around with hardly any clothes on..."

Cowboy had to laugh. All this time, he'd thought she'd become immune to damn near everything he'd thought he had working in his favour.

He ran his hands lightly down her stomach, marvelling at the way it seemed to bloom from her body. The rest of her was still slender. It was true, she'd put on a few extra pounds since Paris, but he'd thought she was a bit too skinny before. She felt good beneath his hands—so soft and utterly, thoroughly feminine. He strained to see her in the darkness, but though his eyes had tried to adjust, he still couldn't see a damn thing.

She kissed him as she tugged at his shirt, breaking off to say, "I'm feeling very much as if I'm the only one naked here."

"That's because you are. And, to be honest, I like it. There's a real hint of a master-slave thing to it," he teased. He lowered his head to draw one hard bud of a nipple into his mouth as his hand explored lower, sweeping beneath the taut curve of her stomach, his fingers encountering her soft nest of curls. Talk about a turn-on. She was ready for him, slick with heat and desire, and as he touched her, first lightly, then

harder, deeper, she clung to him.

"Master and slave, huh?" Her voice was breathless. "In that case—slave, take off your clothes."

Cowboy cracked up. Damn, he couldn't get enough of this girl. He yanked his shirt over his head, then kissed her, pulling her back with him onto the bed, careful, so careful to be gentle.

He felt her fingers fumble with the buckle of his belt, and he tortured himself for a moment, just letting her knuckles brush against him as she worked to get him free. There was no way she'd ever figure out how to unfasten that belt—certainly not in this blanket of darkness, and probably not even in the light.

"Jones..."

He reached down with one hand and released the catch.

"Thank you," she murmured.

It took her next to forever to unfasten the button. And he was so aroused, it took her another eon to work the zipper down, and then?...

She didn't touch him. Damn, she didn't touch him! She dragged his pants and his shorts down his legs instead, leaving him screaming with need, aching for her touch, and loving every minute of the way she always kept him guessing.

Melody pulled off his boots one by one, and he wished for the zillionth time that it wasn't so damned dark. He would've loved to have watched.

He propped himself up on his elbows as he helped her pull his legs free from his pants. "Honey, do you have a condom?"

She froze. "You're not kidding, are you?"

"No. I...just want to protect you and the baby."

He felt her sit down next to him on the bed, felt her touch his leg, her fingers trailing up from his calf to his knee to his thigh. "Most guys wouldn't think past the fact that they couldn't get me more pregnant than I already am."

Her fingers did slow figure eights on his thigh. He reached for her, but she heard him start to move and backed away. He felt her fingers again, this time down near his ankle. He'd never realized that being touched on the ankle could be such a mind-blowing turn-on. He tried to moisten his dry lips. "Most guys wouldn't have gotten totally paranoid by reading every book in the library on pregnancy."

"Most guys wouldn't have bothered." She kissed him on the inside of his knee, her mouth soft and moist and cool against the fiery heat of his skin.

Cowboy reached for her again, but again, she wasn't there. He had to move slowly, searching for her carefully in the pitch black. He didn't want to knock her over with quick moves and flailing arms. Besides, he liked this game she was playing too damn much to want it to end.

But it was going to end. In just a handful of hours, the sun was going to creep above the horizon, and this

night was going to end. And he was going to crawl out of Melody's soft bed and walk out of her room, out of this house. He was going to pack up his tent and be gone. Game over.

It was ironic. The fact that there was an end in sight was quite possibly the only reason Melody was making love to him tonight. It was possible that it was only because he'd already told her that he wouldn't stay that she could let herself have this time with him.

But with each kiss, each touch, each caress, he was wishing that he could keep this crazy game alive forever.

Forever.

She touched him again, and this time he was ready for her. His fingers closed around her arm and he gently pulled her up, finding her mouth with his, her body with his fingers, entangling their legs, the heaviness of his arousal against the roundness of her belly.

She moved languidly, lazily, kissing his neck, his ear, that delicate spot beneath his jaw that drove him crazy and made him want nothing more than to bury himself inside her forever.

Forever.

In the past, the word had scared him to death. It meant a deadly sameness, a permanent lack of change. It meant stagnation, boredom, a life of endless reruns, a slow fade from the brilliant colours of fresh new experiences to the washed-out grey of tired and old.

But Cowboy could be a SEAL forever without ever fearing he'd fall victim to that fate. Even if he ever got tired of parachuting out of jet planes, Joe Cat would have Alpha Squad doing HALO jumps—jumping out of planes at outrageously high altitudes, yet not opening the chute until they reached a ridiculously low altitude. And if he got tired of that—and he'd have to do one whole hell of a lot of 'em ever to be blasé about the adrenaline-inducing sensation of the ground rushing up to meet him—there was always Alpha Squad's refresher courses in underwater demolition, or Arctic, desert and jungle survival, or...

The truth was, he could be a SEAL forever because he never knew what was coming next.

Cowboy had always thought he'd feel the same about women. How could he possibly agree to spend the rest of his life with only one, when he never knew for certain who might be walking into his life at any given moment? How could he survive the endless stagnation of commitment even as temptation walked toward him every time he turned a corner?

But as he lost himself in the sweetness of Melody's kisses, he found himself wondering instead how he could possibly survive the constant disappointment of searching for her face in a crowd—despite the fact that he knew damn well she was two thousand miles away. How could he survive turning corner after corner, coming face-to-face with beautiful women, women who wanted to be with him—women he wanted nothing to do with, women whose only real faults were that they weren't Melody?

She pulled away from him slightly, opening herself to his hand, lifting her hips to push his fingers more deeply inside her. Her own fingers trailed down his side, moving across his stomach, almost but not quite touching him.

"You're driving me insane," he breathed.

"I know." He could hear the smile in her voice.

"I want you so badly, honey, but I'm terrified I'll hurt you." His own voice was hoarse.

She pulled back. "Do you mind if I get on top of you?"

Mind? Did she actually think he would mind? But then he realized that she was laughing at his stunned silence.

"But first..." She touched him, and his mind exploded with white-hot pleasure as she kissed him most intimately. "Do you think if I keep doing this while calling you Harlan," she wondered, "you'll learn to associate positive emotions with the use of your first name?"

Cowboy didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"Harlan," she said. "Harlan. Harlan. Harlan. You know, I never really thought about it before, but I like that name."

He could barely speak. "I like it, too."

Melody laughed. "Wow, that was easy. I think I may have just developed a powerful brainwashing technique. Better not let any enemies of the U.S.A. get their hands—so to speak—on this, or we'll all be in trouble."

"Yeah, but it wouldn't work with anyone else but you."

Melody was quiet for a moment. "Well, that was really sweet," she said. He could tell from her voice that she didn't believe him.

He pushed himself up on one elbow. "Melody, I'm serious."

She pushed him back down, straddling his thighs. "Let's not argue about this now," she told him, reaching for something. He heard the sound of a drawer opening, and then she moved back. "Let's just...pretend that we might've been able to make this thing between us work."

"But—"

"Please ? " He felt her touch him, covering him with a condom.

"Mel, dammit, if you could look into my eyes—"

"Hush up and kiss me, Jones."

It was an order he couldn't refuse. And when she shifted herself forward, and in one smooth, languorous motion, surrounded him with her tight heat, he couldn't do more than groan her name.

He wanted more. He wanted to thrust deeply inside her. He wanted to flip her onto her back and rock her, hard and fast, the way he knew she liked it. He wanted to turn on the light and gaze into her eyes. He wanted to watch her release, see the incredibly sexy look on her beautiful face as he took her higher than she'd ever been before.

Instead, he lay on his back. "Mel, I'm afraid to move." His voice was a paper-dry whisper in the darkness.

"Then I'll move," she whispered back, doing just that

The sensation was off the charts. Cowboy clenched his teeth to keep from raising his hips to meet her. It was possible that he'd never been more turned on in his entire life. Not in the bathroom of the 747. Not in Paris. Not anywhere.

"But I want—"

She pushed herself a little bit farther onto him, and he heard himself groan. "Come on," she urged him, "I promise I won't let you hurt me. I promise there are pregnant women everywhere around the world, making love just like this, right this very minute...."

Her long, slow movements brought him almost entirely out of her before he glided deeply back in.

And it was then, as Cowboy pushed himself up to meet her in this, the sweetest of dances, that he knew the truth at last.

He wanted to come home to this woman every night for the rest of his life.

He wanted forever, and he knew that that forever with Melody would be as fascinating and endlessly exciting as his future with the SEALs, because, bottom line—he loved her.

He loved her.

And he knew right at that moment that in Paris, when Melody had kissed him goodbye and told him not to write, not to call, not to see her anymore, she'd been both very, very wrong and very, very right. She had been wrong in not giving them a chance to be together. She had been wrong not to let their passion deepen. But she had been right when she'd told him that real love was so much more than the hot flood of lust and relief. Because while his feelings for her had been born of danger and attraction and the powerful rush of being trusted and needed so desperately, it wasn't until he was here, in everyday, average Appleton, U.S.A., that those feelings had truly started to grow.

He loved her, but not because she needed him. In fact, one of the reasons he loved her so very much was because she refused to need him.

He loved her laughter, her point-blank honesty, her gentle kindness. He loved the faraway look she would get in her eyes when she felt their baby kick. He loved the fierceness with which she supported her sister. He loved the sheer courage it must have taken for her to stand up in front of the conservative Ladies' Club of Appleton to announce her pregnancy. He loved sitting on her back porch and talking to her.

He loved the heavenly blue of her eyes and the sweetness of her smile.

And he especially loved making love to her.

"Oh, Harlan," she breathed as he felt her release, and he knew without a single doubt that he would indeed forever associate sheer pleasure with his name.

He'd been clinging rather desperately to the edge of the cliff that controlled his own release, and as Melody gripped him tighter, as he filled his hands with her breasts, he felt himself go into free fall, felt the dizzying, weightless drop.

And then he exploded in slow motion. Fireballs of pleasure rocketed through him, scorching him, making him cry out.

Melody kissed him, and the sweetness of her mouth took him even further.

And then, with Melody's hands in his hair, with her head on his shoulder, with their unborn child resting between them, Cowboy began his ascent back to the surface of reality.

He was leaving in the morning. She didn't want to marry him, didn't need him, didn't love him. There were no decompression stops, although he wasn't sure it would have mattered either way. There wasn't anything he could have done to protect himself from the painful truth.

As much as he wanted her, she'd be happier without him.

Melody rolled off him, then snuggled next to him, drawing up the covers. "Please hold me," she murmured.

Lt. Harlan Jones pulled her in close, fitting their bodies together like spoons.

He would hold her tonight. But tomorrow, he would let her go. He knew he could do it. He'd done impossibly difficult things before.

He was a U.S. Navy SEAL.

Chapter 15

Alpha Squad was back in Virginia. Someone at the base apparently disapproved of the SEALs' disagreement with FInCOM, because the Quonset hut to which they'd been reassigned was several very healthy steps down from the first one they'd been given. And that had been no palace.

As Cowboy went inside, the door creaked on rusty hinges and a spider damn near landed on his head. He could see daylight through part of the corrugated-metal roof.

Whatever top brass had placed them here hadn't simply disapproved of their disagreement with FInCOM—he no doubt disapproved of SEALs in general. But that was no big surprise. This wasn't the first time they'd run into narrow-minded thinking.

Wes was on the phone. "Computers and rain don't mix, sir," he was saying. His tone implied that sir was merely a substitution for another, far less flattering word. "We have close to half a dozen computers we need up and running, plus a series of holes in the roof that will not only make it very chilly, but, when it starts to rain—which according to the forecast will happen within the next few hours—will make it very wet in here. As a matter of fact, there are already several permanent-looking puddles on the floor. Sir."

Built during World War II, this place looked as if it hadn't been used since the Vietnam conflict.

"We've been waiting on that request for a week, sir. Meanwhile, our computers are still in their boxes and we're sitting here with our thumbs up our—"

Joe Cat and Blue were on the other side of the gloomy room, deep in discussion.

"Well, yippee-yi-oh-kai-ay! Look who's back!" Cowboy looked up to see Lucky O'Donlon grinning down at him through the biggest hole in the roof.

Harvard was up there, too. "Get your butt up here, Junior. Aren't you some kind of expert when it comes to fixing roofs?"

"No—"

"Well, you are now. You're always claiming that with a little time and a library, you can learn to do anything. Here's your chance to prove it. And if that's not a compelling enough reason, how about this? As last man back from leave, you've won yourself the honour."

"Jones. Welcome back."

Cowboy turned to see Joe Cat coming toward him. He shook his captain's hand. "Thank you, sir."

Wes hung up the phone with a crash. "No go, Skipper. Apparently, there's no other location for us on the entire base."

Bobby joined them, bristling. "This place is huge. That's a load of—"

"Hey, I'm just saying what they told me." Wes shrugged. "We can request repairs, but it's got to go through channels and you know what that means. We'll still be able to stargaze from our desks three weeks from now."

"I say we forget about channels and fix this place ourselves," Lucky called down from his perch on the roof.

"I'm for that, too, Cat," Harvard chimed in. "We can get the job done better in a fraction of the time."

Cowboy squinted up at the roof. "Can we patch it, or will we have to replace the whole damn thing?" This was good. He could get into the distraction of creative problem solving. It would take his mind off the woman he'd left behind in Appleton, Massachusetts.

Melody hadn't thrown herself at his feet and begged him not to go. She'd only taken a few minutes away from the frantic housecleaning she was helping Brittany do in anticipation of a visit from Social Services. Britt's request to adopt Andy Marshall was actually being considered. Melody had been so focused on Britt's need to make everything as perfect as possible, she'd barely noticed when he left.

She'd kissed him goodbye and told him to be careful. And then she'd gone back to work.

Cowboy had passed a billboard advertising Ted Shepherd's candidacy for state representative on his way out of town. The man's pasty face, enlarged to a giant size, made him feel sick with jealousy. He'd had to look away, unable to gaze into the man's average brown eyes, unable to deal with the thought that this could well be the man Melody would spend her life with. This could be the man who would raise

Cowboy's child as his own.

If he'd had a grenade launcher in his luggage, he would have blown the damn billboard to bits.

"Jones, I understand congratulations are in order." Joe Cat slapped Cowboy's back, bringing him abruptly back to the present. "When's the big day?"

The big...?

"Yeah, you gonna invite us to the wedding?" Lucky asked. "Damn, I feel like singing a verse of 'Sunrise, Sunset.' I can't believe our little Cowboy is actually old enough to tie the knot."

"You want us to wear dress whites, or should we cammy up?" Wes asked. "Dress whites are more traditional, but the camouflage gear would probably go better with the shotgun accessories."

Beside him, Bobby broke into a chorus of "Love Child."

Cowboy shook his head. "You guys are wrong—"

"Yeah, you know, that's probably the only way I'm going to go," Lucky said. "Trapped in the corner with no way out."

"Yo, Diana Ross," Harvard called from the roof. "S-squared."

Bobby obediently sat down and shut up.

"The rest of you guys back off," Harvard continued. "Junior's doing the right thing here. Maybe if you pay attention, you might actually learn something from his fine example."

Cowboy looked up at Harvard through the hole in the roof. "But I'm not marrying her, H." He looked around at the other guys. "I'm going to be a father in a few weeks, but I'm not getting married."

Blue McCoy, a man of few words, was the first to break the silence. He looked around at the rest of Alpha Squad. "This just goes to show we should learn to mind our own business." He turned to Cowboy. "I'm sorry, Jones," he said quietly.

But Wes couldn't keep his mouth shut. "Sorry?" he squeaked. "How could you be sorry? Jones's luck is rocketing off the scale. In fact, the way I see it, O'Donlon's just lost the right to his nickname. From now on, I'm calling Jones Lucky."

Cowboy shook his head, unable to respond, unable even to force a smile. By all rights, he should have been agreeing with them and celebrating his freedom, but instead he felt as if part of him would never feel like celebrating again. "I'm gonna go check out this roof," he told Joe Cat.

The captain had a way of looking at a man that made you feel as if he could see clear through all the bull and camouflage to the heart and soul that lay beneath. He was looking at Cowboy that way right now.

"I'm sorry, too, kid," he said before nodding and dismissing him.

Cowboy escaped out the door, searching for the easiest way up to the curving metal roof. There was a drainpipe on the southwest corner of the building that looked pretty solid. In fact, as he approached,

Lucky was using it to climb down.

"Kudos to you, Jones," he said, wiping the remnants of rust from his hands onto his pants. "How about getting together tonight over a cold beer? You could share the secrets of your success." His smile turned knowing. "I remember that girl, Melody. She was something else. And she was on top of you like a dog in heat right from the word go, wasn't she?"

Something inside Cowboy snapped, and snapped hard. He knocked Lucky down into the dust. "Just shut the hell up!"

Lucky was instantly on his feet, crouched and ready in a combat stance. "What the—"

Cowboy rushed him again, and this time Lucky was ready for his attack. They landed together, hard, in the dirt. Cowboy's elbow hit a rock and he welcomed the pain that shot through him. It was sharp and sweet, and it masked the pain in his heart.

But Lucky didn't want to fight. He kned Cowboy hard in the stomach. While Cowboy was struggling to regain his breath, Lucky scrambled free. "You crazy bastard! What the hell's wrong with you?"

Cowboy pulled himself to his feet, breathing hard, moving menacingly toward the other SEAL. "I warned you if you bad-mouthed her again, I'd kill you."

Wes had stuck his head out the door to see what was causing the commotion. "Senior Chief!" he bellowed after taking one quick look.

Harvard was across the roof and down that drainpipe in a flash. "Back off," he shouted to Cowboy, stepping directly between the two men. "Just back off! Do you hear me, Jones? You hit him again, and your butt is going to be in deep trouble!"

Cowboy stood, bent over, hands on his knees, still catching his breath.

Harvard turned and glared at Wesley and Bobby, who both stood watching by the door. "This doesn't concern you!"

They disappeared back inside.

"What the hell is this about?" Harvard asked, looking from Cowboy to Lucky.

"Beats me, H." Lucky brushed dirt from his shoulder. "The psycho here jumped me."

Harvard fixed his obsidian glare on Cowboy. "Junior, you have something to say?"

Cowboy lifted his head. "Only that if O'Donlon so much as breathes Melody's name again, I'll put him in the hospital."

"Damn, I feel like a kindergarten teacher," Harvard muttered, turning back to Lucky. "O'Donlon, were you really stupid enough to be dissing his woman?"

"His woman...?" Lucky was genuinely confused and not entirely unamused. "Jones, you just got through telling us that you're not going to marry...the one who shall remain nameless because I don't want to have to put you in the hospital."

Harvard swore pungently. "It's obvious that right here we've got a live showing of Dumb and Dumber, Part Two."

"I don't get it," Lucky said to Cowboy. "If you're so hot for this girl, why the hell aren't you marrying her?"

Cowboy straightened up. "Because she doesn't want me," he said quietly, all of his anger and frustration stripped away, leaving only the hurt behind. God, it hurt. He looked at Harvard. "H., I tried, but...she doesn't want me." To his absolute horror, tears filled his eyes.

And for maybe the first time in his entire life, Lucky was silent. He didn't try to make a joke. Harvard looked at the blond-haired SEAL. "Jones and I are going take a walk. That okay with you, O'Donlon?"

Lucky nodded. "Yeah, that's uh... Yeah, Senior Chief."

Harvard didn't say another word until they'd walked halfway across the exercise field. By then, thank God, Cowboy had regained his composure.

"Jones, I have to start by apologizing to you," Harvard told him. "This whole snafu's my fault. I told the guys you were going to marry this girl. I guess I just assumed you'd do whatever you had to, to convince her that marrying you is the right thing. Which leads me to my main point. I'm honestly surprised at you, Junior. I've never known you to quit."

Cowboy stopped walking. "Bottom line, what do I really have to offer her? Thirty days of leave a year." He swore. "I grew up with a father who was never there. With only thirty days each year, there's no use pretending I could be any kind of a real father to my kid—or a real husband to Melody. This way, we're all being honest. I'll be the guy who comes to visit a few times a year. And Mel will hook up with someone else. Someone who'll be there for her all the time."

Harvard was shaking his head. "You've talked yourself into believing this is a lose-lose situation, haven't you? Open your eyes and look around you, boy. Your captain's in the exact same boat. It's true Veronica and his kid miss him when he's gone, but with a little effort, they're making the situation work."

"Yeah, but Veronica is willing to travel. I couldn't ask Melody to leave Appleton. It's her home. She loves it there."

"Junior, you can't afford not to ask."

Cowboy shook his head. "She doesn't want me," he said again. "She wants an average guy, not a SEAL."

"Well, there I can't help you," Harvard said. "Because even if you quit the units tomorrow, you're never going to be mistaken for an average guy."

Quit the units tomorrow...

He could do that. He could quit. He could move to Massachusetts, set up permanent residence in that tent outside Melody's house....

But he didn't want to quit. Except that was exactly what he'd done. Harvard was right. In what could

possibly be the most important fight of his life—the fight to win Melody—he'd surrendered far too easily.

He should have told her he loved her before he left. He should be there right now, down on his knees, still telling her that he loved her, telling her that this time it was real. No matter what she said, he knew it was real. And she loved him, too. He'd seen it in her eyes, tasted it in her kisses, heard it in her laughter.

Yeah, she might not know it yet, but she definitely loved him. He should have realized it a full day ago, from the way she'd held him so tightly up at the quarry.

Cowboy looked at Harvard. "I've got to go back to Massachusetts right away. A weekend. That's all I need. Just two and a half days."

Harvard laughed. "Come on. I'll go with you. We'll go talk to Joe."

"Thank you, Senior Chief."

"Don't thank me yet, Junior."

Joe Catalanotto sighed. "I can't do it, Jones. It's going to have to wait a week or so." He gestured to the television in the corner of his office. "I've been monitoring a situation in South America for the past day and a half. A plane's been hijacked. Two hundred forty-seven people on board." Sure enough, the TV was tuned to CNN. "Any minute now, this phone's gonna ring, and Alpha Squad's going to be ordered over to Venezuela to help create order out of chaos." He shook his head. "I'm sorry, kid. I need you with the team. Best I can tell you is to let your fingers do the walking. Make a phone visit, but do it now. Get your gear ready to go, too. Because once we get the word to move, there won't be time."

Cowboy nodded. "And if you're wrong, sir?"

Cat laughed. "If I'm wrong, I'll give you an entire week. But I'm not wrong."

As if to prove his point, the telephone rang.

Cowboy scrambled for the door. He threw it open and made a dash for the nearest telephone. He punched in his calling-card number and then Melody's number. Please, God, let her be home. Please, God...

The phone rang once, twice, three times. All around him, he could hear the sounds of Alpha Squad getting ready to move. On the fourth ring, the answering machine picked up.

"Come on, Cowboy!" Wes shouted. "You don't even have your gear together yet!"

Brittany's recorded voice came on, followed by the beep.

"Melody, it's me, Jones." God, he had no clue what to say. 'I just wanted to tell you—'

Beep. Damn, he paused too long and the answering machine, mistaking his silence for a disconnected line, had cut him off.

"Come on, Cowboy! Move!"

"I love you!" he shouted into the receiver. That was what he should have said. KISS. Keep it simple.

Bottom line. But it was too late to call her back.

Cowboy hung up the phone with a curse.

Melody was dreaming. She knew she was dreaming because Jones was with her, and they were back in the Middle East, hiding from the soldiers who were patrolling the city.

"Close your eyes," Jones told her. "Keep breathing, shallowly, softly. They won't see us. I promise."

Her heart was pounding, but his arm was around her, and she knew at the very least, if she died, she wouldn't die alone.

"I love you," she whispered, afraid if she didn't say it now, she'd never get the chance.

He motioned for her to be silent, but it was too late. One of the soldiers had heard her, then turned and fired his gun. The bullet slammed into her with wrenching force. Pain exploded in her abdomen.

The baby! Dear God, she'd been shot, and they'd hit the baby.

Her legs felt wet with blood, but Jones was fighting the enemy soldiers. He was firing his own gun, driving them away.

Another knife blade of pain seared through her, and she cried out.

Jones turned toward her, touching her, and his hands came away red with her blood.

He looked at her and his eyes were so green, even in the darkness. "Wake up," he said. "Honey, you've got to wake up."

Melody opened her eyes to see the first dim light of dawn creeping in through her windows. She'd been so tired last night, she hadn't even taken the time to draw the curtains.

Pain knifed through her, real pain, the same pain she'd dreamed. She gasped, turning to reach for the lamp on her bedside table. She switched it on, and with shock realized that her hands had left behind a smear of blood.

She was bleeding.

She pulled back the covers to see that her nightgown and the sheets below were stained bright red.

Brittany was still at work. She wouldn't be home until after seven.

Pain made the room spin.

"Jones!"

But Jones wasn't there to help her, either. Melody didn't know where Jones was. He'd called and left a message on the machine over two weeks ago. She'd tried to call him back, but was told he was unavailable and would remain that way for an undetermined amount of time.

He was out of touch on some mission, risking his life doing God knows what. She'd spent the past two weeks scared to death and kicking herself for not being honest with him. She should have told him that she loved him while she had the chance.

Please, God, keep him safe. Every time Melody thought about him, she said that silent prayer.

The pain gripped her again, and she cried out. God, what was happening? This wasn't labour. She wasn't supposed to bleed when she went into labour...

Her door was pushed open. "Mel?"

Brittany. Thank God, she'd gotten home from work early.

"Oh, dear Lord!" Brittany saw the blood on the sheets. She picked up the phone, dialed 911, smoothed back Melody's hair, feeling her forehead, checking her eyes. "Sweetie, when did the bleeding start?"

"I don't know. I was sleeping...God!" The pain made her see stars. "Britt, the baby! What's happening with the baby?"

But Brittany spoke into the phone, rattling off their address. "We need an ambulance here stat. I've got a twenty-five-year-old woman in the ninth month of her first pregnancy, experiencing severe abdominal pain and haemorrhaging."

Melody closed her eyes. Please, God, keep both Jones and her baby safe and alive...

"Yes, I'm a nurse," Brittany responded. "I suspect placental abruption. We'll need foetal monitors and an ultrasound ready and waiting at the hospital. Yes. I'll have the door open. Just get here!"

"Jones, you better get down here." Harvard's voice sounded tight and grim over the telephone line. "There's a stack of messages for you that's four inches high."

Cowboy's heart leaped. "From Melody?"

"Junior, just get down here."

Fear flickered inside him. "H., what's the deal? Is Mel all right? Did she have the baby?"

"I don't know for sure. It looks as if the first few messages are from Melody, but the rest... Jones, Mel's sister has been calling nearly every hour for the past two days. I recommend you get down here and call her back ASAP. She's left a number at the hospital."

A number at the hospital. Cowboy didn't even say goodbye. He hung up the phone and ran.

The temporary barracks he was sharing with the other unmarried members of the team were a good half mile from the leaky-roofed Quonset hut that housed Alpha Squad's office. Cowboy was still wearing his clunky leather boots and his heavy camouflage gear, but he covered the distance in a small handful of minutes.

As he burst through the door, Harvard handed him both the pile of messages and a telephone. The sheer number of message slips was enough to terrify him. Brittany had, literally, called every hour on the hour since early Monday morning.

Cowboy's hands were shaking so badly, he had to dial the number twice. Harvard had backed away, giving him privacy. He sat down at the desk, shuffling through the pile of messages as, up in the County Hospital in Appleton, Massachusetts, the phone was ringing.

"Hello?"

It was Brittany's voice. She sounded hoarse and worn-out.

"Britt, it's Jones,"

"Thank God."

"Please tell me she's safe." Cowboy closed his eyes.

"She's safe." Brittany's voice broke. "For now. Jones, you've got to come up here and talk her into having a C-section. I think one of the reasons she's refusing to do it is because she promised you that you could be here when the baby was born."

"But she's not due for another two and a half weeks."

"She had a partial placental abruption," Brittany told him.

"That's when the placenta becomes partially separated from the uterus—"

"I know what it is," he said, cutting her off. "Did she haemorrhage?"

"Yes. Early Monday morning. It wasn't as bad as I first thought, though. She was taken by ambulance to the hospital and her doctor managed to get her stabilized. Both she and the baby are being monitored. If there's the slightest change in either of their conditions, they're going to have to do a C-Section. She knows that. But right now, the doctor has told her that the baby's in no real danger, and she's determined to hold on as long as possible."

Cowboy drew in a deep breath. "May I talk to her?"

"She's sleeping right now. Please, Lieutenant, I don't think she's going to agree to have this baby until you get up here. But if she starts haemorrhaging again, there's no guarantee that this time they'll be able to get her to stop. They'll be able to save the baby, but they'll lose the mother."

Cowboy looked down at the phone messages in his hand. There were four from Melody, all dated close to the day he'd left for South America. The first three were just notices that said she'd called. The last actually had a message. It was written in quotes, and the receptionist who answered the phone had put a smiley face next to the words, "I love you."

Cowboy stood up. "Tell her our deal's off," he told Brittany. "Tell her not to wait for me to have the baby. Tell her I'll be mad as hell if I get up there and that baby's not hanging out in the hospital nursery. Tell her I'm on my way."

He hung up the phone, and Harvard silently appeared. The senior chief handed him papers signed by the captain, granting him as much personal emergency leave as he needed.

"There's an air force transport heading up to Boston in twenty minutes," Harvard told him. "I've called in some favours from some people I know—they're holding the flight for you. Bobby's out front with a jeep to drive you to the airfield."

Cowboy held up the message that Melody had left. "She loves me, H."

"This is news to you, Junior?" Harvard laughed. "Damn, I knew that last year in the Middle East." He followed Cowboy to the door. "Godspeed, Jones. My prayers are with you."

Cowboy swung himself up and into the jeep, and with a squeal of tires, he was away.

"She was given an amniocentesis so we could assess the baby's lung development." Brittany was talking in a whisper as she came into the room. Melody kept her eyes closed. "All of the tests have indicated that this baby is ready for delivery. His estimated weight clocked in at over eight pounds. But Melody insists that unless the baby is in danger, she's not going to deliver him any earlier than December 1st. You've got to convince her that her stubbornness is putting her life in danger."

"The worst part about being in the hospital is that everybody always talks about you as if you weren't in the room." Melody opened her eyes, expecting to glare up at her sister and some new doctor she'd enlisted.

Instead, she found herself looking directly at Harlan Jones. He was wearing camouflage pants and a matching shirt, and he looked as if he'd come directly from the jungle.

"Hey," he said, smiling at her, "heard you've been raising a little too much hell around here."

She recognized that smile he was giving her. It was his "I'm going to pretend everything's all right" smile. In truth, he was scared to death.

"I'm fine," she told him. As she watched, Brittany quietly left the room.

He sat down next to her. "That's not what I hear."

She forced a smile of her own. "Yeah, well, you've been talking to Nurse Doom."

He laughed. She realized he was carrying a clipboard in his hands, and he held it out to her now. "Sign these forms," he told her. "Have the C-section. It's time to stop playing games with your life."

Melody lifted her chin. "You think that's what this is? Some game? Everything I've ever read stressed the importance of carrying a baby to term. Or at least carrying for as long as possible. The baby's not in danger. I'm not in danger. I see no reason to do this."

Jones took her hand. "Do this now because until this baby is born, there is a risk that you will bleed to death," he said. "Do this because although the chances of that happening are very slim, so were the chances of your having a placental separation in the first place. You don't have high blood pressure. You aren't a smoker. There's no real reason why this should have happened. Do this because if you die, a

very large part of me will die, too. Do this because I love you."

Melody was caught in the hypnotizing intensity of his gaze. "I guess you got my message."

"Yeah," he said. "But you only got part of mine. I had literally ten seconds before I had to leave and I blew it. What I meant to say on your answering machine was that I want you to marry me, not for the baby's sake, but for my sake. Purely selfish reasons, Mel. Like, because I love you and I want to spend my life with you."

He cleared his throat. "And I was going to tell you that I knew there was a part of you that could love me, and that I was going to keep coming back to Appleton, that I was going to court you until you did fall in love with me. I was going to tell you that I wasn't going to quit, and that sooner or later, I'd wear you down—even if you only married me to shut me up." He handed her the clipboard. "So sign these release forms, have this baby and marry me."

Melody's heart was in her throat. "Do you really understand what you're asking me to do?"

He looked out the window at the dreary late-afternoon light. "Yeah," he said, "I do. I'm asking you to leave your home and come live with me near naval bases, moving around God only knows how many times in the course of a year. I'm asking you to give up your job, and your garden, and your sister and Andy, just to be with me, even though some of the time—hell, most of the time—I'll be gone. It's a bad deal. I don't recommend you take it. But at the same time, honey, I'm praying that you'll say yes."

Melody looked at the man sitting beside her bed. His hair was long and dirty, as if he hadn't showered in days. He smelled of gasoline and sweat and sunblock. He looked spent, as if he'd run all the way from Virginia just to be here with her.

"Trust me," he whispered, leaning close to kiss her softly. "Trust me with your heart. I'll keep it safe, I swear."

Mel closed her eyes and kissed him. Harlan Jones wasn't the average, run-of-the-mill, home-every-day-at-five-thirty type she would have chosen if the choice could be made with pure intellect. But love wasn't rational. Love didn't stick to a plan. And truth was, she loved him. She had to take the chance.

"You are going to get so sick of me telling you to be careful," she whispered.

"No, I'm not."

Melody signed the medical procedure consent forms. "Do you think Harvard would agree to be our best man?"

Jones took the clipboard from her hands. "I want to hear you say yes."

She gazed up at him. "Yes. I love you," she told him.

Tears filled his eyes, but his smile was pure Jones as he leaned forward and kissed her.

Epilogue

Melody Jones sat in her new backyard, watching her neighbours, her friends and her new family gather to celebrate her wedding.

It was only February, but the South was having a mild winter, and the daffodils in her garden were already in bloom.

The growing season in Virginia was at least three months longer than in Massachusetts. She loved that. She loved everything about her new life. She loved this little rented house outside the naval base where Alpha Squad was temporarily stationed. She loved waking up each morning with Jones in her bed. She loved holding their son, Tyler, in her arms as she rocked him to sleep. She even loved the late-night feedings.

Brittany sat down next to her. "The papers came through," she said. "Day before yesterday. Andy's my kid now." She laughed. "God help me."

Melody embraced her sister. "I'm so happy for you."

"And I'm so happy for you." Brittany laughed again. "I'm not sure I've ever been to a party before with so many incredible-looking men. And all those dress uniforms! I nearly fainted when I went into the church. I suppose you get used to it."

Melody grinned. "No," she said, "you don't."

Across the yard, Jones had Tyler on one shoulder. He swayed slightly to keep the baby happy as he stood talking to Harvard and his father, the admiral. As Melody watched, he laughed at something Harvard said and the baby started. Jones gently kissed the baby's head, soothing him back to sleep.

As Melody looked around her yard, she realized that Brittany was right. Nearly all of the men there were SEALs, and they were, indeed, an unusual-looking group.

Jones looked across the yard and met her eyes. The smile he gave her made her heart somersault in her chest. It was his "I love you" smile—the smile he saved for her and her alone. She smiled back at him, knowing he could read her love for him as clearly in her eyes.

Despite her best intentions, she had gone and married the least everyday, ordinary, average man that she'd ever known. No indeed, there was absolutely nothing normal about a man called "Cowboy" Jones. He was one hundred percent out of the ordinary-and so was his incredible love for her.

And she wouldn't have it any other way.

When it comes to learning about love,

Cowboy has nothing on Harvard!