



SEMPER FI

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ALSO BY BARRIE ABALARD

Poker Brat

SEMPER FI

BY

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SEMPER FI
AN AMBER HEAT BOOK

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*To my husband.
He isn't a Marine, but his values exemplify
the Marine Corps motto of Semper Fi.*

*My heartfelt thanks to Catherine Snodgrass,
who supplied me with certain details about the
US Marine Corps that I did not know.*

CHAPTER 1

“C’mon, it’s just a dance, not the rest of your life.”

Her words squeezed Jake Stone’s heart. His hurt must have shown on his face, because he saw her hand fly to her mouth. “Omigod, I’m so sorry.”

He looked at the perfect red rose in his lap. Perfectly useless, as of five minutes ago.

He glanced at his watch before remembering that the time was useless as well. She wasn’t two hours and fifty-six minutes late—she wasn’t coming at all.

“Dance with me? It might make you feel better.”

The redhead tugged at his arm. A dance certainly couldn’t make him feel any worse.

He drained his glass of liquor. “Okay, honey, let’s go.”

He flung the rose into a trashcan on his way to the floor. The band ripped into a funky R & B number. Miss Redhead must have liked it,

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from the way her hips rolled to the beat. She smiled an invitation, so he placed his hands on those gyrating hips. The two of them ground together, but his thoughts were anywhere but on his dance partner.

Kimberly.

Kimberly always ended their conversations with the Marine motto, *Semper Fi*. Always faithful. However, she'd been anything but. Now he was just another lonely guy with his heart ripped out. He'd rather have received a Dear John letter in Iraq than tonight's phone call.

Instead of celebrating their engagement, here he was, drinking and dancing on autopilot.

Another woman danced with the redhead now. The two women were twirling and shaking and damned exciting to watch—to someone else, maybe. He wanted Kimberly, not groupies.

"Hey, stud," the blonde shouted over the music, "I like your style."

A smile flashed across his face as the woman wiggled mere inches from him. He could reach out and touch, if only she invited him to do so.

Kimberly loved to dance.

Her name exploded in his brain, driving away lustful thoughts.

The band wrapped up the song with a bluesy flourish as the two women moved closer to him.

"We want to buy you a drink," the redhead said, patting his bicep. "Ooo, you certainly are buff. Gym rat?"

"Body courtesy of the U.S. Marine Corps."

After the threesome reached the bar, the redhead asked, "What's your pleasure?"

"Irish whiskey," he said, "and you."

The redhead laughed. "Hey, Charlie," she called, "A Bushmills, neat, for my newest friend."

"So," the blonde said, "who do you want to take home with you?"

He nearly dropped his glass.

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“Pick one of us, or take both of us. We want to be sure you’re not lonely tonight,” the redhead said.

“I haven’t had enough to drink to take on two women. Or maybe I’ve had too much to drink to do two.”

The blonde giggled while he downed the whiskey. She was looking better all the time. He knew she wanted him, the way she kept touching him.

But he didn’t like blondes. Not anymore. Not with Kimberly’s bloneness seared into his memory.

“Both of you, eh?” His gaze wandered up and down each woman. “You must be pretty good friends to want to share me.”

“We know what happened,” said the blonde, “and we want to make you feel better.”

His laugh forced its way out. “A man’s got no secrets from a woman who’s determined to know them.”

The redhead trailed her fingers across his forearm, circling his *Semper Fidelis* tat, the one with a snarling bulldog above the legend. “Charlie, the bartender, told us.”

“Like that tat, honey? Had it done during my first drunk after Parris Island—boot camp, you know.” He gulped the rest of his Bushmills while he watched the two confer.

Who knows what they’re thinking. Besides, my mind’s still on Kimberly.

He signaled for another drink. The blonde spoke just as he raised the glass for a sip.

“We’ve decided you’re going to have both of us tonight.”

“You have, huh? What’s your name? I’m Jake.”

The redhead stepped up, flashing teeth that glowed white in the club’s dimness. “She’s Connie. I’m Amanda. Let’s go, devil dog.”

Well, why the hell not? I don’t exactly have plans tonight. Not now.

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his cock stiffen. When he brought his mouth to hers, she opened wide for him. The kiss combined with the whiskey had his head spinning. He broke the clinch.

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* * *

Connie Woods hungered to be the first to take the hard-bodied Marine. She swallowed her disappointment as he stripped away Amanda’s blouse and bra, sucking her nipples as if he thought he could get booze from them. Her friend’s moans of pleasure tormented her.

Damn. She’d had a thing for the man ever since laying eyes on him early in the evening. How could she make him more interested in her?

She thought a moment. It just might work. Men loved woman-on-woman.

Connie nibbled Amanda’s neck while reaching for the Marine’s zipper. He got the message quickly, pulling his mouth off Amanda’s breast to watch Connie make love to her. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the man shucking his jeans. When he was again settled on the bed, she reached over to touch his erection.

Mmmm.

“Watch and learn,” she said before peeling off her friend’s underwear, demonstrating more bravery than she felt. She’d never done

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this with a woman, the thing she loved when a man did it to her.

Connie licked her way down Amanda's body, tongue tickling all the hollows in her torso. When she reached the delta, she veered to the right thigh, biting lightly while the other woman whimpered for satisfaction.

Here goes nothing.

The tip of her tongue explored deeply between the folds. Amanda moved her hips, groaning. Connie reached again for the man's cock, only to discover that his hands had reached her pussy first. His massive fingers explored her gently while she lapped her friend.

The Marine had talented digits. Keeping her mind on satisfying her friend grew more and more difficult. She couldn't help moaning, moving herself against his thumb inside her while his middle finger teased her clit.

"Oh, no, oh, God, yes, yes yes yesssss," Amanda cried, jerking so violently that Connie had to grip her hips to stay in position. Then she forgot all about her friend's pleasure, because she suddenly felt as if she were blooming like a flower. Nothing else existed except the thrills coursing through her body from one central area.

"Oh, God, Connie," Amanda said, sliding down the bed to kiss her with tongue before sucking her nipples. She heard the snap of a condom, and then felt the Marine enter her from behind.

Her, not Amanda. Yes!

Amanda's nimble lips and tongue pulled her nipples to aching hardness, while Jake's cock slid in and out. With every movement, the sweet fire built. Though she'd just come, Connie felt another orgasm building. As his hands seemed busy with her friend, Connie used her own to pet herself to a second intense explosion.

* * *

Jake opened one eye, only to have a shaft of sunlight pierce it. He sat up, holding his head.

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“Too much whiskey,” he said to the empty room.

Empty. Where were the women? Had they left while he snored, drunk and satisfied?

He checked his pants to see if his wallet was still there. It was, along with his money and his credit cards. But damned if he could find his unit medallion, given to him by the Twentynine Palms commanding general. Very few Marines were ever awarded such a medallion—he’d received his while he was in Iraq, for service above and beyond the call of duty. Where had it gone?

He was rubbing his fingers together, longing to feel his oval medallion between them, when the memory of last night’s loss broadsided him. His fiancée wasn’t his fiancée any more.

He shook his head. Actually, she never had been. She’d stood him up the night he’d planned to propose and, when he’d called to find out where she was, she’d broken up with him over the fucking phone. He thought he remembered a noisy background on her end, so she must have been out, celebrating her new, *available* status. Losing him must not have affected her much.

He, on the other hand, had been depressed and angry. Still was, actually. Though the wild night he’d spent with the women had started the healing process.

He lay back down, head pounding, stomach sour. He didn’t enjoy hangovers, but this one would pass, as they all did. What a night he’d spent with the women. The redhead was hotter-looking, but the blonde was a firecracker in bed. When he’d entered her the first time, she’d bucked and rolled like no other woman he’d ever had. No doubt about it, the gal could fuck. The memory turned him hard. He gripped himself, masturbating while his mind wandered through last night’s fun. First the blonde, then the redhead, then the blonde again. He’d sucked tits and pussy till his mouth ran dry, and was sucked off by each of them. How he could still get hard after last night’s five orgasms was

beyond him.

He wished he had his drawing tools with him. He hungered to draw last night's scenes, still looping through his head.

Damn, why didn't I get their numbers? Or at least their last names?

He finished masturbating before taking a hot shower. While he was walking around naked, the door flew open. The two women burst in, giggling, laden with paper bags and a tray of take-out coffee cups.

"Hey, you're awake." The redhead put down the bags she was holding to kiss him while squeezing his butt. "How are you feeling?"

He shrugged. "I'll live. What's in the bags?"

"Breakfast for the three of us," she said.

"And coffee," the blonde added.

He smiled. "Angels of mercy, I 'pologize for my poor memory, but what were your names again?"

"Connie. Connie Woods," said the blonde.

"Amanda Foster," said the redhead, kissing him again, this time with plenty of tongue. Her fingernails trailed across his thigh, turning him hard.

He broke the kiss. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I sure could use some coffee before we—"

Connie had a cup in his hand before he could finish the sentence. "Got it, devil dog." When he looked down her shirt, her soft, full breasts nearly distracted him from the issue of his missing property.

"All right. Which one of you took my unit medallion?" He glared at each of them in turn. The blonde raised her hand, answering shyly, "I did."

"Plan on giving it back to me?" he said, slapping her bottom once, hard. The blonde jumped, her mouth round with surprise. Then she smiled, slyly.

"Here you go." She pulled the prized possession out of her pocket and dropped it into his palm.

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“Don’t you know better than to take a Marine’s unit medallion?” he growled. “It’s not as if they give these out like candy on Halloween. When your commanding general bestows one on you, it’s a source of pride and *esprit de corps* to receive it. I always carry mine with me to remind me that Corps values matter.” He frowned. “I’ve a mind to spank that cute little behind of yours for taking mine without permission.”

* * *

Connie considered her next words carefully. She’d seen the medallion and had felt an irresistible urge to take it while he snored. A man she’d loved years ago had died while serving his country, and her dead lover’s parents had refused to let her have his unit medallion from his first sergeant, not even long enough to make photocopies. They’d buried it with their son. She supposed that was why Jake’s medallion had attracted her. Though, of course, she hadn’t intended to keep it. She’d just wanted to enjoy the feel of it in her hand for a while.

Oh, and I suppose it’s not because I’m drawn to Jake like a mouse to cheese.

“If you’re that desperate to spank a woman, I wouldn’t mind. But I want breakfast first.” Connie peeped at him over the rim of her coffee cup while sipping. Then she looked at Amanda. She knew, from Mandy’s pout, that her friend wanted more sex right now.

But Jake said, “Sounds like a plan.” He dug into one of the bags, extracting an oversized breakfast sandwich. “My favorite,” he said before taking a large bite. “Mmm.”

Connie unwrapped her egg-whites-on-English-muffin while staring at his sandwich. She loved junk food, but remained on a diet most of the time. Her jeans were tight enough as it was. Amanda, on the other hand, was lithe and toned, with silky red hair falling past her shoulders. Amanda always got the best men.

But Mandy’s my friend.

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Connie's jealous thoughts produced a twinge of guilt. She put her sandwich down, appetite momentarily gone. Yes, Mandy was her friend, but she really, really liked the Marine, and not just because of his prowess in the sack.

"Pretty good," her friend said, chomping on a sandwich almost as large and fattening as the Marine's while batting her big, blue eyes.

Friend or not, Connie wanted to strangle her.

Then Amanda swore under her breath. "I forgot that I work this afternoon. No time for fun after breakfast. You want us to drop you back at your car?"

Even though Connie wanted Jake, she also wanted to pump her fist in the air. Amanda wasn't going to have him again this morning.

* * *

Jake wadded up his sandwich's wrapping paper and stuffed it into his empty coffee cup. "Been a real treat, ladies. Care to give me your phone numbers?" He used the plural even though he only wanted the redhead's number. Though spanking the chunky blonde might be fun, with that full, jiggly ass of hers. As if she read his mind, she said, "What about my spanking?"

He smiled at her. "Not today, I guess." *I'd really like to do the redhead right now. Too bad she has to work.*

The women gave him their phone numbers before taking him back to his car in the bar's parking lot. The ride seemed shorter than it had been last night. He watched the pair drive away, sun glinting on the vehicle's chrome.

Connie waved to him, her expression sober, even sad. For some reason, that made his stomach quiver.

He didn't want another blonde, because of Kimberly, despite the attraction he felt.

He shrugged. His attraction must be rebound feelings. Amanda would be a better choice, if only because her hair wasn't blonde.

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He looked forward to getting home to his drawing tools. He wanted to draw the expression on the blonde's face when he'd thrust inside her for the first time.

* * *

"Hey, what's the matter?"

Connie shook her head, keeping her eyes averted. "Nothing."

"You wanted another go with him, too, huh? I'm almost coming just thinking about last night. Lucky you, he screwed you twice. I feel deprived."

Amanda laughed her fabulous laugh, threw back her fabulous hair. If Connie's eyes weren't already green, she would have sworn they'd turned that color.

Just because I want Jake, but he wants Mandy, is no reason to be jealous of her beauty. She's always been there for me.

"And you know, what you did was so *yummy*." Her friend laughed again, squirming in her seat. "Not many men know what to do down there. Sometimes it takes a woman to know how to please another woman. Want to get together with Jake another time?"

Connie and Mandy had been pals forever, and last night hadn't been their first threesome. Though it *had* been the first time she'd gone down on her friend. The experience had been...interesting. But, even though Mandy had returned the favor, Connie thought the Marine's abilities superior. He'd produced pure magic with his lips and tongue, making her come twice, rapid-fire.

Now it was Connie's turn to squirm in her seat as she recalled his probing, his gentle sucking, and his flicking tongue's tip. She wanted to rub herself right here, right now. She closed her eyes, feeling herself grow wet as she replayed sensations in her mind.

"Connie."

Amanda's voice was husky. To Connie's surprise, her friend had pulled the vehicle over while she was fantasizing. Now, Mandy was

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staring at her as if she were a tasty morsel. A hand landed on her knee, making Connie swallow hard.

Mandy stroked her thigh. "We don't have to include the Marine in our games, if you'd rather not."

Connie said nothing, watching her friend unsnap her jeans. She felt her nipples harden, her arousal making her ache down below.

Leaning back, she closed her eyes while Mandy's hand slipped inside her panties. Her elegant, slim fingers were as talented as Jake's large blunt ones.

"Wow, you're so wet," Mandy whispered as her index finger teased Connie's clit until she was ready to come. Then her friend slipped two fingers inside to massage Connie's G-spot, her thumb working on the clit.

Connie's thigh muscles trembled as her friend's fingers teased her, only to stop just short of orgasm, once, twice, three times.

"Come," Mandy crooned. "Come for me, Connie. Scream for me."

This time, her fingers did not stop. Connie felt thrills emanating from her core, and that funny pit-of-the-stomach feeling you have when you ride a roller coaster. She gasped as the orgasm broke over her. It was almost as good as the one she'd had when Jake had fucked her the first time, from behind, while Mandy had sucked her nipples.

The realization that she was truly turned on by her friend hit Connie hard. That conclusion, combined with her long-time feelings for Amanda, had her thinking, if only for a moment, that what she felt for Amanda might be more than just friendship.

She glanced shyly at Amanda. "That was...really good."

Mandy put the SUV back into Drive. "Plenty more where that came from, if you want it."

CHAPTER 2

Two weeks later

Fridays were usually her day off, but Amanda had swapped with another worker. Saturday night loomed, the night she hoped that she and Connie would finally spend some intimate time together.

For now, though, she had to concentrate on her job, hustling tips in the upscale brew pub where she worked. When the jukebox played one of her favorites, “Rebel, Rebel” by David Bowie, she hummed along. Amanda loved all that ’80s glitz and weirdness, even though she’d been an innocent ten when Frankie Goes to Hollywood had hit the charts with “Relax.”

The ’80s. That had been when she’d first realized that she was as attracted to curvy women as she was to hunky men.

She wiped down tables on autopilot, recalling her first experience with a woman, the only secret she kept from Connie. It hadn’t

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happened until 1998, when she'd turned twenty-three. Amanda had driven three-plus hours to a lesbian bar in Chicago, seeking her first experience with a woman. Linda—that had been the woman's name—had introduced her to pleasures Amanda had been longing to experience.

She'd wanted to keep in touch with the older woman, but Linda had gently refused, producing a last name, Smith, that was almost certainly fake. "You want to see me again, Amanda-Panda, you come visit Hannah's Bar. I'm not much on writing or calling. Besides, you have a lot to learn about the world," Linda had said.

Amanda certainly did have a lot to learn, but she'd made up for lost time by suggesting threesomes to her friend. It had taken a long time for Connie to work up the nerve, though, so the two of them had enjoyed only a few encounters. The threesomes were tons of fun.

However, she still wasn't entirely sure how to entice Connie, and Connie alone, into her bed. Since the day Amanda had made love to her, their conversations had been either too brief to really talk about it, or stilted and uncomfortable. Last weekend, Connie had suffered from apparent food poisoning, so when Amanda dropped by with some flowers, she hadn't pressed her friend for conversation.

Amanda shrugged. She needed to get a grip. The two of them had been best friends since the third grade, and they always would be. Both of them had been busy, that was all. No need to get her panties in a bunch about it.

Still, Amanda's thoughts kept straying to Connie, delicious Connie, hottie Connie. What fun it would be to spend the night with her, with no man to come between them, so to speak. Sure, she enjoyed cock, but she had to admit, she enjoyed women just as much. Maybe more.

Amanda had known since her night in Chicago that she wanted to make love to her friend. Not that she was in love with Connie. Romance wasn't for her, at least, not yet. She was too busy having fun.

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In that way, she was more like Linda from Chi-town.

Mmm, wouldn't it be fun to have my best friend in my bed?

Amanda hoped the exciting little interlude in her SUV would convince Connie to try a twosome with her. Watching her friend come had almost been better than coming herself.

As she collected drink orders, bar tabs, and tips, the wait for the end of her shift became unbearable. At her break, she called Connie, hoping they could share a late dinner—and, perhaps, a bed.

Her friend's cell rang and rang, but it wasn't answered. Amanda found this strange. Maybe her phone was off? No, that couldn't be it. If she knew Connie, she'd have it on, in hopes that the Marine would call.

She sighed. Connie and Marines. Ever since Ryan had died in a freak accident overseas, she'd become obsessed with them. Not that Jake the Devil Dog wasn't worth obsessing over—the man was *fine*.

Still, if she wanted Connie, Jake was her rival. Did she want her friend enough to pursue her?

Yes, I do.

Amanda called again, this time leaving a message on Connie's voice mail. She hoped it would pique her friend's curiosity.

* * *

Amanda was calling her again. Connie bit her lip, unsure about answering.

Truth be told, she felt a little strange about what had happened in the SUV. Her fleeting feelings of infatuation had given way to her true self. Connie did love Mandy. But she loved her like a sister, not a lover.

Or did she? Connie rubbed her eyes with frustration.

Mandy was usually the more aggressive one in the threesomes, and she had enjoyed the benefits. What Connie had done two weeks ago, by taking the initiative and going down on her friend, had broken the pattern. Now, because of her forwardness, it seemed as if the big "R" had arisen between them. Mandy might be confusing Connie's sexual

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initiative with romantic love.

Ironic, considering she'd done so in order to catch Jake's attention.

Connie had spoken with Amanda several times since that night, but had been careful to keep the conversations away from sex. Fortunately, Mandy worked most nights while she worked days, so it hadn't been that difficult to avoid her friend. But Friday nights had always been their night to party hearty.

Last Friday night, Connie had begged off, genuinely ill with food poisoning. She'd had a valid excuse to limit talk when Amanda dropped by before her Saturday shift. But now it was the next Friday night, and Mandy was calling her. Maybe it was because she wanted another threesome with the Marine.

Or, maybe she was calling to ask Connie on a date, just the two of them.

Do I want a relationship with my best friend?

She checked the phone. Mandy had left her a message. Truly, wasn't she just the tiniest bit interested in what her friend had to say?

The phone trilled again, interrupting her thoughts. When Connie glanced at the caller's name, her spirits soared.

The Marine's calling me!

Just saying hello to him left her breathless.

Then he asked her to dinner. Her heart pounded in anticipation as she accepted.

He'd asked her, not Amanda. Maybe she had a chance with him after all.

She flew off to shower and dress for her date, forgetting about Amanda's voicemail.

* * *

Jake didn't understand why he'd called the blonde instead of the redhead. He found himself saying things he'd never planned to say to her.

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Like, “May I take you to dinner tonight?”

He’d heard Connie inhale sharply. “All right,” had been her soft reply.

He’d proposed going to Jonathan’s, a fancy place, because he wanted to impress her. He didn’t know why. He simply knew that he had to. Afterward, he planned to take her to Rhythm and Brews, a brew pub with live music.

And following that? Well, he hoped he could convince Connie to have sex with him again. She’d been such a hellcat in bed, and he wanted sex to help him forget Kimberly. He’d intended to stay away from women ’til he was over her, but his cock had a mind of its own. He’d beaten off to images of Connie’s heaving hips, of her amazing mouth sucking him, every single day since that night. Connie was, simply put, the greatest fuck he’d ever had.

He pondered the reasons why he’d asked her out while he showered and shaved and checked that his suit was flawless. Connie had wanted him, and had screwed with joyous abandon. Not like Kimberly, who’d always seemed conscious of how her hair and makeup looked, even at their most intimate moments.

Amanda had been almost as wild in bed. Certainly she was more beautiful, and he’d always had a thing for genuine redheads. But Connie—she had something he couldn’t put his finger on. He only knew he had to get to know her better.

Before he left, he took the drawing he’d done of Connie, folded it carefully, and tucked it into an inside jacket pocket.

* * *

Connie’s head was spinning. Jake looked amazing in his suit, the gray bringing out the steel in his eyes, and he was acting like a perfect gentleman, attentive and polite.

After the maitre d’ directed them to a quiet corner table, he touched her hand while she was looking at the menu. Inside, she trembled from

the zap of sexual attraction.

Raising her head, she smiled. "Yes?"

"I don't know what to say, except I'm glad you're with me. I'm not much of a talker."

Jake ducked his head, and by doing so, endeared himself to her. She liked strong, silent types.

"Why don't we start with our jobs?" she said, gratified when he raised his gaze to hers.

"You'd think I'd never been on a date before, the way I made you start the conversation. So, what do you do?"

"I work at Schneider Trucking as the CEO's executive assistant. My boss is decent. I like the work, and the pay's pretty good, too. How about you?"

"I'm on leave, trying to decide whether to re-up with the Corps. Originally I took the time off to propose to, and marry, my girlfriend, but as you know, that didn't happen." He sighed. "I've put in fourteen years, joined right out of high school. Maybe I'll leave. Maybe it's time to let Uncle Sam send me to college. Did you go?"

The wine arrived. She tasted the pinot grigio before speaking. "I have a two-year degree in accounting. But after temping a while as an administrative assistant, I realized I liked doing that more. I've been with the trucking company ten years. What would you study, if you went to college?"

"Graphic art and design." He ducked his head again. "I'm not exactly the artsy-fartsy type, but I think I'd enjoy learning how to design web sites and creating graphics. Computers are easy for me. I work with them in the Corps."

Something about the shyness of the big, muscular guy, in his buzz cut and fancy suit, tugged at her heart. But, before she could say anything, he spoke again.

"That reminds me. I drew a little picture of how you looked that

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night. I hope you like it.”

He withdrew a creamy piece of paper from his jacket, unfolding it carefully before handing it to her. Her heart raced and her insides melted when she saw her face, caught in a moment of passion with just a few pen strokes. Seeing her inked expression of hunger started a throb deep inside her. She wanted him again, wanted him to recreate this look on her face, the look he had produced.

“No one’s ever drawn a picture of me before, not even those caricature guys you find at summer resorts. I love it. Thank you,” she said.

* * *

Her green eyes glimmered in the candlelight with unshed tears. Jake had never moved anyone to tears with one of his drawings. He realized that her shining eyes had awakened something inside him that he’d thought was dead. Something cold and shriveled expanded under the warmth of her gaze.

He suspected it was his heart.

I should be careful. Kimberly dumped me just two weeks ago. I’m not ready for anything but a rebound. Well, maybe I’m ready for some more hot sex.

“Connie?”

She blinked rapidly, and the glimmer in her eyes cleared. “Yes?”

“I know this is a date, and that dates are different than, well, you know, but do I have any chance with you tonight?”

Her smile was slow, but sure. “As you said, it’s a date. And I don’t do, uh, that. Not on a first date. Even though we already—well, I hope you understand.”

He took her hand as joy washed through him. He knew he’d just been turned down, but for some reason, he was even happier than before.

“What happened with your fiancée?” she said.

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He felt something black brush across his soul. He shook it off. "I told you, I wanted to marry her, but she didn't want to marry me."

"That's because she didn't share your values," Connie said.

A light bulb went on in his head. "Yes. That's exactly it," he said, his voice eager. "I want a woman who will be my partner as well as my lover. I want to be able to trust her when I'm away. I want to be able to rely on her, on her fidelity, on her sense of responsibility, the way she can always rely on me. Any woman I marry needs to be *Semper Fi*."

The earth seemed a happier place when she smiled. "You just described what I want. With the right man. An old-fashioned man, I guess, if it's old-fashioned to want a man with integrity."

After dinner arrived, they said little to each other, except for comments about the food. Once they were back in his car, he said, "I know the perfect place. But it's a surprise."

* * *

Connie thought the dinner had been wonderful. She gazed into Jake's eyes when he reached across the gearshift to stroke her cheek.

"A perfect place?" she said, smiling with all her heart. "Around here? Where?"

"As I said, it's a surprise. I think you'll like it, though." His attention returned to the road when he pulled out of the restaurant's parking lot.

When she realized where they were heading, her heart sank.

"Rhythm and Brews?" Her voice sounded weak to her.

He grinned. "Damn, you guessed it. Great brew pub, great bands. At least, that's what I've been told. I've never been there. It wasn't open the last time I came back here on leave."

"Who told you?" Her voice sounded sharper than she'd intended.

"Something wrong?" He pulled into a parking space at the brew pub. "I know you like blues, from the way you danced that night."

"Amanda works here." Connie ground out.

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“Think she’s working tonight?”

By now they were walking to the club’s door. Connie tensed with jealousy before she remembered that it was Mandy’s night off. She smiled, relieved. “No, she never works on Friday nights.”

Then, a flash of red hair caught her eye. Connie’s steps slowed as Jake called, “Hey, she’s here. Amanda, want to have a drink with us?”

Connie let her hand go limp in his, the evening going south for her. Damn it all, Mandy *was* here. But why?

Her friend smiled at her the same way she had that day by the side of the road—as if Connie were a piece of cheesecake. Amanda spoke directly to her, ignoring Jake’s question. “What’d you think of my idea?”

“Idea?” Connie blinked, confused.

“Yeah, in the voice mail I left.”

Too late Connie remembered the message she’d meant to listen to, but had forgotten. “I’m sorry. Jake called, and, so...” She changed the subject. “Have a drink with us, and tell me about it?”

“Yeah, Amanda, have a drink with us.”

Connie saw the way Jake’s gaze was roaming over her friend’s body. The truth crashed down on her.

He asked me out in order to have another threesome. He probably called her to set it up without telling me. I should have known better. He doesn’t care about me, only about getting his rocks off with the two of us.

Amanda shook her red mane, her stare still on Connie. “It’s not the kind of thing I want to talk about with a third party listening,” she said, staring pointedly at Jake. “So—he asked you out, and you forgot all about me and my not-very-important message. I never thought you’d be the kind of woman to ignore her friends just because a *man* called. Or, maybe you want to ignore me for other reasons. Every time I’ve tried to talk with you about what happened that day in the SUV, you’ve either

changed the subject or developed an urgent reason to hang up.”

Her full wrath hit Connie, who had to admit that she’d evaded all of Mandy’s attempts to talk about their sexual interlude. Suddenly, she felt crappy for the way she’d been avoiding her best friend. They’d always been able to talk out their problems before. Why should the feelings she had—or didn’t have—for Mandy be different than any other topic?

She touched her friend’s shoulder. “I’m sorry. I should have listened to your voice mail. You’re right—I’ve been avoiding discussing what happened in your SUV. Can we please do that tomorrow?”

“Would one of you *please* tell me what happened in the SUV?”

Connie hated the avid look on Jake’s face. She hated feeling like the fool she was. He’d played her, all right—all he wanted was the sex. After all, didn’t he try to hustle her during dinner? He was a user, a loser.

So why did she feel as if she were the one who’d lost?

Amanda stuck her chin out, glaring at Connie. “I traded shifts so we could go out on a Saturday night for a change. I thought we might have some *fun* together.”

The way she emphasized the word “fun” made Connie uneasy again. “Okay, well, call me tomorrow so we can talk about it,” she said, sliding her glance away from Amanda’s.

The anger in her friend’s voice burned her ears. “If I do, I can tell that you’ll find some way to turn me down again, Con. You’ve made it clear you don’t want to be close to me. Just delete the frickin’ message I left and go on with your life.”

Connie’s stomach hit the ground as Amanda stormed away. She’d lost her best friend, all because of sex with the man standing next to her. The man who was only using her to get to Amanda.

She turned away from Jake. “Take me home, please. Now.”

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* * *

Jake sat at the kitchen table in the small house his parents had left him, an open bottle of whiskey next to an empty glass. He poured a shot, shaking his head as if to clear the cobwebs.

What the hell had happened?

He and Connie had enjoyed a fantastic dinner. Though he hadn't been thrilled that she didn't want to go to bed with him tonight, he understood. Last time, it had been a one-nighter. Tonight had been an actual date, and the rules were different for dates. Even dates with women he'd already fucked.

He shook his head again. Connie seemed pissed that he'd invited Amanda to have a drink with them. Amanda seemed pissed because Connie forgot to return a phone call.

Jesus. I'll never understand women if I live to be one hundred and ten.

He spilled more whiskey into his glass before heading for the television. He went three steps, stopped, and returned to grab the bottle. Once he'd flopped into the recliner, he channel-surfed, on his way to becoming roaring drunk.

Despite the liquor, memories of Kimberly still burned in his mind. Only now, the memories had company—a still photo of Connie's pain-filled eyes.

If he were truthful, the image of Connie's haunted face hurt more than the memories of his former girlfriend.

He stared at the screen, absentmindedly fiddling with the cap on the bottle. Something white fluttered off the coffee table, catching his eye. While the guys on ESPN's *Sportscenter* yucked it up, he picked up the scrap of paper.

It was only Connie's phone number. Well, he didn't need that any more. Come to think of it, he didn't need Amanda's, either. To hell with both of them.

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He dug around on the table 'til he found Amanda's. After draining his glass, he dropped both pieces of paper in it. He lit them using the torch-style lighter he used to ignite his charcoal grill, watching them turn to ash.

The way his fuckin' life had.

CHAPTER 3

A week later

Connie drummed her fingers on the plastic tabletop in the diner's booth. She looked at her watch. Amanda was late.

She and Mandy had fought in the past, but nothing like this. Not where they hadn't spoken for several days. It had taken many calls, and three apologies left on voice mail, before her friend had called her about discussing things in person.

Connie realized she'd been wrong to avoid talking about their sex scene in the SUV. She didn't want to lose a friend over it, but she also didn't want an ongoing relationship with Mandy that was more than platonic.

She found a hangnail to nibble. She'd only been waiting ten minutes, but each moment weighed on her like an iron anvil. Would Amanda actually agree to meet her, and then be a no-show?

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No, that wasn't her way. She kept her word. Connie had always been able to count on her friend to do so, no matter what. And they'd always been honest with each other. She had to remember that.

Amanda strode in, paused briefly to locate Connie, and then made her way to the booth, waving away the hostess. She slid in, her expression shuttered.

Connie swallowed. "Hi."

"Hi." Amanda tossed her hair. "Sorry to be late. Traffic."

She didn't believe for a moment that traffic had been the reason Mandy was late, but she said only, "It's all right."

"So. You wanted to talk?" Her friend's glance roved around the diner, anywhere but at Connie's face.

"Want something to eat or drink?" the waitress said as she approached, menu in hand.

"Coffee's fine," Amanda said. The waitress walked away.

Connie was glad she'd picked a slow time. The diner was almost deserted except for the two of them, a solitary man poring over a map at the counter, and an elderly couple enjoying pie in the booth closest to the door. Connie had chosen the booth farthest from both the door and the counter.

"Well?" Mandy's tone said, *Get on with it.*

Connie noticed the thunderclouds lurking in her friend's blue eyes. She needed to be careful with her word choices.

"Again, I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I avoided you rather than talking about the day in the SUV, and I'm sorry I forgot to listen to your voice mail. It wasn't meant as a slight, believe me. Sometimes people forget things despite their best intentions."

Mandy motioned with her hand as if to say, "*Go on.*"

The waitress brought them coffee. Both of them sipped from their chunky white mugs silently. Connie waited until the waitress had walked away before speaking.

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“I love you like a sister, Mandy. And that’s the problem. I love you like a sister. Not a lover. While I’ve truly enjoyed our threesomes, as well as what you did in the SUV, I think that has to be part of my past now.”

Her friend said nothing, her head bent forward. Connie leaned across the table, her voice carrying an undertone of urgency.

“Please understand. I still want to do all the girly things we do together—shop, have lunch, enjoy a long talk while drinking beer. Just not, you know, *that*. I’m ready for Mr. Right. I’m ready for a relationship—with a man—again.”

Amanda raised her head. “Are you seeing Jake?”

Connie shook her head. “No. He’s on the rebound. Besides, he wants you, not me, and was only using me to get to you.”

“Snap out of it, girl. He doesn’t want me.” Amanda pantomimed slapping Connie’s cheek. “He called you. He took *you* to dinner, not me. He didn’t know where I worked, and he didn’t know he’d run into me that night.”

“You two didn’t talk before we arrived at Rhythm and Brews?”

“You think I’d actually do that? Set up a threesome with a man without telling you? Geez, Con, if you think that badly of me, how can we be friends?”

Amanda sighed, and in that sigh Connie heard the sadness in her friend’s heart, her despair at being misunderstood. She took Mandy’s hand, saying, “I guess I’m an idiot.”

* * *

Her friend’s comment pulled a smile from Amanda. “You certainly are. How can you possibly think I’d horn in on your man?”

“My man?”

“Honest to God, what do I have to do to make you smell the coffee?”

Connie looked around the diner, grinning at the unintentional joke.

Amanda felt relieved. In fact, she felt better than she had all week. “I saw the way he looked at you, standing in front of Rhythm and Brews. The man’s wanted you more than me from the beginning. Okay, maybe not quite from the absolute beginning, but—” She took a deep breath before continuing. “By the next morning, his eyes were only for you. And, I’ll admit, it made me sort of jealous. He’s such a hunk.”

“You, jealous of me?” Connie’s mouth opened in surprise, and Amanda wished, just for a moment, that she could kiss that mouth. She sighed.

“That’s right, I was jealous of you, but not for long. I’m not the one looking for romance, for a steady partner. I’m not ready to give up my fun yet. Besides, Jake certainly seems ready to settle down, just like you do.”

“So you don’t mind that we’re not going to be a couple?”

Amanda laughed. “Sweetie, I love you to death. I always will. I also find you hot, and I don’t regret a moment of our encounter in the SUV, or our threesomes.” She bent toward Connie, her voice a whisper. “Watching you come almost makes me come. And I do love sucking those full, bouncy breasts of yours. Not to mention your delightful little clit.”

Connie’s face turned red, and Amanda could see her nipples poking through her T-shirt. “And I’d truly love to reach over and tweak your nipples right now. But that’s because my path is veering toward women, just as yours is firmly moving toward a man, marriage, and a family. I knew that having you was a long shot, but I had to try.”

“You’re not mad that I don’t want to?” Connie murmured.

“No. Disappointed, but not mad. I’m sorry I assumed you had blown me off for Jake. I guess that was my jealousy talking. He clearly wanted you, and you clearly wanted him. I was just an extra in your life’s story.”

Amanda stared at her coffee, raising her head only when Connie

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took both her hands in her own. “No, Mandy. You’ll never be an extra in my life. You’re my best friend. I want you there when I have my kids just as much as I want my husband there.”

“And you want that husband to be Jake, don’t you?” Amanda said, squeezing her friend’s hands.

Connie bit her lip. “Maybe. I want him, but he hasn’t called, probably because I made it clear I was pissed off. I ordered him to take me home, and then I slammed out of his car without a word. He probably thinks he has no chance with me.” Connie disengaged her hands from Amanda so she could sink her head into them. “God, I really am an idiot. I nearly lost my best friend, and I’ve lost my chance with a man who stirs something inside me, something down deep.”

Amanda knew what she had to say. “Con, Jake’s a man of integrity, of honor, of values. How could you ever think he’d trick you into a threesome with me? He strikes me as someone you could count on to be *Semper Fi*—always faithful. What we need to do now is find him, so you can tell him what you just told me.”

Connie removed her head from her hands to stare at her. “But, how? Where?”

Amanda threw money on the table to cover the bill before standing. “Come on. I have an idea.”

* * *

Jake could see now that he’d never been in love with Kimberly. He’d been in love with the idea of her beauty, in love with the glances he received when Kimberly was on his arm. Arm candy, that’s all she had been. She’d never written to him much the entire time he’d been overseas. Fact was if he were honest with himself, she wasn’t wife material. A mate had to be *Semper Fi*, the same way a Marine had to be.

Jake continued brooding, ignoring the afternoon baseball game playing on TV. He’d wasted time and energy on a woman who wasn’t

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right for him. Was he going to let history repeat itself by going for arm candy, rather than the cute-but-not-gorgeous blonde with the round, curvy body?

Of course not. Connie was someone he could marry and settle down with. He knew he could take whatever life handed out, as long as he had her in his corner.

I was a real dumbass to burn those phone numbers.

He called 411, but couldn't find a listing for either woman. Only one thing remained for him to try: visiting the blues club where the three of them first met, the club where he'd been planning to propose to Kimberly.

He forced himself to drive the speed limit instead of racing to the club as fast as he could make the engine scream.

It's only 4:00 P.M. Slow down, you dumbass. If she's going to be there, it won't be until evening.

He ground his teeth, gripping the steering wheel harder.

Hell, I can't take the chance of missing her. I'll sit there 'til closing time if I have to. Just please, God, don't let her walk in with another man.

* * *

Connie blinked to go from sunshine to the dim light of the club. She saw Jake sitting at the bar, drinking what looked to be a cola.

Amanda squealed, "Did I call it, or what?" Her friend grabbed her arm, but Connie didn't need coaxing. She walked straight to Jake.

His glance grabbed hers, held it fast. She felt herself drawn to him, as if she were on a conveyor belt.

"Hey, devil dog," Amanda said, "Long time since we talked."

"Hey, Amanda," he said, his gaze never wavering from Connie's. His voice was softer when he said, "Hi, Connie."

Connie couldn't breathe when he stroked her cheek the way he had a week ago. She managed a, "Hi, Jake," before taking the stool next to

him.

The bartender came by, but Jake motioned him away. She didn't care. It wasn't a drink she needed.

She realized Amanda was kissing her on the cheek, the same cheek Jake had touched.

"You kids have fun," she said before leaving.

Jake's ignoring what Connie knew to be a fetching sight—Amanda walking away in tight jeans—made her heart thump harder.

He really does want me.

"So," she said, trying for nonchalance, "how long have you been waiting for me?"

"Too long," he said as he took her hand.

She watched Jake offer up his credit card and sign the slip without looking away. When she stood, he looked her up and down openly.

She felt her chest tighten, and she could barely breathe. He clearly lusted for her. *Her.*

Jake grinned. "You like it when I ogle your body, don't you?" He led her to his car. Once inside, he said, "Connie, I don't know what happened between us last Friday night, but I'm willing to take the rap for it. I can be pretty clueless when it comes to this man-woman stuff."

She smiled a real smile for the first time since she'd walked in the club's door. "I like it when a man's willing to apologize, even when he has no idea what he did. But that's not going to wash, devil dog."

"It's not?" His grin wilted.

"No. Because the whole sorry mess is my fault. I thought you'd set up a threesome with Amanda behind my back. I thought you'd asked me out only so you could have both of us again. Or something stupid like that."

"That's stupid all right, little lady. You truly do need that spanking I never gave you."

She held her breath, waiting, watching him.

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“But not now. Maybe not tonight at all.”

His lips touched hers. She sucked in her breath at the spark she felt, parting her lips for his insistent tongue. The two of them spent several minutes kissing before he broke away. “You’re forgiven, by the way,” he groaned against her neck.

His fingers touched her nipples through her T-shirt, and she couldn’t stifle her moan. Every touch, every sensation sent little chills of excitement rippling through her body. The way his hands cupped her breasts possessively made her want to rip his clothing off right there in the parking lot.

“Connie,” he said, “I want you for more than just a night. I want us to get to know each other. I want us to be together—maybe forever.”

“Maybe?” She grasped him through his jeans, and felt his entire body shudder.

“When you touch me like that, I’m ready to propose just to have you again for one fucking night.”

“One fucking night, one night of fucking,” she said. “That sounds good to me. Drive me home, Jake, so you can drive *it* home inside me.”

She gripped his hand tightly while directing him to her apartment.

* * *

Jake couldn’t help himself. Once they were safely inside her apartment, he clutched Connie to him like a life preserver. When his mouth landed on hers, he reveled in the heat of her tongue and her breath. The sensation of her breasts, pressing against his chest like heavenly pillows, made him dizzy with lust.

She moaned, gripping his butt tightly, grinding her pelvis against his, her body rubbing his rigid cock in all the right ways.

He hadn’t wanted a woman this badly since he’d been sixteen, the night Jennifer Graham had let him into her pants.

At thirty-two, he knew more, a lot more, about satisfying a woman. He would ensure that tonight would be spectacular for Connie.

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He broke their clinch long enough to lift her T-shirt. When he brushed his fingers across her rib cage, her entire body vibrated under his touch. He massaged her breasts through her thin knit bra, bringing her nipples to fierce stiffness. Then, he lowered his mouth and sucked them through the soft cloth for a few moments before pushing her bra down.

He heard her whisper, “Oh, God,” when his tongue’s tip tickled one puckered nipple. But he took his time, first licking it lightly. Then, he blew air across the nipple before sucking it deeply into his mouth.

He kept sucking until he heard her moan, “Please, please.”

He switched to the other breast, repeating the licking, blowing, and sucking until he felt her hands unzipping him. He pulled his mouth from her breast to say, “Not yet.”

“Bedroom. Now,” she moaned.

He picked her up in his arms, and carried her in the direction she pointed.

* * *

Connie’s thoughts whirled in her brain. Jake was carrying her to the bed, something she’d always wanted a man to do. It made her feel cherished, loved.

He placed her on the bed and promptly peeled off her jeans and panties.

Her breasts actually ached, she was so aroused. She’d been wet since their first kiss tonight. She spread her bare legs, more than ready.

But he didn’t take the hint. Instead, he began sucking her nipples again. Just when she despaired that he’d never touch her *there*, his fingers riffled through her pubic hair. It was so unexpected, so light a touch, that she nearly came.

Maybe I should try the direct approach.

“Jake, I’m ready, right now.”

He lifted his head and smiled before moving down her body with

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his tongue. She knew where that tongue was headed. Her pussy quivered at the long wait for him to part her labia.

But, no. He spent time simply breathing on her pussy, his breath warm, her rippling hairs taking her to the edge.

Then she felt something soft, wet, and incredibly hot dart between her folds, touching her clit quickly.

Oh, God, oh, yes!

She grabbed his head, refusing to let him pull away, in case he wanted to tease her more. The next touch of his tongue was a long, slow stroke that made love to her clit, over and over and over.

Her entire body was shaking. Vaguely, she noticed that his hands were holding her hips still, the better to bring her pleasure.

When he sucked her clit into his mouth, her orgasm rushed through her body. Stars were shooting from her fingers and toes, and behind her eyelids. Waves of sensation that refused to end made her shriek wordlessly.

When they receded, she begged, "Fuck me now. Please, Jake. *Now*. I swear I'll die if you don't."

He moved his mouth to hers. She shut her eyes as he positioned himself between her legs. It took an eternity before she felt the sweet steel of his erection sliding into her, and then out.

"Look at me," he said. She opened her eyes.

No man had ever looked at her with such love, such tenderness. Not even Ryan, on the night before he shipped out. She felt tears spill down her cheeks.

"Connie," he said in a hoarse whisper. "I think I love you."

"Me, too," she said, just before sensations of his cock slipping in and out overwhelmed her. Jake's every thrust was full of power and speed. She wanted not to come yet in order to glory in their delicious erotic dance, but as her orgasm enveloped her, she quit fighting the feelings. She floated on a cloud of pleasure, Jake's sounds of climax

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echoing in her ears. They lay together, not moving, for a while.

Jake stirred. “There’s so much I don’t know about you that I want to learn. For example, what’s your full name? Mine’s Jacob Roger Stone.”

“Constance Faith Woods,” she said.

“Constance Faith Woods. Constant Faith—that’s nearly identical to *Semper Fidelis*, always faithful.” He kissed her lightly on the lips. “Even your name is right for me.”

Connie smiled, starting to speak, but Jake placed an index finger across her lips before she could. “Constance Faith Woods Stone would be even better,” he said.

Her heart pounded against her chest wall. Was this a proposal? So soon?

“Shut up and kiss me, Marine,” she whispered before stopping further words with her mouth.

EPILOGUE

Six months later

Jake stood at the altar in his dress blues, waiting for his bride. An old friend from the Marines, now working in the private sector, stood to his left to serve as best man and witness.

He'd decided to re-up, and Connie had supported his decision to put in his full twenty years with the Marines. The two of them had spent only a week or so together before he'd formally proposed, but something deep inside him knew she was The One. He didn't hesitate once he realized he'd be crazy to let her go.

Then he'd gone back to serving his country. Connie had written to him every day, it seemed, and they had maximized the few chances they'd had for video email and chat. Now he was about to embark on the only adventure bigger than his first time overseas, fighting a war: a marriage that would last a lifetime.

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The small chapel sported poinsettias, gardenias, and holly, for Christmas was next week. A few friends and relatives sat in the front rows, waiting.

When the organist touched the keys, producing the first chords of the old, familiar tune, Jake turned his attention to the aisle. Amanda, dressed in deep green velvet, walked until she reached the altar. She winked at him as she took her place opposite his best man.

The sight of Connie in white velvet, her blonde hair glowing under the lights, brought a lump to his throat. The white gardenias she carried, with their glossy green foliage, briefly blurred before he blinked away his rising tide of emotions.

Connie's eyes glistened as she now stood opposite him.

The minister began speaking the words they had both longed to hear, the words that would tie them to each other forever.

* * *

Connie had to remind herself to breathe as she waited to say, "I do." Her best friend grinned at her when she shifted her glance in Mandy's direction.

What was it her friend had said while helping her dress for the wedding? "This is the last time you'll ever see me in a fancy dress, so this marriage had better last." Remembering Amanda's jest made Connie grin back.

Her friend had met someone—a female someone. Connie wasn't surprised, despite Amanda's protests that she "wasn't looking for a long-term thing." Everyone needed love, a special someone. And Connie was thrilled that love had finally found her friend.

She caught Jake's glance, the naked adoration in his expression taking her breath away—again. She forced herself to inhale and exhale.

Breathe, breathe!

She now realized she'd loved Jake from the first moment she'd seen him sitting at the bar with a wilting rose. Something in the way he'd

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held his body, his obvious sadness combined with an inner tender strength, had grabbed her heart and had never let it go.

And now they were marrying.

She imagined what their honeymoon would be like—four nights at the Chicago Drake Hotel, living on room service and each other. She felt heat rising in her face when memories of Jake taking her from behind began to play in her head.

Jake caught her gaze. He silently mouthed, “Love you.”

Tears filled her eyes once more.

Suddenly, the wedding was nearly over. They’d said their “I do’s”, and the minister was about to present them as a married couple to their assembled guests.

It was time.

Each reached for the other’s hand. They faced the pews, and in strong voices, said in unison, “*Semper Fidelis*.”

BARRIE ABALARD

Barrie has worked as a radio personality, technical writer, taxi driver, bank clerk, and ad copy writer, but she's always come back to her first love, fiction writing. For eleven years, she has written for various spanking-oriented e-publishers. Her credits include the sale of more than thirty-five short stories and two short novels to CF Publications, for whom she writes as "Miss Lee." Barrie is married with a grown child and lives in one of the Middle Atlantic States, along with two persnickety cats.

You can learn more about Barrie by visiting her website:

<http://barrieabalard.com>

* * *

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