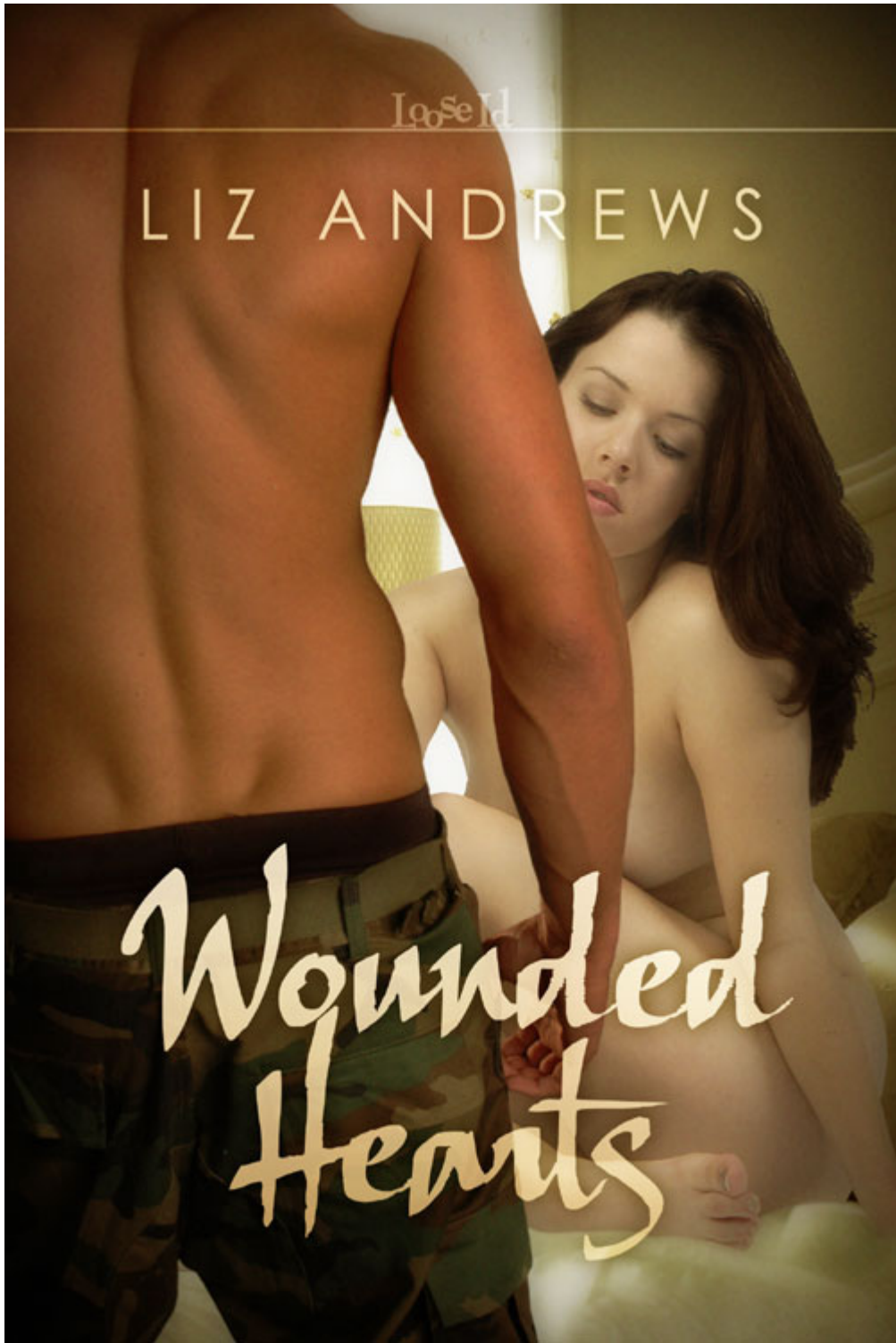


Loose Id

LIZ ANDREWS

Wounded
Hearts



WOUNDED HEARTS

Liz Andrews

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Liz Andrews

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Dedication

To Stephanie, my friend, my confidant, my taskmaster. Without you, none of this would be possible. Borrowed time it may be, but I'll take fifty years, please.

Chapter One

Eagerly scanning her email, Erin Riley hunted for the one address she always read first, before any other. Emails from her fiancé were treasures she ripped into as fervently as packages on Christmas morning. Unfortunately she hadn't received one in over a week and was starting to get worried. She usually tried to ignore the fact Patrick was overseas, fighting in a war where death could happen any day, but at times like these, when they hadn't corresponded, the fears would creep in. Thankfully, Erin finally spotted the coveted email and clicked on the message.

Dear Erin,

I didn't want to do this in an email, but I can't go on pretending things haven't changed. I'm a different person and so are you. The picture of you at your office party proved it beyond a shadow of a doubt. We were too young to get engaged and in the last two years we've grown apart. We need to end things now rather than going on with the charade so we can both start to get on with our lives, separately. I never meant to hurt you.

Patrick

Erin sat still as a statue, unable to comprehend what she was reading. It felt as if her heart had been torn from her chest and all that remained was the shell of her former happy self. She could hear a loud keening and realized she was crying.

“Erin, what the hell?” Marianne, her twin sister ran into the room, pulling her from her chair. “Did something happen to Patrick?”

The hysterical laughter bubbled up before she could control it. “Happen, no, nothing happened except he dumped me.” Erin pulled from her sister’s arms and dropped to the bed.

Hearing movement across the room, she knew Marianne must be reading the source of her misery. As Erin reviewed the email in her mind, one phrase continued to stand out, *I’m a different person and so are you. The picture of you at your office party proved it beyond a shadow of a doubt.* She knew what picture he was referring to and her cheeks burned at the thought.

Never thin, Erin had put on forty extra pounds in the last two years. She didn’t know just how bad she looked, though, until the candid party shot. In the picture she was standing talking to one of her colleagues, laughing at some stupid joke he had made. Not realizing someone was taking a picture, she hadn’t been sucking in her gut, which had become her usual *modus operandi*. Instead the picture showed off every curve, lump, and roll.

The only reason she’d even sent it was because Marianne had forced her to do it. Now she regretted it bitterly. Erin had planned to go on a diet and lose the weight before Patrick got back home, or if not then, at least by the wedding. Of course now the wedding was never going to happen. Patrick finally realized he was engaged to a blimp and wanted out.

“Bastard.”

“Don’t call him that.” Even now Erin felt the need to defend him. Despite Patrick and Erin being high school sweethearts, Marianne had never thought he was good enough for her. It was all so stereotypical, she’d been the brains and he was the bad boy. They’d met when she was a junior and he was a senior. He’d been failing English and she was assigned as

his tutor. After the semester was over, he asked her out. No one was more surprised than Erin, but she'd said yes and had never regretted taking the chance.

Everyone predicted she was only a fling for him, but they'd dated for the last six years. While she'd gone to college, he had joined the reserves and worked in the local factory. He made good money and Erin didn't care about his lack of degree.

When Patrick had been called up to go overseas two years ago he'd asked Erin to marry him. He didn't have much, but he did have his grandmother's ring. Erin treasured the antique and had even imagined passing it on to her own children.

"Erin, he's not worth it. Don't let him hurt you like this." Marianne sat on the side of the bed, stroking her hair in comfort.

"I love him." To Erin, those words said it all. She couldn't turn her emotions on and off like a faucet. Even though his email hurt, her love for him was still ever present.

"Then fight for him. Don't let him get away with it." Marianne's fierce declaration was surprising.

"I didn't think you liked Patrick."

"I don't. In fact, now I like him even less. But if you truly love him you need to fight for him and find out why he dumped you."

"Isn't it obvious? He saw that damned picture of me looking like a whale and decided to cut bait and run."

"Give me a break. So you've gained a few pounds."

Erin rolled her eyes. Sometimes her sister could be completely oblivious. A few pounds, please, she'd gained a toddler, with no precious three-year-old in sight. Marianne and she might be twins, but their similarities were few and far between. Although they both had dark hair, Marianne wore hers short and very chic. She always dressed in designer clothing, but she also had the body for it. Tall and thin, she could compete with any model in the catalogs. In stark contrast, Erin had let her hair grow and it curled around her shoulders in

an unruly mess. Her wardrobe ran more toward the comfortable rather than the fashionable. The extra pounds she carried made wearing runway clothing impossible.

“Don’t roll your eyes at me. I know how he looked at you. He loved you for the person you are and he didn’t care how much you weighed.”

“That was forty pounds ago. Like he said, we’ve both changed. He’s a gorgeous military hunk and I’m a fat pig.”

It wasn’t hard to put on forty pounds in two years with the kind of stress and boredom Erin had been through. Long distance relationships were hard and she’d always used food as a source of comfort. Unfortunately, it had come back to bite her in the ass in the worst possible way.

Marianne stood, hands on her hips. “I’m not going to sit here and listen to you talk down about yourself. When you decide to get out of the pit you’re wallowing in, let me know.” Turning, she stomped from the room.

What did she know? I just got dumped. I have a right to wallow.

Erin stayed in bed the rest of the day, alternating crying and getting angry. Her lowest point came when she realized she hadn’t eaten all day and wasn’t even hungry. If only Patrick had broken it off sooner she might have stopped eating and not gained as much weight. The stupidity of her reflection finally propelled her from the bed.

Walking into the living room Erin plopped into her favorite comfy chair. Marianne, sitting on the couch reading, looked up for a moment, but said nothing. Finally breaking the silence, Erin asked the question haunting her.

“If it isn’t my weight, why would he break up with me?”

“I don’t know sweetie, but we can find out. Isn’t he due for discharge soon?”

“Yeah, he should be coming home in the next two months. We’ve been waiting to get the final date.”

"I'm sure you can get it from someone at the base. Then I think you should set out to seduce him."

Erin stared at her sister in shock. "I don't think --"

"Shh, I'm the one thinking here. You need to beard the lion in his lair."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means to confront him boldly, so no more flannel nighties. We need to go shopping and find you some new clothes, things to entice him. You also need to drop the modesty act and get more comfortable with your body, whatever size it is. And finally, it means you're moving out."

"Wait a minute. I'm moving out?" Erin felt caught in the middle of Hurricane Marianne. Her sister was a whirlwind when she put her mind to a project and Erin had the sinking feeling her love life was the newest project.

"Yep, if you really want this to work, you need to be ever present and that means living right under his nose. He left you the key to his apartment. You were going to live there when you got married. I say you push the envelope and move in early."

Erin bit her lip, wondering if she could really do everything Marianne suggested. It would be a complete change for her, a one hundred and eighty degree turn around. She could fail. Ultimately though, she knew if she did nothing she had already failed.

"Okay, tell me where to start."

* * * * *

Patrick O'Rourke made his way through the throng of crowds. He'd heard the airport made a spectacle for returning military personnel, with balloons and signs welcoming them home. Of course family and friends of the soldiers joined in the party, happy to be reunited with their loved ones. But he never expected to see this much pomp and circumstance. Hell, there was even a high school band playing.

Patrick didn't imagine anyone would be waiting for him and he wasn't disappointed. His parents died the year after he graduated from high school, he'd alienated all his former friends and Erin...well, he'd made certain she wouldn't be around.

"Welcome home, soldier." A leggy blonde, eyeing him as if he were her favorite candy, tried to hand him a balloon. Patrick kept walking, ignoring her. He wasn't interested in a bubblegum girl who wanted to get her kicks with the soldier boy. He just wanted to get away from all these people.

A hand on his arm caused him to drop his duffle bag and whirl around toward the threat. The blonde, who had thought to chase down her prey, jumped back in obvious fear. "I'm sorry, never mind." She hurried away, back toward her friends as Patrick grabbed his bag and headed out. He quickly hailed a taxi, more than ready to leave the hustle and bustle of the busy airport.

He wasn't fit to be around other people right now, which was obvious by his reaction to the woman in the airport. He'd clearly overreacted. In fact he'd barely held back the blow he wanted to land.

"Where to?"

Giving the driver his address, Patrick settled into the back seat and closed his eyes. The quiet of the cab was a welcome change. The multiple stimulations of the airport were an assault to his brain. After two years of bland beige desert sands, the colors of civilization were overwhelming. To top it off, he felt as if he were jumping at every sound.

"We're all real proud of you."

Prying open one eye, Patrick stared at the taxi driver, who was staring back at him in the rearview mirror.

"You're a true American hero." The cabbie continued to wax enthusiastically.

"Thanks." Although far from the truth, Patrick didn't want to insult the man. He'd joined the reserves because he wanted to serve his country and he knew that would most

likely mean being shipped overseas. What he hadn't expected was the devastating cost to his soul. No longer the carefree man he used to be, Patrick was no good to anyone any more. "The real heroes are those who didn't make it back."

"I suppose you saw a lot over there, huh?"

Sighing, Patrick surmised his dream of a quiet taxicab home was long forgotten. He'd responded to the man and now he was caught. "Yeah, I suppose I did."

The driver nodded thoughtfully. "I was in Vietnam." He paused dramatically, as if waiting for Patrick's response before continuing. "You guys are lucky. Even those who oppose the war support the troops."

Patrick imagined the man was right, but somehow he didn't feel lucky. Instead he just felt weary. He knew he should be glad to be alive, but his homecoming wasn't the happy, thankful experience of most soldiers.

The taxi finally reached his apartment complex and Patrick pulled out his wallet.

"No charge, soldier. Like I said, we're all really proud of what you guys did."

"Thank you, but it's not necessary." Patrick tried to press the money into the man's hands, but was waved away. He finally climbed out and watched as the driver pulled away. The relief he felt upon reaching his apartment was palpable.

Digging out his key, Patrick opened his door to a surprisingly seductive setting. Soft music played in the background and the only light in the room came from a fire crackling in the hearth. An ice bucket sat on the coffee table, chilling a bottle of wine, and a tray of strawberries sat alongside. But the most amazing sight was lying across the couch.

Lush curves were draped with filmy fabric, giving peek-a-boo views of a body he hadn't seen in two years. It was more alluring than if she'd been lying there naked. She looked like a present he wanted to unwrap.

Her hair was so dark it looked almost black in the subdued lighting. She'd let it grow in the last two years and it curled over her shoulders. Her brilliant blue eyes shone as she licked

her lips. "Welcome home." The husky whisper sent a shudder through him. He never expected to see her again, not after his email.

"Erin." Just saying her name brought back a rush of feelings he wasn't expecting -- longing, hopefulness, and then despair.

"So I see you *haven't* forgotten my name."

"Didn't you get my email?" This was not supposed to happen. She shouldn't be here.

"Of course. I've saved all your messages." Erin stretched sensually, causing him to bite back a moan.

Patrick continued to stand in the doorway, unwilling to come any further into the room, any closer to the temptation she was providing.

"I meant my last email."

A small frown marred Erin's face for a brief moment before she smiled. "Yes, I received it." She stood and walked across the room toward him. "I decided to ignore it."

Patrick shut the door and walked across the room to drop his duffle bag, effectively sidestepping Erin as she approached him. "It's over, Erin. I thought I was very clear. I'm breaking our engagement."

"I'm not stupid, you know. I can read. I've chosen to ignore your idiotic email because you made a promise to me and I'm holding you to it." She accompanied her words with a wave of her hand, flashing his grandmother's engagement ring. It seemed a lifetime away now. Back then he'd been looking forward to the future and their life together. Before life had rudely interrupted and reminded him of a few cold hard facts.

"You don't always get what you want, Erin. You can ignore it, but it doesn't change the facts. We're over."

He wanted his words to hurt her enough to make her leave and hopefully avoid the questions she would raise. Patrick was drained. He'd never anticipated a confrontation with Erin. He was a coward and he knew it all too well. He'd figured the email would do his dirty

work and if he ran into Erin years from now, he'd be able to handle it. But meeting like this was throwing salt on an open wound. It was too fresh for him to pretend to be unaffected.

"You forget, Patrick, you're not a dictator or deity. You don't get to make declarations and expect the rest of the world to fall at your feet and do your bidding."

Patrick tried to ignore the tremor he heard in her voice and her rapidly blinking eyes. If Erin started crying it would be all over. He'd take her in his arms and comfort her and all the sacrifices he'd made would be down the drain.

You're doing this for her. Don't forget that asshole.

"Take your own advice. I'm not going to fall into line just because you've decided to ignore me. Engagements end. Get over it and grow up."

Her gasp was the only indication he'd scored a blow. She stared at him, the depth of his betrayal evident in her eyes. Patrick saw her swallow hard, as if she were gathering her courage to ask him the ultimate question, *why*. Before she could get the chance he was getting out of the line of fire.

"Look, it's late. I'm going to get a drink. Hopefully you've finally gotten the message and I expect you'll be gone by the time I return. Goodbye, Erin."

Chapter Two

He didn't come home.

It was the first thought Erin had when she woke the next morning, still feeling exhausted from the night before. After Patrick left she'd waited up for nearly three hours before heading off to bed. Her carefully laid seduction plans tasted like bitter ash in her mouth in the cold, harsh morning light. Although Marianne had convinced her Patrick was just getting cold feet and once they were together again Erin could fix whatever the problem was between them, she was no longer so convinced.

The only thing that finally propelled her from the bed was the knowledge she had to go to work this morning. Dragging herself into the bathroom, Erin looked at her reflection in the mirror, at the baby doll nightie Marianne convinced her to buy and sighed with disgust. She'd attempted to purchase something which would cover all her flaws while still being seductive. It was obviously woefully inadequate. For one moment she almost believed she'd garnered some sexual interest from Patrick, but his words denied anything she thought she might have seen.

By contrast, Patrick looked like perfection in his uniform. The muscles he'd gained in the last two years filled it out nicely, and his close-shaven hair didn't detract one iota from

his appearance. His skin was tanned bronze from working in the harsh sun and lines highlighted his eyes. He looked as if he'd aged more than the two years he'd been gone, looking more mature, but also more wary. Patrick seemed like a different man, harder and colder than when he'd left, especially when she looked into his dark eyes.

Realizing her daydreaming wasn't going to get her to work any faster she quickly showered and dressed for work. As she headed down the hallway toward the kitchen, Erin paused when she thought she heard a sound coming from the living room. She tiptoed into the room to find Patrick folding the afghan blanket. If she'd thought he looked good the night before he looked even better standing there in only his boxer shorts.

Unfortunately for him, Erin wasn't in the mood to appreciate his good looks at the moment.

"So, I guess you did make it home last night."

"It certainly looks that way." Patrick's nonchalant attitude made her blood boil.

"You didn't have to hide out here in the living room. It wasn't as if I'd attack you in your own bed." Erin had the feeling the only person she was kidding with that statement was herself.

"I didn't realize you'd still be here." Patrick totally sidestepped the sleeping arrangement issue, obviously concentrating on what was annoying him the most, the fact she was living in his apartment.

"Be that as it may, it's your apartment and your bed. You can sleep there anytime you want."

"I told you to be gone."

Erin let her resentment overwhelm her. "Well it's too damn bad that I'm living here now then, isn't it?"

Picking up her purse and keys, Erin slammed from the apartment, her anger giving way to despair. At this point she didn't see a way to get through to him. On the other hand,

proximity was probably her best tool right now. He was going to have a hard time forgetting her when she was living in his home.

Once she pulled away from the curb Erin flipped open her cell phone to call Marianne. She needed to talk to someone and her sister was the only one who knew about Patrick breaking their engagement.

“Hey Erin, so am I to assume things went well?” Her sister always checked the caller ID, so Erin wasn’t surprised at the greeting. Besides Marianne knew last night was seduction night.

“No, things didn’t go well. They went as far from well as things could go.” Erin proceeded to give Marianne a blow by blow account of the previous night as well as the events of the morning.

“I’m sorry.” Marianne paused as if deciding whether to continue. “I know I was the one who convinced you to try this plan, but now I’m doubting the wisdom of my advice. Maybe it’s time to just let go.”

She believed in him, in them, and she wasn’t willing to surrender yet. “I love him. I can’t just give up on him. He just seems so different, like he’s hiding something.”

“Yeah, like a heart,” Marianne muttered.

“Marianne. I thought you were on my side.”

“I am. I am, really. I just don’t want to see you get hurt again.”

“I know and I appreciate it, but I’ve got to see this plan through to the end. Wish me luck.”

“Good luck, sweetie. I love you.”

“Love you too, bye.” Erin hung up the phone.

When she finally reached work, Erin tried some deep breathing exercises in an attempt to calm herself. Only a few minutes into the treatment she was interrupted by a visit from her co-worker.

“Morning Erin, whatcha doing?” Dave Kinner worked in the cubicle next to Erin and they’d become friendly in the last year. Marianne was convinced Dave had a crush on Erin, but Erin thought he was just being nice. Although they’d gone out to dinner a few times, he knew she was engaged and had never tried anything.

If she’d never met Patrick, Erin might have been attracted to someone like Dave. He was smart and funny, always cracking a joke and making her laugh. Although not devastatingly handsome, Dave had a boyish charm, green eyes, and sun-kissed, sandy-colored hair. Unfortunately Erin compared every man she met to Patrick, and no one measured up to her fiancé.

Giving up on the deep breathing, Erin opened her eyes to smile at Dave. “Just a little morning mantra to get me started.”

“Hey, maybe you can teach it to me? I need something to get me through the day.”

Erin laughed. “I thought your morning coffee got you through the day?”

“It does, along with my morning donut, speaking of which...” Pulling his hands from behind his back, Dave presented a chocolate frosted donut to Erin. “Your morning pick-me-up has arrived.”

Although the donut looked heavenly, Erin knew she should refuse. If she really wanted to win Patrick back she needed to drop these forty extra pounds. On the other hand, she could really use the comfort of chocolate after the night and morning she’d had. Reaching out, she started to take the donut.

“Erin.” The raspy voice calling her name caused her to freeze and drop her hand from the offending pastry.

“Patrick, what are you doing here?” Erin jumped to her feet, shocked he’d shown up at her job. She knew she probably sounded guilty, but why did he have to show up when she was getting ready to eat a donut? It couldn’t have looked worse. When you’re fat you never

want people to see you eating, especially something unhealthy like a donut and especially someone who you want to look good for.

He certainly didn't look too pleased as he stood there staring at her. His brow was furrowed and he was staring daggers at Dave. "Want to introduce me to your friend?"

"Uh, Patrick, this is Dave Kinner, the accountant for our department. Dave, this is Patrick --"

"Her fiancé, right?" Dave shook Patrick's hand as Erin stood, dumbfounded.

"If you'll excuse us." Patrick looked pointedly at Dave, who quickly excused himself from the general vicinity.

"You were pretty rude to him."

"I didn't come here to talk about your --"

"Why did you come here?" Erin wanted to hope it was to tell her he'd made the worst mistake of his life, but seeing him standing before her, she knew that was a faint hope.

"Where are my keys?"

Erin stepped back in shock. She couldn't believe he wanted her out of the apartment so badly he'd come to find her at work to get the keys. Dear God, how could he have changed so much from the loving man she once knew?

"I..." Swallowing, she tried to start again, but in her attempt to hold back the tears she could barely form words. She could feel her heart pounding and idly wondered if he could hear it racing.

"I wanted to run some errands today and couldn't find my car keys. I had to take a taxi here."

Car keys, he only wanted his car keys.

The relief she felt was palpable. Dropping into her chair, Erin could feel her heart finally beginning to slow.

“I left them in the desk, right hand drawer.”

“Thanks.” Patrick stood there awkwardly for a moment before turning on his heel. “I’ll talk to you later.” He walked away as Erin stood staring at his retreating back. If things kept going down this path the back of him was all she was ever going to see.

* * * * *

Patrick breathed a sigh of relief when he opened the door to the apartment later that night. The room was dark and Erin was nowhere to be seen. But unfortunately he could still smell her fragrance in the air. Taking a deep breath, he held the memory of her scent within him. He’d purposely stayed away when Erin would have arrived home from work, not sure he was ready for another encounter with her.

Patrick had followed Erin to her job to check on her after she flew from the apartment that morning. The lack of car keys became the perfect excuse. He never could stand to see Erin in pain and knowing he was the cause was twice as agonizing. But he truly believed the brief pain she was experiencing now was better than living with him for the rest of her life.

Unfortunately he hadn’t expected to come face to face with his rival for Erin’s affections. Of course he shouldn’t care, seeing as he’d been the one to break their engagement. As much as he might pretend to Erin it was over, Patrick knew the truth. He still loved her.

At the time Patrick sent the email he’d been certain it was the right thing to do. But now, after seeing how hurt she was, he began to second-guess his choices. Unfortunately, it was too late. He’d picked the path that led to Erin’s brief misery now, knowing it would eventually lead to her having a lifetime of happiness. One he wouldn’t be a part of. It was seeing it through to the bitter end that was the painful part.

Sitting down abruptly, Patrick took off his boots and socks and pulled his tee shirt off over his head. He was worn out. Sleep had been elusive in the last couple of months and he often had to drive himself to exhaustion to get just a few hours. He was ready to fall into bed

and forget the last two days. Forget the sight of Erin lying on this couch, waiting to welcome him home. And forget the sight of pain in her eyes when he told her goodbye.

Patrick stood and walked toward the bedroom, telling himself he only wanted to check on her well-being. He stopped for a moment at the door. Allowing his eyes to adjust to the darkness, he had no trouble seeing Erin curled up asleep in his bed. She'd kicked the covers off and the short nightgown she had on last night was rucked up her legs, exposing her full pale hips to his hot gaze. The tiny matching string bikini she wore barely covered her. Her hands were tucked under her head and with the moon shining into the room he was sure he saw the tracks of tears dried on her face.

Just as he was telling himself to do the right thing and leave her alone, Erin turned onto her back. The material of her nightgown strained across her chest, while her bountiful breasts practically spilled out of the confines. She must have sensed his presence in the room, because she blinked and slowly opened her eyes.

It had been two years since they'd been together and real life was better than fantasy any day. His own hand was no substitute for the lusciousness in front of him. He knew what he should do, what he had to do, but his body and heart were telling him something completely different. This was his woman.

"If you don't get your ass out of my bed in the next twenty seconds you're going to find yourself fucked and fucked hard." His cock straining against his zipper was telling him to take what was presented. Patrick was certain she'd run at his threat, but she remained silent, just staring at him while he continued to gaze at the succulent offering in his bed.

Patrick loosened his pants and pushed them down over his hips. He stood naked before her, his cock standing in anticipation. Without a word, Erin opened her arms. He walked over and joined her on the bed.

"This is only sex." He wanted to push her away but he couldn't resist the call of her charms.

“Keep telling yourself that.” Erin reached out and grasped his cock, her soft warm hands stroking him.

Patrick groaned at her touch. He had to keep his head, if only for another minute. “You understand it doesn’t change anything, right?”

“Stop talking and come love me.” Erin released his cock and tugged him down to her.

He wanted to deny her words, but he couldn’t lie to himself as easily as he’d been lying to her. He still loved Erin and couldn’t imagine a time when he wouldn’t. Pushing back those thoughts, he rolled over pinning her to the bed.

Patrick began to kiss her jaw line, moving down to her neck. As he nibbled around her collarbone she shivered in response. Sitting up for a moment he reached down and pulled off the gauzy gown, exposing her more fully to his gaze. Her nipples immediately puckered, whether from the cool air or his stare, he wasn’t sure.

Erin was breathing heavily, causing her chest to rise and fall with every inhalation. Cupping a breast in his hand he massaged the ample flesh. He sucked her nipple into his mouth, biting and teasing it till it was rock hard. Turning to her other breast he took her nipple between his fingers and pinched it hard.

“So good,” Erin moaned softly, undulating under his rough touch.

He’d never been rough with her before, always treating her with respect and gentleness. The sight of her reaction sent him into overdrive. Releasing her arms Patrick traveled down her body, biting and kissing until he reached the apex at her thighs. He hooked his fingers in the string of her damp panties and pulled them off. Erin arched her body against him, silently begging for more attention.

“Tell me what you want.” He wanted to hear her say it, something she’d never been willing to do before. Erin had been a virgin the first time they’d made love and he hadn’t had much more experience. Although he often prompted her to talk about what she liked, she’d been shy to express herself in the bedroom.

“Inside,” she gasped. “I want you inside me.”

Patrick was surprised at her response and pleased at the same time.

“Like this?” His fingers slipped inside her, testing the depth of her arousal. She soaked his hand as she twisted her hips and dug her heels into the bed.

“More.” Erin was moaning as Patrick petted and teased her, pinching her clit before thrusting his fingers back and forth. Erin responded to his every touch, grabbing his hand and trapping it between her legs.

“No you don’t.” He pulled his hand back as she gasped, obviously intent on obtaining her orgasm.

Pushing her legs up, Patrick began nibbling at her knee, making his way along her inner thigh. As he reached her pussy he could smell the evidence of her arousal and see the glistening dew. Without touching her there, he gently blew, causing a sharp intake of breath from Erin. Chuckling, he switched to the other leg, licking back up her thigh to her knee.

“Stop teasing me.”

Patrick wanted to taste her, if only for a moment. Leaning down, he swiped his tongue along her slit, gathering the moisture there. Erin tasted like a luscious fruit, still warm as if it were just picked from the tree. He could eat at her all night, but it had been two years and he needed to be inside her. Spreading her legs apart, he knelt between them, positioning his cock at her center. Patrick was rock hard, and had no trouble sliding into her dripping pussy. Erin cried out as he filled her, begging him incoherently for more. She pulled her legs up, wrapping them around his waist.

Her arms encircled his back and she began to run her hands up and down his spine. Patrick felt her touch still for a moment and realized she’d discovered his scars. Pulling back he grabbed her hands from around his neck and pinned them above her head. He didn’t want her to explore his wounds. That would begin a whole round of questions he was unwilling to answer.

Instead he began pumping her pussy as hard as he could, holding nothing back. Erin cried out as her orgasm hit, squeezing her legs tightly around him as it rushed through her. Patrick pulled back, thrusting one last time and spilling himself inside her before collapsing on her prone body.

Eventually he rolled over onto his back, the consequences of his actions slowly seeping into his consciousness. This was not the way he wanted to enforce his broken engagement. Having sex with Erin with no protection was not a step in the right direction.

Glancing over at her, he saw she'd already fallen asleep, curled against his cooling body. As she lay dozing, Patrick could stare at her to his heart's content, the love he tried to hide evident in his every look. His desire, like his love for her, hadn't waned in the last two years. In fact, it was stronger than ever.

Patrick loved Erin's body almost as much as he loved her soul. But it was definitely her body he was looking at now. He never thought he had a "type;" he just loved beautiful women. Erin's curves appealed to him as no other woman's ever had. Even though she'd put on a few pounds since they'd last been together, he liked the fact she wasn't some stick-thin woman who needed to be treated like glass.

Unfortunately, thoughts like these were doing him no good. He needed to banish them and move on. At least for tonight he could do the one thing he could never do when she was awake. Patrick wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close. His exhaustion finally overtook him and he fell asleep.

Chapter Three

Erin came awake as the bathroom door closed. She stretched slowly as her body protested the muscles she hadn't used in two years. In the past Patrick had always treated her respectfully, being careful of her inexperience. Sometimes she had sensed there was more there, but he'd been nothing but gentlemanly.

Last night, however, she caught a glimpse of that something he'd held back. When he announced his intention to fuck her hard, it made her juices flow, although it almost seemed as if Patrick was trying to scare her away with his declaration. Instead of running from his demands, however, she'd embraced them. The timid virgin of two years ago was long gone.

The early morning light shone through the windows. Glancing over at the clock she noted it was almost seven o'clock. Since it was so early, she was surprised at the faint ringing of the phone from the other room. She immediately noticed the phone was missing from the charger on the bedside stand. Erin was constantly picking the phone up from one room and taking it to another, forgetting to return it to its base.

Jumping up from the bed, she grabbed her robe and struggled into it as she ran into the living room. Unfortunately she was too late and heard the message click on and then a stranger's voice.

“O’Rourke, it’s Captain Bryant. Your appointment with the therapist is scheduled for Monday morning at nine. Don’t be late.” The voice was commanding and brooked no argument.

Erin gazed back toward the bedroom, but Patrick must not have heard the telephone ringing from the bathroom. She thought back over the message. *A therapist appointment.* This was definitely a clue to Patrick’s behavior, but she wanted him to open up to her on his own. She didn’t want him to feel trapped by what she’d heard.

Walking back to the bedroom, Erin could hear the shower running. She shed her robe, dropping it to the floor as she opened the bathroom door. The steam from the shower obscured her vision for a moment. But eventually she saw Patrick standing in the glassed in shower, one hand braced against the wall, his head down and the water pounding on his neck and shoulders. The scars she’d only felt last night were starkly visible in the bright lights of the bathroom.

For the first time since he’d returned she could see his vulnerability and it broke her heart. She opened the door to the shower and stepped inside, closing the door as he turned. Before he could speak, Erin dropped to her knees in front of him, her hands clasping his thighs to steady herself. She leaned in, taking in his aroma.

“Erin...”

Erin rarely initiated sex when they’d been together before and never oral sex. She often felt intimidated by her lack of experience. And being naked in the fluorescent lighting of the bathroom didn’t put her at her most self confident. Unfortunately, she couldn’t wait around until the dark of night fell to hide under the covers. Patrick needed her now, whether he was willing to admit it or not. The need she felt to take him in her mouth and give him release was all consuming.

“Shh, no talking.” Erin kissed the tip of his cock before gently taking Patrick’s balls into her hands.

She ran her tongue around the crown and then down the length of his cock, smiling as it twitched in response. As he moaned in appreciation she caressed the sensitive part under the head, enjoying the texture of change from soft and silky to hard curves. She let her lips travel back to the tip, licking at the pre-cum seeping there.

A hiss escaped his throat as Erin enveloped his cock in her mouth. She slowly relaxed, letting his length slide deep within her throat. Before he'd left, Erin had only experimented with giving oral sex, only doing it at his request, and she'd always been too afraid to try to deep throat him.

Pulling back slowly, Erin gently caressed his cock with her tongue. Patrick wrapped his hands in her hair, guiding her movements as she slid her head up and down along his penis. She still held his balls and began to fondle them, rolling them around in her hand.

Patrick moaned and then braced himself against the shower wall as Erin sucked harder, speeding up her motions. Her scalp burned as he tightened his fingers in her hair, shouting out loud as he exploded into her mouth. Erin swallowed convulsively, drinking down his seed.

Patrick's breath was ragged as Erin watched him struggle to gain control. He pulled her up into his arms, tucking her head beneath his, resting his own chin on her head. She tried to wrap her arms around him, but he turned her around, pulling her back against his chest, effectively blocking her embrace.

"Why won't you let me touch you?"

Rather than answer, Patrick opened the shower door and stepped out. Grabbing a towel, he wrapped it around his waist before looking up and facing Erin.

"Finish your shower." Patrick slowly closed the door to the shower before turning and exiting the bathroom.

As she stood in the now cooling shower, Erin realized her tears were mixed with the water streaming down her face. After last night and then this morning, Erin had been sure

they'd overcome their biggest hurdle. She'd been a fool once again. He'd warned her it was only sex and she'd convinced herself she could make him see the error of his ways.

Scrubbing her hands over her face, Erin tried to wash away the evidence of her despair. She didn't want him to see how much his actions affected her. Instead, she was ready to give him a piece of her mind. How dare he treat her this way?

Turning off the shower she entered the bedroom to find it empty. He could run, but he couldn't hide. Quickly putting on her underwear, she grabbed her sweatpants and oversized sweatshirt. Her bra was nowhere to be found, so she decided to forgo it for now. There wasn't much she could do with her hair, so she finger combed it, intent on allowing it to dry naturally. She'd change for work after she confronted Patrick.

Hands on her hips, Erin marched into the living room to see Patrick sitting in a chair, staring broodingly off into space.

"You never answered my question."

When Patrick lifted his head to stare at her, Erin could feel the intensity of his gaze down to her core. She actually had to stop herself from crossing her legs or putting her hand to her vagina. Her nipples peaked under the fleece of the sweatshirt as he continued to stare at her.

"I don't need your touches."

Erin blinked, actually confused for a minute about what he was saying, before realizing he was finally answering her question. The yearning she felt from his look was overriding every coherent thought in her brain. Finally shaking off the haze consuming her Erin retorted to his ridiculous response.

"You seemed to like them well enough last night."

Patrick bent his head in acknowledgment. "That was sex. I don't want or need your love."

Erin dug her fingernails into the palm of her hand, determined she would not react. If that's what he wanted, fine, she'd give him exactly what he asked for and nothing else. "If all you want is sex, then why not take what you have waiting for you right here. I'm certainly convenient enough."

Patrick studied her for so long, she felt like a bug under a microscope. Erin wanted to squirm at the force of his perusal while at the same time hating her reaction to it. She could almost hear him mentally ticking off her flaws, wondering if she were worth the effort.

Maybe Marianne was right. Perhaps it was time to throw in the towel and declare their relationship dead. Erin didn't know if she could stand here much longer waiting for a response. And the fact she was willing to offer herself as his sexual outlet with no love was so far from the results she was after it was ludicrous to think this ploy would ever work.

"I want sex my way."

Erin shivered at the timbre in his voice. She had no idea what he meant, but the resonance coming from him made her want to melt into a puddle on the floor.

"What's sex your way?" Erin was proud of the fact she'd been able to control the tremor she knew was in her voice.

"How I want it and when I want it." Patrick's gaze never wavered as he spoke, his eyes staring keenly at her, as if gauging her reaction.

Erin was bewildered. She'd never denied Patrick sex and had always enjoyed their lovemaking. But she got the feeling he wasn't talking standard missionary, in-the-dark-sex here. No, this was that "whatever" she'd glimpsed last night. Now she needed to make the decision if she was willing to open the door to what he was requesting.

She loved Patrick and surprisingly, she trusted him. If this was the only opening he was willing to give right now, she was going to take it. Throwing caution to the wind, Erin gave her answer.

"How and when do you want me?"

* * * * *

Patrick released the pent-up breath he'd been holding. Did he want her to accept what he was asking or did he want to scare her from him? He still didn't know. All he did know was with her submission his cock was immediately at full staff. Still, Erin hadn't heard his demands yet. The running and screaming might be imminent.

"Take off your sweatshirt."

Patrick thought he caught a trembling of her hand before she grabbed the hem of her sweatshirt and pulled it over her head. Although he'd suspected she wasn't wearing a bra, the sight of her unfettered breasts took his breath away. The creamy paleness of her skin called to him in ways he couldn't explain. He wanted to see his mark on her, proudly displayed.

"Get your nipples hard." He knew his demands sounded harsh, even to his own ears.

Erin's brow was furrowed and she opened her mouth to respond. Patrick was certain this would be the moment she'd tell him to take a hike. It was as if she could read his mind, however, and instead of speaking, she closed her mouth slowly and hefted a breast into each hand.

Erin rubbed her thumbs across the tips of her breasts, the soft touch slowly pulling a response from her pink nipples. Reaching up with her index fingers, she began to pinch them lightly, unconsciously biting her lip in response to her own touch. Patrick watched as her eyes slowly drifted closed and her face got that soft, wanting look he loved so well.

Before he comprehended what he was doing he'd unsnapped his jeans and pushed them down over his hips to free his cock. Watching Erin slowly tease herself was better than any porno or imagined fantasy he could ever create. As he stroked his cock, Patrick wondered how many times she'd touched herself like this in the last two years. She certainly seemed to know what her body liked.

Her light touches were firmer now and her previously pink nipples were now a raspberry color as the blood rushed to the area. Patrick sat, stunned for a moment, when Erin

used her nails to pinch and scrape across the tender flesh. She was pulling hard on her nipples now, flattening the flesh as she tugged it away from her body. He didn't even know if she realized her hips were undulating in time with her pulls. Patrick wished he had some nipple clamps to adorn the now diamond-hard nubs.

"Stop." Patrick's voice was ragged with desire.

At first he thought Erin might not have heard him, but then he realized she was close to orgasm, simply from the nipple stimulation. He was sure if he touched her clit at that moment she would explode in his arms.

"I said stop." Firmer now, his commanding voice finally caused her to break contact. She lifted her passion-glazed eyes and licked her lips as she stood there topless and wanting.

"Take off your sweatpants."

Erin quickly complied, pulling them from her body and kicking them away. She stood, lips pressed together, in nothing but a scrap of lace covering her sweet pussy. Patrick decided he needed to know how far he could push her before she'd push back and decided to go for broke.

"Do you have any clothespins?"

Patrick always had had a domineering, controlling personality. Although the tendencies permeated most of his life, in the past he'd always downplayed them in the bedroom. Erin was innocent and pure and he never wanted to soil their relationship with his aggressive needs. He loved her and thought he'd always be content with the way things were.

After two years away, however, he was no longer able to suppress his sexual needs. During his time in the Middle East he'd remained faithful to Erin, but he heard about a lot of different things he'd never known before. It made him realize he wasn't alone in his need to control his woman in the bedroom.

"What?"

“You heard me. Answer the question.”

“Yes.”

“Go get them.”

“Now?”

Patrick didn't answer, but stared at her until Erin sighed heavily and walked into the kitchen. Returning a few scant seconds later, she had a handful of clothespins in her fist. She looked like she wanted to punch him with it. But he also noticed her nipples were still rock hard, even though she was no longer touching herself.

“Come here and kneel, legs apart.” Erin's eyes widened at his command and he decided he had probably pushed her too hard. Once again she surprised him and walked to his chair and knelt at his feet. Her eyes were riveted to his cock, now steadily leaking pre-cum. He almost groaned as she licked her lips at the sight.

Finally releasing his cock, Patrick lifted her hand and pried her fingers open, removing the clothespins and setting all but one on the side table.

“I want to see your nipples clamped.” Patrick watched as Erin's eyes flared to life at his words and her gaze swung to the one clothespin he still held in his hand. “Aching with the constant pressure and filled with blood. These aren't pretty, but they'll do for now.”

Grasping her left nipple between his thumb and forefinger, he pulled the tender flesh out, imitating Erin's earlier manipulations. Pressing open the clothespin, he brought it to her nipple.

“Do you want this?”

Erin swallowed visibly and cleared her throat. “I want what you want, how you want it and when you want it.”

Patrick released the spring, clamping the wooden pin over her flesh. Erin gasped at the pain, tears forming in her eyes as she blinked furiously. Patrick grabbed her right nipple and Erin's body shuddered in reaction.

She couldn't handle it.

Quickly releasing her, Patrick moved to remove the clothespin from her left nipple when Erin stopped him with a hand on his wrist.

"Please, don't stop."

Her breathing was shallow, but it wasn't pain in her eyes he saw, but desire. Patrick pushed his hand between her thighs and found her panties were soaked through. She groaned at his touch and jerked her hips toward his questing hand, but he quickly withdrew his hand.

Seizing her right nipple, Patrick clamped it as Erin gasped once again. She gripped his arms tightly as she fought to regain her breath. Finally sitting back on her heels, Erin stared up at him with longing. Patrick eased back to stare at the sight of his woman kneeling before him, her nipples tightly clamped.

Erin moaned in appreciation as Patrick thrust his hand between her legs. Rubbing the soaked lace of her panties, he pushed the material between her nether lips while she undulated her hips in response. As he pulled his hand back from the caress, Erin whimpered with want.

"Please Patrick, I need..."

"Lie back and take off your panties."

Erin immediately scrambled to comply. Patrick sat back, grasping his cock in his hand.

"I want you to masturbate for me, but don't come unless I tell you to."

Without hesitation Erin's hand went to her pussy, her fingers stroking firmly along the seam. Patrick watched as her eyes closed and her teeth bit down on her lower lip as she increased the pressure. In response, Patrick stroked his cock as he watched her bring herself to the edge of climax, teetering on the precipice. As he watched her fingers dip inside her dripping pussy, his cock jerked in reaction at the sight of her fucking herself.

"Taste yourself, baby."

Erin's hand stopped for a moment and her eyelids fluttered open. As she stared intently at him, she pulled her hand from her body. Bringing her fingers to her lips, she sucked them into her mouth and greedily licked them clean. Patrick was doing everything possible to hold back his orgasm as he watched the erotic show.

Reaching down between them, Patrick took hold of the clothespins and removed them both. "Now, Erin, come now."

As the blood rushed back to her tortured nipples Erin cried out at the sensation. Reaching down to her pussy once again, she rubbed her clit furiously while her hips arched off the floor and her head whipped back and forth. Watching her orgasm, Patrick grasped his cock firmly and stroking firmly, ejaculated over her stomach. Patrick collapsed back in the chair as Erin lay supine, panting on the carpet. Although enjoyable, Patrick wasn't nearly as satisfied as he could have been if he'd finished inside her pulsating vagina.

"That's the kind of sex I want, my way. Rough, demanding, unexpected. If you're still interested, I'll see you back here later tonight." Patrick stood and went into the guest bathroom to clean up. He heard Erin stumble from the living room and wondered, not for the first time, if he'd lost his mind and if this course of action would gain him anything.

Chapter Four

Erin was counting down the minutes until she could leave work. The phrase “Thank God, it’s Friday” was never more appropriate than it was for her today. Her morning encounter with Patrick had left her a wreck the entire day. She was still trying to come to grips with what she had learned. Patrick had turned into an alpha hero straight from one of her romance novels.

When she thought back over how she had acquiesced to his every command she could feel her face burning. Of course it didn’t stop her pussy from pulsing at the thought either. She was one sick puppy, but his domineering actions had made her hot for more. In fact, if he’d still been in the apartment after she’d cleaned up this morning, she might have never made it in to work.

The most surprising fact was her willingness to strip down for him. Although embarrassed about her weight gain, when she saw him staring at her with lust filled eyes she was more than willing to take off her clothes and reveal her flaws, even in the light of day. It was almost as if he’d given her *carte blanche* in his acceptance of her body.

If you’re still interested, I’ll see you back here later tonight.

Patrick's final words to her reverberated through her brain. Erin couldn't help but wonder what he had planned. If only she knew what it meant in regard their relationship. Could she continue to let him bring her to the heights of pleasure only to leave her emotionally bereft? There was no way she could hide her love for him and she didn't know how long she could last in the relationship if he didn't return her feelings.

Of course she'd never find out anything until she could get out of here. Glancing at the clock Erin sighed with relief. Five minutes until five. The anticipation was almost over.

"You've been watching the clock all day."

Erin turned and smiled at Dave, who stood at the entrance of her cubicle. "Have you been spying on me?"

"You caught me." Dave smiled, but Erin noticed the gesture didn't reach his eyes. She wondered if Marianne was right and he was more interested in her than he'd let on.

"Well, I'm ready to go."

"I figured you were anxious to get home. I didn't realize your fiancé had gotten back."

"Um, yeah, it was kind of unexpected."

"I suppose you won't be joining us for Friday night dinners any more." Dave tried to sound jovial, but Erin could hear the underlying disappointment in his voice.

"No, probably not." Erin stood and grabbed her coat, slipping it on. "I'm heading out as soon as I get all these donation boxes together."

In the last few months Erin chaired a donation drive at work to collect items for soldier care packages and had promised to get all the items together for the military by this weekend. Even though she didn't feel up to it, she needed to take the stuff home and sort it out.

"It looks like you've got quite a haul there. Can I help you out?"

"Thanks, I appreciate it." They each picked up a box and headed out, but Erin was soon cursing when they reached the entrance of the building and she realized it had started to

rain. After her hectic morning, she'd rushed from the apartment and had forgotten to grab her umbrella, so it looked as if she'd be running to get to her car.

"I won't melt." With firm resignation, she smiled at Dave before sprinting across the parking lot, juggling her box as she ran, Dave hot on her heels. Finally reaching her car, Erin sighed with relief once she stowed the boxes away and was inside. Her jubilation didn't last long however, when she tried to start her car, tried being the operative word. The ignition just clicked when she turned the key.

This was just great. Erin didn't know shit about cars. Grabbing her purse, she pulled out her cell phone and almost screamed when she realized her battery was dead. *Damn, damn, damn.* She pounded on the steering wheel before laying her head down on it, wanting to weep.

Jumping from her car, she saw Dave just getting ready to pull away and hurriedly flagged him down.

"Is everything okay?"

"No, my stupid car won't start."

"Let me take a look."

Dave walked around to the front of the car while Erin gratefully popped the hood. She sat there for a few minutes before Dave slammed down the hood and walked back, shaking his head.

"It looks like a short in the electrical system, but I'm no expert. You're going to need a mechanic."

Erin sighed. "My cell phone is dead. Can I borrow yours to call someone?"

Dave nodded. "Why don't I call my mechanic? He can have your car towed to his shop and I'll drive you home."

"Thanks, I really appreciate it."

"No problem."

Erin gathered her purse and boxes and settled herself into Dave's car while he called his mechanic. They were soon on the road. Their conversation was casual and the earlier awkwardness she'd felt was gone. Perhaps she'd been mistaken about his attraction to her. Before too long they'd finally reached her apartment.

"Thanks again for the ride. I can't thank you enough."

"Let's get these boxes inside." They each hefted their respective box and braved the rain once again. Swiftly reaching the door, Dave followed Erin inside the apartment. "Where do you want these?"

"Kitchen table I think."

Once they were relieved of their burdens, Erin smiled brightly in gratitude. "I feel like I've said this a hundred times to you today, but thanks. I don't know how I would have made it home if you hadn't helped."

"That's what friends are for."

Erin reached out to hug him, but jumped back when the front door opened.

"Isn't this cozy?" Patrick's voice dripped venom and he looked like an avenging angel standing in the doorway.

"I'm not sure what you think is going on, but..."

"Don't insult me. Just leave before you make a bigger ass of yourself." Dave's face flushed at Patrick's words and Erin could see him clench his fists.

"Dave, I..." Erin didn't know what to say and trailed off miserably. Patrick's face was thunderous, and if she thought he looked cold and hard yesterday, today he looked like an unfeeling machine.

Dave turned to Erin, ignoring Patrick. "I'll leave if you'll be okay."

"Of course she'll be okay." Patrick voice was laced with irritation.

Dave continued to ignore Patrick, staring at Erin.

“He’s right. I’m fine. Go on to dinner and say hi to everyone for me.”

Dave nodded stiffly before walking to the blocked doorway and firmly standing his ground until Patrick finally stepped aside to let him leave. Once through the door, Patrick slammed it behind him, making Erin jump.

“What is your problem?” Erin was embarrassed by the scene and thankful Dave was discreet and she wouldn’t have to hear about it at work on Monday.

“My problem is *you* with *him*.”

Erin gaze narrowed. “My *friend* drove me home when my car didn’t start and helped me carry a heavy box into the apartment. That’s it. Why the fuck should you care anyway? You’re trying to dump me, remember?”

Patrick opened his mouth to respond but promptly closed it. His eyes narrowed menacingly as he took a step forward. “If he’s touched you, he’s a dead man.”

Patrick glanced down at his hands and realized he was unconsciously clenching his fists. Taking a deep breath he had to deliberately relax his hands, willing himself to calm down. This was what he wanted, for Erin to move on and find someone else in her life. Unfortunately, his possessive streak was showing.

“So what, you don’t want me but no one else can have me either?”

“If you’re just friends then it’s a dead issue, isn’t it? Besides, I never said I didn’t want to fuck you.”

Erin picked up a pillow and threw it at his head. Ducking quickly Patrick snatched the paperweight she started to heft and deftly removed it from her hands. Although he could envision himself throwing things, he never imagined Erin would.

“What the hell are you doing?” He quickly grabbed her wrists, turning her arms back and locking them behind her.

“Acting like a stupid ass, kind of like you have been acting.” Erin struggled against him but she was no match for his superior strength and was already beginning to tire. “Let me go.”

“Not until you calm down.” Hauling her closer to him Patrick continued to hold her immobile with one hand while he tried to soothe her with the other, stroking her back and arms. He could feel the soft curves of her body as he held her close, wanting only to sink into her flesh. “Shh, you’ll only hurt yourself.”

“More than you’re hurting me?” Erin looked up, and he could see the tears shining in her eyes. Instinctively he knew she wasn’t referring to his hold on her. She must not have seen what she was looking for because she immediately calmed down and stopped struggling. “Please let me go.”

Patrick immediately released her, instantly missing her touch.

“I could just kick you. Why don’t you want to talk about the elephant sitting in the middle of the room?”

Patrick quirked his brow. *What the fuck was she talking about?*

“Hello, it’s an *expression*.” Erin exasperation came through loud and clear.

“You always were obscure.”

“And you were always obtuse. Let’s get back to the point. Why are you trying to pretend you don’t care?”

“I don’t.”

“So it wouldn’t bother you if I confessed I’d been intimate with Dave.”

Patrick knew she had to be lying, but at the same time he could feel his pulse pounding at the thought of Erin with the man – hell, *any* other man other than him. She was *his* woman. His rage at the idea was overpowering every rational thought in his brain.

“What if I said he fucked my brains out? Right here, over the arm of this sofa.” Erin trailed her hand over the soft suede fabric.

“You’re going too far, Erin.” Patrick enunciated each word, his jaw tightly clenched as he spoke.

“That not what Dave said when I was on my knees in front of him.” Erin screeched as Patrick’s hand shot out and grabbed her upper arm, hauling her up against his hard body.

“Little girls shouldn’t tell fibs or they might find themselves in a whole lot of trouble.”

“Fuck you, Patrick. You don’t care, remember?”

Swiftly turning her in his arms, Patrick pushed Erin onto the padded arm of the sofa, leaning over her. He bent his head until his lips were touching her ear. “So he fucked you, right here, huh?”

“Uh huh.” Patrick held her arms immobile so she couldn’t move. He wasn’t sure why she was baiting him, but all his domineering tendencies were suddenly in overdrive.

“So you’re telling me you stripped naked, draped yourself over the arm with your ass in the air, and begged to be fucked?” Patrick pressed his cock against her ass as he spoke. When Erin pushed back against him, Patrick smiled, knowing his words were turning her on.

“Yes.” Erin’s voice was barely above a whisper.

“Why don’t I believe you?”

“Not. My. Problem.” Erin’s words were stiff, although her body was telling a different story.

Patrick released her arms, but pressed her further into the fabric. Slipping his hands into her blouse, he cupped her breasts, grasping her pebbled nipples through her lace bra. Erin gasped as he tugged at the heated points. Her breasts, although previously bountiful, now overflowed in his hands and Patrick could imagine pressing his heated cock between the fleshy mounds.

Leaning down, Patrick licked at the shell of her ear, causing Erin to shiver in response. “There’s certainly a lot more of you to go around these days.” Patrick liked the new look, but he’d always been a bit of a breast man.

Erin immediately stiffened in his arms, her previous softening disappearing completely.

“Let me go now.” Her voice was thready, as if she was fighting back tears, but with her back to him Patrick couldn’t see her face.

He instantly wanted to shout never, but knew he no longer had that right. Instead he continued to antagonize her. “Did you beg him to fuck you?”

“I don’t beg.” Erin sounded indignant, but Patrick was willing to bet he’d get her to eat those words.

“I’ll have you begging by the end of the night.”

“Never.”

“What did I tell you about lies, baby? You’re just going to get into more trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“I just might have to spank that fine ass of yours until it’s rosy and red.”

“Like hell.” Erin tried to straighten and Patrick tightened his grip on her.

“You’d love it. I’d put you over my knee, and you’d lie there trembling, wondering when the first blow was going to fall. Your pussy would be weeping with the anticipation. Then *smack*, I’d swat that ass and watch as it jiggled and shook.”

Erin was grinding back against him as he spoke. Even though she initially balked when he mentioned spanking, she certainly seemed to be getting turned on by his dirty words. And after this morning he was more than willing to explore every fantasy he’d ever had.

“After your ass was glowing, I’d part your legs and stroke your soft little pussy, gathering up every bit of your essence. Then I’d stroke down your backside until your hole opened up and I’d push my finger deep inside. You’d squirm at first, but then you’d be pushing back at me, begging for more.”

“I’ll never beg.”

It was just the comment Patrick was waiting for. Hauling her up, he dropped back into the chair behind him, pulling Erin over his lap.

“You wouldn’t dare.” Erin started struggling in earnest and Patrick put a hand on her back to steady her across his knees.

“You were warned.”

Swinging her head around Erin stared at him, her eyes wild with a combination of fear and something else -- eagerness.

“Patrick, I don’t think this is such a good idea.”

“Don’t think, Erin, feel.”

Her skirt was bunched around her upper thighs and Patrick pushed it up until her ample hips were exposed. He sucked in his breath when he noticed she was wearing thigh-high stockings and panties. Grasping her panties, he ripped them off with one hard pull. Patrick didn’t want anything between his hand and her flesh.

Instead of immediately starting on her punishment, Patrick caressed her behind, enjoying the feel of her softness. He wanted to fuck her from behind, holding her hips as he powered into her yielding flesh.

Cupping his hand, Patrick gave Erin a firm swat. The pale skin immediately pinkened with the mark of his hand.

“Oh shit, that hurt.” She wriggled on his lap, trying to maneuver her hands behind her to protect her exposed bottom, but Patrick kept his hand firmly on her back, trapping her hands in front of her body. Unfortunately her squirming was causing his already hardened cock to press painfully against his jeans.

Patrick continued his assault on her poor defenseless ass, spanking her firmly and watching as the faint pink marks soon turned cherry red. Spread before him, her ass high in the air and her pussy wide open, Erin was yelping with every swat. He could see the

evidence of her desire glistening, dew drops coating her dark, curly hairs, and her pink pussy was parted, just waiting for him to explore.

The temptation was too much to resist, and before he knew it his hand came down firmly between her legs. Before she could regain her composure he'd parted her legs and swatted her again, hitting her clit as well.

"Oh shit, Patrick." Erin had stopped protesting and was arching her back in anticipation of the next blow. Her clit was peeking out from its hood and his hand aimed for that engorged nub as Erin jerked and moaned. Just when he thought she was on the edge, he pulled back and Erin cried out at the loss.

Stopping for a moment, Patrick listened to her faint gasping as Erin lay in stunned disbelief. He slipped a hand between her thighs and her pussy eagerly engulfed his finger as he began pumping it slowly in and out. Adding a second digit, he hooked them, searching for that sweet spot inside. Erin suddenly jerked and Patrick knew he'd found it.

Erin's nails were digging into his thigh as he continued to finger her. He could see she was biting her lower lip as she rode his hand. Just as he'd promised, Patrick gathered the moisture covering his hand and pressed a finger to her rosette. Erin whooped with surprise, jerking up on her toes at the unexpected invasion.

"I can't...it's too much." Erin moaned, but her body betrayed her as she began to undulate at his thrusts.

"Just imagine this is my cock, spreading you open, fucking you."

"Oh, God, Patrick --"

She might be protesting, but he could see her rolling her hips against his denim-clad leg, pressing her clit hard against him with every thrust of his fingers. Slowly drawing back, he removed his hand as she sobbed with frustration.

"The next time you come, I want to be inside you, feeling your pussy clamped down on my cock. I want to look at your face and watch you as you scream."

Chapter Five

“I don’t scream.” Her comment only brought forth a wicked laugh.

Lying across Patrick’s knee, trembling with unfulfilled desire as well as indignation, Erin wanted to curl up and die. Or kill her erstwhile fiancé. Whichever, it didn’t much matter to her. How dare he decide how and when she’d orgasm? Of course, she conveniently avoided his words from this morning. Subconsciously she’d agreed to sex whatever, however, and whenever he wanted.

That was before he called her fat, spanked her ass until it was on fire, and then fingered her behind. Although the spanking may have left her panting for more, she refused to admit she’d enjoyed Patrick stimulating her rosette. Struggling to her feet, Erin pulled her skirt down as much as possible before facing her tormentor.

“Fuck you, Patrick O’Rourke. I don’t need you to come. I’ve done just fine on my own for the last two years.”

Gathering what little dignity she had left, Erin stomped to the bedroom and slammed the door, flipping the lock for good measure. She’d show him. Erin was going to find her vibrator and give herself the biggest, loudest orgasm she’d ever had.

The doorknob jerked and Erin jumped as she realized Patrick had followed her back to the bedroom.

“Erin, damn it, open the door.”

Ha, as if she’d do something so stupid. “Make me.”

“Don’t make this harder on yourself. Once I get in there the spanking you just got will seem like child’s play.”

Erin stripped off her blouse and unhooked her bra, studiously trying to pay no heed to Patrick. Of course she’d do a much better job ignoring him if she wasn’t getting turned on by the thought of another spanking. When she turned into a total freak she had no idea, but there it was. Pulling off her skirt, Erin threw it over the chair before sitting down to peel off her hose. Now completely naked she looked at herself in the floor-length mirror on the back of the closet door.

Never one to like how she looked naked, the forty extra pounds brought out every flaw she’d ever noted. Her breasts, once the size of oranges, now looked like melons. And her thighs jiggled with every step. But the worst was her stomach. The extra weight there was like a giant basketball. No wonder Patrick said there was more of her than ever before. Hell, she was four times as many handfuls as she’d been before.

“Erin, I don’t want to break this fucking door down.”

“Then you’d better leave it alone.” Erin heard him sigh heavily and then listened as his footsteps walked down the hallway away from the bedroom. She convinced herself she wasn’t disappointed he’d given up so quickly. Nevertheless, she was going through with her masturbation plans.

Pulling on her silky new robe, Erin dimmed the lights in the room and settled herself on the bed. Opening her bedside table she found her trusty vibrator and checked to make sure the batteries were working. Now all she needed to do was get in the right mood.

Erin flipped the vibrator on low and closing her eyes, ran the plastic wand over her breasts. The light vibrations made her nipples bead in eagerness. She parted the robe and caressed all those errant extra pounds on the way to her ultimate goal.

“Why didn’t you tell me you had your own toys? I wouldn’t have wasted my time today shopping.”

Engrossed in the sensations she was creating, Erin hadn’t noticed the door opening. Her eyelids flew open to find Patrick casually leaning in the doorway, a small skeleton key twirling in his fingers.

“Get out!” Erin hastily drew the edges of her robe together, covering herself.

“I guess Dave hasn’t been doing his job if you had to resort to toys to take care of yourself.”

Erin was fed up with his continued references to Dave. To her ears it sounded like the pot calling the kettle black, and she wondered if he was secretly hoping she *had* cheated because he had something of his own to hide.

“Dave likes to watch. He enjoys using the toys on me.”

Patrick’s eyes flared and he straightened away from the door jam. Where the barbs were coming from Erin had no idea, but it was as if her tongue had a mind of its own. Stepping into the room Patrick slammed the bedroom door behind him, causing Erin to jump at the reverberation.

“I warned you about pushing me.”

Patrick stalked toward her, and as Erin scrambled from the bed he caught her belt and pulled, jerking her back. Erin held on to the robe for dear life, but it wasn’t her shield he was after, it was the belt. Pulling it from the loops, he measured it in his hands with a practiced eye.

“I think this will do just fine.” Pouncing on her, Patrick wrestled Erin onto her back, stretching her arms above her head. “I think we need to tie you down since you have a nasty habit of trying to run away.”

“Ha, take a look in the mirror. I’m not the commitment-phobe who’s running in this relationship.”

Swiftly securing her wrists, Patrick soon had Erin trussed like a calf at the county fair, with her arms fastened tightly to the headboard.

“Now I’ll use your toys on you and we’ll see whose name you call out.”

“Patrick, this is ridiculous.” Erin paused, waiting for a response. “You need to untie me. Now.”

The vibrator was still humming on its lowest setting when Patrick picked it up from where it had rolled across the bed. Erin started to get a bit worried when Patrick continued to ignore her comments. Instead he twisted the base of the vibrator, increasing it to its medium level.

Erin began to use her legs to kick at him, trying to get his attention. Unfortunately she got it all too well.

“If you keep kicking, I’ll have to tie your legs down too.” Patrick’s seriousness stopped her movements immediately.

Luckily the lights were still dimmed from when she had turned them down earlier. That fact still didn’t stop the flush of embarrassment wash over her as he parted the top of her robe and gazed down at her breasts. Erin twisted away from his stare as much as she was able.

Patrick started his teasing at her breasts, just as she had done, grazing the tips with the vibrator. Already slightly aroused, they were soon peaked in response to the vibrations. As he dragged the plastic toy down her body, Erin desperately tried to suck in her gut to conceal the extra weight. But it was no use. The constant vibrations were causing her to lose her

concentration, especially when he circled her navel before dipping the tip of the toy in the crevice.

Thankfully, he soon moved from her stomach to her now dripping pussy. Once again he teased, circling her clit without ever making contact. Erin was biting her lip, determined not to cry out and especially not to beg him. Her body, on the other hand, was betraying her.

Patrick chuckled as he dipped the toy to her opening and the head of the simulated penis slipped in without any resistance. Coating the toy with her moisture, he pulled it from her body and began rubbing it back and forth along her crease, grazing her clit with every stroke. Just when she thought one final stroke would push her over, he stopped, and she had to bite back the curse she wanted to fling.

Twisting the base of the vibrator to the maximum setting, Patrick reversed the toy, pressing it into her body with a firm steady thrust. Erin groaned as her flesh parted to accommodate the buzzing toy. She could feel the vibrating sensations throughout her pussy walls.

"I want to see this." Patrick flipped on the bedside lamp, illuminating the bed in a golden circle of light. Erin gasped, knowing her body was now being displayed as if in a spotlight. She tried to twist away from the lamp, anything to get out of the glowing focus.

"If you wanted to roll over baby, all you had to do was tell me."

Patrick had tied her to the headboard in such a way that it was easy for him to flip her around so she was now lying on her stomach. In some ways she was grateful, since she was not only out of the lamplight, but covered as well. On the other hand, she somehow felt more vulnerable in the new position.

That feeling increased when Patrick adjusted her body and pushed a pillow under her hips, elevating them off the bed. The pillow was propped so it pressed against the small part of the vibrator still exposed. The constant buzzing was keeping her on edge, but without additional stimulation Erin was poised, unable to make that final leap.

Her tension ratcheted up to the highest level however, when he flipped the bottom of her robe up, exposing her ass and the vibrator lewdly humming away.

“Now this is an image worth coming home to.”

Patrick caressed the soft globes of Erin’s ass, enjoying the cushion her new fuller figure provided. He couldn’t wait to sink himself into her softness, gripping her hips tightly as he powered into her. There was no question in his mind she was an anal virgin and the thought of how warm and tight she’d be, especially with the vibrator lodged snugly in her pussy, had his cock leaking pre-cum freely.

Reaching out, Patrick eased the speed of the vibrator back to a more tortuous level. No use allowing Erin to come too quickly. She definitely needed punishment after stomping away from him and locking him out of the bedroom.

Of course, if he were wise, Patrick knew this was the perfect opportunity for him to leave. He’d broken their engagement, for God sakes. But instead of brooding alone about it, Erin was living in his apartment, and they were having the kind of wild, uninhibited sex he’d only dreamed about. Looking back at her draped over the pillow, tied to the bed, and at his mercy Patrick knew there was no way in hell he’d be leaving anytime soon.

“You’re in the perfect position for me to fuck your ass. And with your vibrator humming away inside your pussy you’ll be stuffed full.”

“Oh God, there’s no way.”

“There is a way and it starts with lots and lots of lube.”

Erin swung her head wildly around, craning her neck to look at him over her shoulder. “I don’t have any lube.”

“Then my shopping trip wasn’t completely in vain.” Leaning down, Patrick bit the fleshy top of her ass, causing Erin to whoop in shock. “Don’t go anywhere. And no coming.”

As he headed out the bedroom he could hear Erin cursing his parentage. Finding the brown bag holding his purchases from earlier in the day, Patrick sorted through the items until he found the lube. Some of the other surprises would just have to wait for another day. Patrick returned to the bedroom to hear Erin still complaining bitterly, her hips twisting back and forth as she tried without success to free herself.

"I can't believe you left me tied up in here. What if something had happened to you and I was stuck like this?"

"Then the rescue workers would find a big surprise."

Erin's gasp of indignation made him want to laugh, but Patrick didn't want to set her off again. Her embarrassment about being found in such a compromising situation was adorable, but he didn't think she found it so. Rather than argue about it, he was more interested in seeing if reality could match his fantasies. Patrick swiftly divested himself of his clothing.

"Have you been a good girl while I was gone?" Patrick popped the top of the lube, squeezing out a generous portion with which he began to coat his cock.

"What else? I'm trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey here."

"You can still move the lower half of your body. And I think I made it pretty clear I didn't want you to come."

"Goody for you then." Frustration laced her voice.

"No baby, good for you. It'll be so much better when your body is pulsing around my cock and I come deep inside you."

As he spoke, Patrick gently spread her buttocks and leaned down to lick along the seam there.

"What...what are you doing?" Erin's voice sounded confused, but was spiked with hunger as well.

"Making you feel good."

Returning to her ass, Patrick moved his tongue directly to her rosette, flicking back and forth over it. He coated her asshole with spit, applying more pressure with his tongue until it popped into her forbidden hole.

“I never...”

“I know, baby, I know.”

Sitting back, Patrick eased a lubed finger into her rosette. Instead of the resistance he felt in the living room, Erin opened to his invasion; the only evidence of him entering her was her indrawn breath. Although his finger slipped easily inside, he could also feel the additional tightness due to the softly humming vibrator, still in her pussy.

Pushing a second finger inside her ass, Patrick stretched her backside, preparing her for his cock. Within a few minutes Erin was moaning softly and pushing back against him, jerking her hips.

“Are you ready, baby?”

“No...yes...I don't know.”

Patrick chuckled. “As long as you're sure.”

“I don't think I'll be able to handle it.” Erin's voice had gone soft and was no longer defiant.

“Yes, you will, because we'll be here together.” As soon as the words left his lips Patrick wanted to call them back. His admission sounded too intimate. Thankfully Erin didn't comment. Instead he saw her back start to lose some of its resistance. Pulling his fingers from her ass, Patrick pushed Erin's knees under her, causing her ass to present itself more fully to him.

Patrick grabbed his cock and positioned the head at her rosebud. “You look beautiful like this, baby.” Erin's intake of breath spurred him forward and ever so slowly he eased the head into her asshole. Her body jerked as he began to enter her and her hands grasped tightly at the belt restraining them.

“Am I hurting you?”

“No -- well, maybe a little, but don’t stop.” His little hellfire was still trying to give the orders.

“Don't worry, I won't.” He began sliding in and out, going a little deeper each time until he was finally fully seated inside her.

The feeling was unlike anything he'd ever before experienced. The tightness of her ass was unimaginable, but even more powerful was the trust she put in him to allow this. He was awed by her willingness to do just what he asked, even if she did initially resist.

“Damn, baby, you feel so good.” Patrick see-sawed inside her, taking his time making love to her ass, so she could become accustomed to his girth. “So tight. So hot.”

The thin wall between her ass and pussy was the only thing separating the vibrator from his steady thrusting in her ass. He could feel the purring motions of the toy with every plunge he made. If the pulsating felt that good to him through the thin barrier, Patrick could only imagine the sensations Erin was experiencing.

To hell with imagining.

“Tell me how it feels to be fucked by two cocks at once.”

Erin tried to bury her face in the mattress so she didn't have to respond, but Patrick wasn't about to let her hide from him now. If she wanted to escape, Erin should have run when he originally gave her the opportunity. With a snap of his wrist, Patrick landed a well aimed blow on the side of her ass. “Answer me.”

Her muffled words only earned her another smack.

“Don't make me tell you again, Erin.”

Erin jerked her head up and peered over her shoulder at him with fury in her eyes. “It feels good, all right?”

Smiling, Patrick rubbed his palm against her reddening flesh. “How good?”

“Very.”

“Better than this?” Patrick reached underneath her and grabbed hold of the vibrator. He buried his cock deep within her ass and began to fuck her pussy with the toy. From the sounds of Erin’s moans, Patrick surmised his girl liked double penetration.

“You’re killing me.” Erin moaned and clawed at the bed desperately, but continued to push back heartily with his every driving force.

“You like being stuffed.”

“Yes, I like it.” Erin was panting now, her body glowing with the sheen of her exertions.

Patrick finally flicked the switch off, halting the buzzing toy, although leaving it buried deep in her pussy. Erin sobbed with dissatisfaction, but was soon humming with delight when Patrick found her clit and began rubbing vigorously.

“Oh God, I need to come.”

“Don’t come yet. Not until I tell you.” Patrick began thrusting, faster and faster. He could tell by Erin’s whimpering she was close.

“I can’t hold it back.”

“You can. You will.” Patrick watched as Erin dropped her head in defeat. Her body trembled in reaction as she held back her orgasm. With one final powerful drive, he ordered. “Now Erin, come now.”

Erin threw her head back and screamed as the orgasm ripped through her body. The clenching of her muscles had Patrick emptying his seed scant seconds later. Collapsing over her prone body, one thought centered in Patrick’s head. Erin was a screamer.

Chapter Six

Erin bustled around the kitchen the next morning, gathering all the items for the soldier care packages. She'd slept late, but Patrick still hadn't moved and she'd been up for two hours. Nibbling on a carrot stick she checked her list to determine what items were still missing. If she could fill in those holes this weekend she'd be able to deliver the packages to the base by Monday.

Movement from the other room notified her Patrick was finally awake. Erin chewed on her lower lips fretfully, wondering how she would face him after last night. She was able to admit to herself that all the things they'd done had thrilled her, but in the hindsight of morning she wondered if it accomplished anything. Their problems hadn't been discussed and nothing was resolved.

Nervously she smoothed her hair back, wondering if she should have spent more time on her appearance this morning. Oh hell, who was she kidding? If she really had wanted to do something she should have been working on losing those forty pounds long before today.

Patrick walked into the kitchen and Erin jumped. His presence in the small room overwhelmed her senses.

"Coffee smells good."

"I'll get you a cup." Erin began to prepare his coffee, the routine settling her nerves somewhat. The hominess of the situation didn't escape her attention. Anyone looking at the scene would imagine them to be a happily secure couple.

"What's all this?" Patrick gestured to the items strewn over the kitchen table as she handed him the coffee cup.

"I've been collecting items for soldier care packages. I need to finish the check lists today and then go shopping for the missing items so I can deliver everything to the base on Monday." Erin felt as if the words were rushing from her mouth.

Patrick nodded and sat at one of the chairs, his leg propped on the rung. He watched as she returned to verifying items on her list. Erin felt as if she were on display while she worked, wondering when the other shoe was going to drop. She didn't have long to wait.

"Why don't you sit down to do that instead of hovering?"

Maybe because my ass is sore not only from a spanking but a spirited fucking as well.

"It's just easier this way."

Patrick snagged her hand, halting her movements. Erin cocked her eyebrow.

"You're feeling okay this morning, right?"

He almost looked worried, except for the smirking little grin playing over his lips.

"Just dandy." Erin pulled away from him and picked up another carrot stick, biting into it in one swift clamp of her jaws.

"It's only ten in the morning. Why are you eating carrots?"

"They're good for you."

"Not a very appetizing breakfast though. You used to make pancakes on Saturday mornings."

Erin stifled a groan. She *loved* pancakes, with lots of syrup. No, she needed to be strong.

“Too many carbs.”

Patrick stared at her in confusion. “So what, you love pancakes.”

“I can’t.” Erin turned her back to him, ostensibly to get a bottle of water from the refrigerator, but actually to hide from his prying eyes.

“When did you start watching your carbs?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Erin realized her ass was sticking out while she searched the depth of the fridge for her water. Finally locating the errant bottle she stood up.

“It means exactly what I said.”

“It’s what you didn’t say.” Erin slammed the refrigerator door closed.

“Please enlighten me.” Patrick’s words were softly spoken, but Erin was getting the sense he was upset and she really couldn’t figure out why. If anyone had a right to be offended it was she.

“I just have to wonder why you asked when I started watching my carbs, since your comment made it sound as if it’s obvious I certainly haven’t done so up to this point.”

“I never inferred that. In fact, I was just wondering.”

“Well no need to wonder any more. It started today, okay?”

“No, it’s not okay. There’s something else going on here and I’d like to know what it is.”

Look who was talking, Mr. “I’ve got a boatload of secrets.” Erin so did not want to have this conversation. It was bad enough knowing he thought she was fat. She really didn’t need the verbal confirmation. But he could be like a dog with a bone when he had an issue with someone or something and it looked like he was going to make this an issue.

“I’m fat, okay? And I want to do something about it. So I’m watching my carbs.”

Patrick sat silently for a minute and Erin thought she just might avoid the most embarrassing conversation imaginable, but no, it wasn’t to be.

“You’re not fat.”

“Please don’t lie to me. It’s pretty obviously I’ve gained weight in the last two years.”

“Well I can’t say I couldn’t tell you added a few extra pounds.”

“I know you know. I heard every comment.”

“What comments?”

Erin began ticking each humiliation off on her fingers. “Let’s see ‘There’s certainly a lot more of you to go around these days,’ ‘Then the rescue workers would find a big surprise,’ oh and last but not least, let’s not forget about the dear Jane letter you sent referring to the picture I emailed you as being evidence of how much I’ve changed.”

“I never could understand a woman’s logic, even when it was explained to me. How is it you can take these incidents and turn it into a slam-fest of me commenting on your weight?”

“I call them like I see them.”

“Well open your eyes, little girl. I happen to enjoy your curves very much, as if you couldn’t tell from the last few days. I’ve never been interested in fucking a stick, and being able to hold onto your ass as I fucked you last night was mighty fine. I couldn’t keep my hands off you.”

Erin felt the flush of embarrassment wash over her, coupled with the pleasure she took from his comments. “I just assumed --”

“You know what they say about assuming.”

The phone ringing interrupted their conversation and Patrick left the kitchen to grab the receiver. Erin shook her head in amazement. Ever since she’d got the email from Patrick about wanting to break their engagement she’d been sure the deciding factor was her weight. Even when Marianne insisted it was something more, Erin felt certain her weight contributed to the problem. Hearing now that Patrick didn’t care -- hell, *liked* her curves, yet -- was a hard pill to swallow.

Erin could hear Patrick talking on the phone, his voice getting louder. “You don’t need to --”

Walking into the living room she could see him pacing the room as he held the phone to his ear. He stopped suddenly upon seeing her and handed her the phone.

“It’s your boyfriend.” Erin set her mouth firmly and took the phone from him.

“Hello.”

“Erin, it’s Dave.”

“Hi, Dave. What’s up?”

“Are you okay?”

“Of course.” Erin listened to Dave while watching Patrick stand at the fireplace, his hands clenched as he took in every word.

“I was worried about you after leaving last night. Your fiancé seemed like he was really pissed off.”

“Not a problem Dave, but thanks for thinking about me.”

“I’m worried about you, Erin. You haven’t been yourself the last few months and now that he’s home it’s worse. He was practically interrogating me on the phone, wanting to know why I was calling.”

“Really? I’m so sorry. It’s...well, let’s just say I’m handling it, okay?”

“I want you to know you’ve got a friend if you need one.”

“Thanks, Dave, I appreciate it. I’ll talk to you Monday.” Erin ended the conversation and stared at Patrick across the room. She’d been dreading a confrontation, but she needed to know where she stood with him. There was no way she could continue in this state of limbo. Loving Patrick too much was her downfall.

While Patrick listened to Erin's conversation with the asshole, he tried to rein in his emotions. A picture sitting on the mantle caught his eye. It had been taken at their engagement party and the photographer had captured their personalities perfectly. Erin was laughing at something someone had just said, her joy and exuberance shining on her face. Patrick had a smile on his face, but instead of looking at the photographer, he was focused entirely on Erin, with a look of love and adoration shining in his eyes.

Patrick ran a finger along Erin's face in the picture, remembering that day. Erin was a person of light and life; someone who loved being around other people and enjoyed social situations. This was the exact opposite of Patrick, who would rather spend time alone with Erin. He loved her.

He had been so sure at the time he sent the email he was doing the right thing. She should be with someone who made her happy. Reality threw all his plans out the window when he came home to find her living in his apartment. Patrick should have figured out he was doomed then. When Erin didn't run from his sexual demands, he knew he'd never let her go. Now he needed to figure out how to break the news to her.

"Why were you questioning Dave?" Erin looked pissed as she returned the phone to its base.

"He has no right to call here asking if you're okay."

"Why not? He's a friend. Besides, you don't have any rights either, we're only fucking and I can fuck, or not fuck, anyone I want."

Patrick grabbed her arm, pulling her toward him. Leaning his face close to hers he whispered, "While you wear my ring you don't fuck anyone but me, understand?" You can never fuck anyone ever again is what he wanted to say.

"Maybe I shouldn't be wearing your ring anymore. Technically the engagement is off, right?" Erin tugged at the ring, trying to dislodge it from her finger.

"Don't you dare."

Erin broke his hold on her and threw her hands in the air. “I am so sick and tired of this. You break the engagement, you don’t want me, but you want to tie me up, spank me and fuck me anyway and anywhere you want. Make up your fucking mind.”

“So one call from Dave and you’re ready to take my ring off?”

“Are you fucking mad? You broke up with me.”

“So that gives you *carte blanche* to fuck anyone, is that it?” Patrick couldn’t understand why he was purposely antagonizing her.

“You don’t deserve this, but here it goes. I never fucked Dave. You’re the only man I’ve ever been with, the only man who’s been inside me, the only man I’ve ever loved.”

Patrick sucked in his breath at her words. He had been livid when she began teasing and taunting him about Dave. Instinctively he knew Erin had always remained faithful to him, although he really couldn’t blame her if she’d found someone else. He was certainly no prize. They’d been apart for two years and then he’d dumped her by email. Any sane woman would be running for the hills.

Instead Erin welcomed him home with love, prepared to do anything to keep them together. So naturally he insulted her good intentions by being as rude as possible. She was everything he was not: good, kind, and decent immediately came to mind. And to think that after all the horrible things he’d done, she still declared her love for him. It took his breath away.

“Well, I can see how much that declaration means to you.” Tears clogged her voice. “Just answer me one thing. Why? If it wasn’t my weight gain what was it that made you want to break the engagement?”

“It seemed like the right thing to do at the time. I wasn’t exactly in my right mind at the time.”

Erin looked a bit ashamed as she admitted. “I know you have an appointment with a therapist on Monday. I overheard the message your Captain left.”

Patrick nodded his head in amazement. It was a wonder she'd stuck around this long. "I see. So now you think I'm crazy?"

"No, not at all. I may have done a lot of assuming, but I don't think you're crazy. On the other hand, I gotta say, when you walked through the door a few nights ago, I wasn't even sure I recognized you. It was as if all life, all laughter had been sucked out, leaving this empty shell."

Patrick ran a weary hand over his face. "That sounds about right. I felt nothing but desperation."

"Desperate to get rid of me?" The hurt she felt was obvious in her tone.

"It wasn't like that."

"What was it like? Because to me it was total devastation. I thought I was going to hear you were finally coming home to me. Instead, I find out you're coming home, but you don't want me any more. My family and friends can't understand why I would even want to talk to you at this point."

"I never didn't want you."

"Then why?" Erin's voice cracked as she repeated the question Patrick never wanted to answer. But she deserved the truth.

"I killed my best friend." Erin looked at him with a brief look of shock and horror on her face.

Okay, that was not what he'd planned to say, but before he could take it back Erin picked up his hand, kissing it briefly before placing it over her heart.

"Tell me." Her voice held no censure, only acceptance. It made him willing to finally open up to her.

"I was in charge of this mission. Unfortunately we got some bad intel and found ourselves in an ambush. Jerry wanted to retreat, but I had my orders and thought we could still complete the mission. Instead, my decision got him killed."

"I'm so sorry for the loss of your friend, Patrick, but I still don't understand. Why wouldn't you turn to me instead of turning away? We're engaged. Marriage promises for better or worse. Did you think I would abandon you during the worse?"

"Never, Erin. It was never about doubting your love. I don't know if I can explain." Patrick needed to feel her body next to his and pulled her into his arms, wrapping her tightly in his embrace before continuing his story.

"My mental state after that mission wasn't exactly the most stable. During my debriefing I completely lost it. After that incident, I didn't believe I was good for anyone. I'd been reading your emails about the guy at work who was always available to help out, the guy who always seemed to be there for you. When I saw the picture I thought, 'she's happy' and I decided I needed to let you go so you could live a life with someone like him, someone who could be good for you."

Saying it all out loud Patrick could barely believe he once thought it had been a good idea.

"Don't cry, baby." He stroked Erin's arms as he felt her body shaking.

Erin slapped his hands away. "I'm not crying, you idiot. I'm furious. You gave up on us!"

"I didn't give up on us, despite the way it might seem."

"Really?" Crossing her arms over her breasts, Erin faced him, ready to battle. "Then what would you call it?"

"I just needed a little space. Some time to adjust."

"Space...space...I'll give you all the space you need." Erin began to head down the hallway toward the bedroom. Now that he'd confessed everything Patrick wasn't willing to let her go so easily. Chasing after her, he hauled her close as she struggled in his grip. "I can't let you go."

"You were willing to do just that a few days ago."

"I was never *willing* to let you go. I just didn't want to hurt you."

"Stop with the bullshit. You had to have known the email would hurt. And when you came home and found me here you weren't exactly loving." Erin tried to jerk away, intent on escaping.

"I was confused. I thought you'd be happier with someone who didn't have as much baggage."

"So what's changed?"

"You're mine. You wouldn't let me go and now I'm not letting you go."

"Gee, thanks for letting me know. Yesterday you wanted to throw my ass out the door, now you've decided you're not letting me go."

"I might have said it at the time, but I never could have gone through with it. I wasn't expecting you to be here, but even if you hadn't been, I would have found you, eventually."

"It's easy to say that now, but you tried to push me into the arms of another man."

"Damn it, Erin, the idea of you with someone else makes me want to rip the man's heart out. I thought I could handle it, for you. Seeing you again, seeing you with him, made all my dominating tendencies come to the forefront."

Erin snorted with derision. "So now it's my fault you decided to be a bully."

Patrick shook his head. "No, at first I thought you'd be scared away. But then you responded so beautifully to everything. God, Erin, it made me want you all the more."

"Want to fuck me, but not love me." Tears clogged her voice as she spoke.

"I do love you, Erin." Patrick said the words, knowing they were truer now than ever before.

Erin was silent for so long Patrick considered releasing her just so he could look at her face. Finally she spoke, making his heart soar. "Then prove it. Make love to me and make me forget you ever wanted to get rid of me."

Chapter Seven

Erin didn't want to fight any more. She loved Patrick and he had declared his love for her. Although she wasn't naïve enough to suppose their problems were all solved, Erin didn't believe in prolonging the inevitable, either. Patrick said he wasn't going to let her go. As far as she was concerned, everything else would eventually be worked out. She was willing to move forward and get to the good stuff: the reunion, the make up sex, whatever you wanted to call it.

Patrick pulled back from her for a moment, staring down into her face, looking for what, she wasn't really sure. But he must have seen whatever it was he was searching for, because he released a long breath she didn't even know he'd been holding. Reaching up to smooth her hair away from her face, he asked, "My way?"

Erin didn't pretend to misunderstand. The thought of what Patrick had in mind had her clenching her legs together. "Yes, I'm yours however and whenever you want me."

Passion flared in his eyes, causing heat to prickle across Erin's skin. Knowing he wanted her so intensely made her respond just as fiercely. Although it was new to her, his brand of loving was something she was beginning to crave like a drug.

“Good girl.” Patrick picked up a bag she hadn’t noticed and reached inside, retrieving a black blindfold. “Go into the bedroom, take off everything, put this on and then kneel in the middle of the bed.”

Erin took the blindfold from him with nerveless fingers, contemplating what she was about to do. Could she handle it? Looking up at Patrick, a sense of calm came over her. She loved him and trusted him and knew anything he did would be fine. Patrick smiled and kissed her lightly before swatting her ass to send her on her way. Erin could already feel her juices flowing and knew if she had to wait long for him she’d soon be soaking the bed.

Once in the bedroom, Erin quickly stripped off her clothes. She desperately wanted to dim the lights, still somewhat self-conscious of her body. On the other hand, Patrick had told her he was still attracted to her, no matter what. Finally deciding to leave both bedside lamps on, Erin climbed into the middle of the bed and put the blindfold over her eyes, blocking out all the light.

The loss of her sight plunged her into a world where her other senses suddenly seemed so much more important. She smelled something burning and realized Patrick must have entered the room and lit a candle. Erin’s ears strained to hear his movements, but it was as if he was purposely trying to be as quiet as possible to avoid letting her know what he was doing.

Just as she predicted, the anticipation of what was going to happen, what might happen, had her sex weeping with pleasure and her thighs were wet with the evidence of her need. Her nipples were hard little points, begging for attention and her legs were strained from holding the kneeling position. Although she knew it only had to have been a few minutes, it felt like forever.

The feel of his hand, stroking over her soft belly made her jump with shock and joy. Shock that he had touched that part of herself she was most embarrassed about and joy to feel his hands caressing her so lovingly.

“You are so beautiful.” Hearing his words made her want to cry with the depth of the emotions she heard. To think of what they would have lost if she had given in to her insecurities and not fought for him.

Unexpectedly she felt the wet suction of his mouth on her breast as Patrick sucked her nipple into his mouth. He grasped her other breast in his hand, swiping at the nipple with his thumb. The dual touches made her lose her balance and she sank back, resting her ass on her feet and supporting herself with her arms braced behind her. Patrick released her nipple with a pop and Erin moaned at the loss of contact.

“You have very sensitive nipples. I bought you a present for them.”

Erin trembled, remembering the pain and pleasure from the clothespins.

“Shh, it’s okay, baby. I would never do anything to hurt you.”

Patrick cupped her face as he spoke and Erin melted into his touch. “I know.”

Briefly stepping away from the bed, Patrick returned momentarily and flicked her nipples, bringing them once more to attention. She could hear Patrick breathe heavily before a slight sensation of squeezing on first one and then the other nipple. The feeling of heaviness invaded the tips of her breasts, but there wasn’t the sharp shooting pain of the clothespins.

“They’re a beautiful pair of nipple rings with little tear drop jewels on them. Maybe someday we’ll get your nipples pierced.”

Erin’s hips jerked in reaction to the idea of permanently marking herself for him. Patrick chuckled when he saw the movement. “Do you like that idea?”

“Yes. I never thought I would, but yes, I like the idea very much.”

Reaching between her legs, Patrick spread her knees further apart before running his fingers along the seam of her pussy, spreading the fluid he found there. Erin bucked at his touch, moaning softly. “Yes, more. Oh, God, more.”

“Shh, I’ll give you everything you need.” Patrick stroked her lightly, gently teasing her parted flesh. His fingers would occasionally brush her exposed clit, causing Erin to shift slightly as she tried to extend the contact. Slipping a finger between her lips, he penetrated her warmth.

Her pussy eagerly engulfed his finger as he began pumping it slowly in and out. Adding a second digit, he hooked them, finding a secret sweet spot inside Erin didn’t even know existed. She cried out at the startling feelings. When he reached up with his other hand and lightly pinched her clit between his thumb and finger Erin knew it wouldn’t take her long. Her body was pulsing with the need for release.

“Come for me, baby, come all over my hand.”

“Oh, my God, Patrick.” Erin screamed out as she orgasmed, her hips pumping onto his thrusting fingers.

Erin collapsed back onto the bed, unable to support herself any longer. Patrick moved her legs from under her and knelt between her outstretched thighs. He continued to stroke the fire he’d created, leaning forward and licking at her sweetness, lapping up her come.

“I can’t stand it.” Erin moaned, but her body betrayed her as she began to undulate at his ministrations. She was rocking back and forth, riding the thrusts of his tongue as Patrick continued to eat at her pussy, driving her desire higher once again. Just as she thought she would come again, Patrick pulled back, eliciting a scream of frustration from Erin.

“We have the whole night ahead of us.”

Erin groaned, knowing he planned to drag out every torturous second, bringing her to the point of climax before backing off and starting all over again.

“Lie back on the bed, arms and legs spread-eagle.” Patrick was back in command mode and Erin jumped to do his bidding. He soon had her secured to the bedposts, with only limited movement in her limbs. Erin wondered what he had planned next, but she didn’t have to wait long to find out.

“I’m going to do something, but I don’t want you to be startled.” The loss of control was frightening while at the same time exhilarating. Since she couldn’t be in charge of the situation she just had to allow her body to react to what Patrick was doing to her. “Are you ready?”

Erin nodded, unable to speak. The feel of something hot dripping onto her breast had Erin sucking in her breath with a gasp. She’d had a bikini wax before, but she never expected to feel hot wax coating her breasts and nipples. The sensation was intoxicating, especially as he dragged the wax down her stomach, circling her navel. Her clit was begging for contact from the wax, but Patrick stopped.

Gently pinching the engorged nub, he explained, “I don’t want to use the wax here until you’re completely bare. I can only imagine how soft you’ll be.” Patrick petted her pussy as he spoke and Erin jerked on her bonds, wanting to touch him. “That doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy this sweet pussy.”

The drip of water on her inner thigh was the only warning she got before Patrick ran an ice cube along the seam of her pussy. Erin jumped at the sensation of cold along her heated core and tried to wriggle away from the ice.

“Shh, stay still and enjoy the feelings.”

Patrick stroked along her labia until he reached her clit, rubbing the cube in circles around the engorged nub. Erin was moaning as the ice melted and dripped, adding to the moisture in her pussy. When he spread her lips and began pressing the cube deep inside, Erin arched her hips at the invasion.

“Oh, my God, it’s so cold.”

“Let me warm you up.” Patrick stuck out his tongue, licking slowly, from her cool, tight asshole, slowly up to her pussy hole, where he buried his tongue as deep as he could, lapping at the cool water. The combination of her heat and the cooling ice had her jerking her hips and pressing them tight against his mouth.

Slowly he finally pulled back, licking up until he reached her clit. Wrapping his lips around it, Patrick sucked hard until Erin was begging him.

“Patrick, I need you. Please, I thought I could do what you wanted, but I can’t wait all night.” Erin hated the idea of giving up, but her body was on fire to have him inside her.

“That’s okay, baby. I don’t think I have the patience to wait much more tonight either.”

Patrick swiftly released her bonds, massaging her arms and legs to aid her circulation. His mouth descended on hers, pressing her lips open to accept his questing tongue. Erin wrapped her arms around his neck, grateful to finally have him in her embrace once again.

Breaking the kiss, Patrick pulled her blindfold off. “I want to see your face.”

Erin blinked as her eyes adjusted to the light, thankfully dimmed. She stroked the hard planes of his face, pressing kisses to his jaw line. “Love me, Patrick. I need you inside me.”

“My pleasure, baby.” Patrick pulled back for a brief moment and grasped his cock, pushing inside her with no resistance. But instead of moving as she’d expected him to do, he rolled over onto his back, keeping himself firmly seated inside her.

“Sit up for me, baby. I can go so deep inside you this way.”

Patrick bent his legs at the knees, pushing them up behind her as a support. Erin gingerly sat up, unsure of her movements, but he was right. She’d never felt him so deeply before.

“Now ride me, baby. Take your pleasure.”

Erin began rocking at first, rolling her hips to find a rhythm. She felt a bit awkward and unsure, but Patrick’s guttural words encouraged her.

“That’s it, good girl.” Patrick was holding her hips, directing her motions and pressing up at her down stroke. He pressed her forward a bit and Erin leaned close, offering her breast to him. She gasped as he engulfed her nipple, sucking it into his warm mouth. Reaching up behind him Erin held onto the headboard as she propelled herself back and forth, riding his cock.

“God, woman, you’re going to kill me.”

Erin smiled, thinking it would be mutual. Patrick switched his attention to her other breast, lightly grazing the crest with his teeth. Her clit was being stimulated with every movement and Erin knew she wouldn’t be able to hold out much longer.

“I’m going to come.” Erin pushed back, wanting to look at Patrick as they came together. Her body jerked as her orgasm hit her, pulsing through her every pore. Patrick grasped her hips hard and pushed up one last time, emptying his seed deep inside. Erin collapsed on his chest, physically and emotionally worn out.

The feeling of contentment pulsing through his chest reminded Patrick he was still alive. This was no dream or apparition he’d conjured. All the things he thought he’d have to sacrifice were there, in his hand, ready for the taking.

Stroking his hands down Erin’s back, Patrick was astounded by his good fortune. Not only was she willing to forgive him for breaking the engagement, an act that even he now could see was the stupidest move he’d ever made. But she was willing to allow him to dominate her sexually. Hell, she actively participated, even.

“You are an amazing woman, do you know that?”

Erin propped her chin on his chest, staring at him with those brilliant blue eyes. “Only to you.”

As Patrick swatted her ass, Erin shrieked in surprise. “What did you do that for?”

“New rule, every time you put yourself down, you get a punishment.”

“I didn’t --” Patrick cocked an eyebrow and Erin’s words faltered for a moment. “Okay, fine, no self pity talk.”

“That’s my girl.”

“As long as you don’t forget it.” Erin’s smirking reply almost had him ready to administer another swat, but he couldn’t fault her for the truth.

"I won't make the same mistake twice. You can count on it."

Patrick felt the audible sigh of relief from Erin and cursed himself for ever causing her pain in the first place. Hindsight was twenty-twenty and knowing what he knew now would have made all the difference in the world. He'd tried to let her go once and it was the worst torment he'd ever experienced. She was stuck with him.

Erin lay on his chest, their bodies still locked together, running her fingers down his arm. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"When did you decide you liked this stuff?"

Of all the things she might ask, this was the one thing he wasn't expecting. He didn't want to further hurt her, but he needed to be completely honest as well.

"I think in some ways I've always known."

"Even before you left?" Erin's words were muffled in his chest as she spoke.

Patrick tilted her head up so he could look into her eyes. He wanted to see her, but he also wanted her to see him and his love for her.

"I've always had a domineering personality. You know that. There were things I wanted to try sexually, but I thought it was wrong, something I never wanted to subject you to."

Erin bit her lower lip as she listened and Patrick wondered what she was thinking, but she remained silent. Finally he couldn't take the suspense and had to ask her. "Come on honey, talk to me. What is it?"

"I just wonder why you didn't want to try those things with me before, but now you do."

Releasing a pent-up breath, Patrick tried to figure out how to explain himself. "I always looked at you like you were an innocent. You were a virgin the first time we made love."

"So were you, weren't you?"

“Technically, yes, but I had a lot more experience than you did. And at the time I thought I had a lot more desires, as well. Things a sheltered girl like you shouldn’t have to deal with.”

Erin furrowed her brow. “So were you planning on ever telling me or were you just going to cheat after we got married when you couldn’t get at home what you wanted?”

“I never stopped to analyze it.” Patrick felt like he was on a slippery slope and one wrong move could have the whole thing crashing to a halt.

“So what changed?”

“Battle changes a person. I saw people dying all around me. And I realized I couldn’t hide this part of myself anymore. When I came home and you were here, offering yourself to me so sweetly, it was like something broke free inside and the real man came out. The one who loved and cherished you, but who also wanted to control your every pleasure.”

Erin wiggled her hips, re-sparking Patrick’s interest in just those pleasures. “I didn’t know it, but I liked what you did.”

Patrick chuckled. “I know, baby. You were so hot when I touched you I thought you would burn me.”

Erin buried her head in his chest as she laughed. “God, I’ve missed you. Don’t ever leave me again. I don’t think I could bear it.”

“Never again.” It was a promise Patrick knew he would keep. Erin had brought him back from the brink of devastation and into the light. It was a place he wanted to stay always, with her.

Epilogue

One Year Later

As they drove through the tree lined lane, Erin stared out over the lush green grass that seemed to go on for miles. It was beautiful, calm and peaceful, but she felt a slight shiver of unrest. She turned back to stare at Patrick and a smile came to her face. It had been a year since he'd come home, and although he'd never return to the fun loving young man he'd been before he left, Patrick had learned to relax somewhat and take it easy. She'd even caught him laughing on occasion, something she'd despaired of ever seeing again after his first night back.

Pulling up along the curb, Patrick parked the car and hopped out, coming around to her side to open the door. Erin stayed seated, knowing she'd hear it if she tried to hop out on her own. He liked to pamper her and one of those perks was a gentleman who opened her door and assisted her from the car. Her hands felt ice cold as he grasped them, helping her to her feet.

"How are you doing?" Erin couldn't keep the worry out of her question.

"Okay. Not good, not bad, but okay. I'm more worried about you."

Erin smiled and rubbed her burgeoning stomach lightly. They'd been married nine months and she was eight months pregnant. Not one to waste time, Patrick had wanted to start trying for a family right away. Since they were both young and healthy it hadn't taken them long.

"I'm pregnant, not sick."

Patrick nodded, but he didn't look convinced. Thankfully, he didn't pursue it, instead putting his hand beneath her elbow as he helped her over the uneven grass. They walked through a sea of military headstones, each decorated with an American flag on this Independence Day. Eventually they reached the one they were looking for.

Kneeling down, Patrick placed the flowers in front of the cross and ran his hand lightly over the name engraved there, Gerald "Jerry" Rightenour. Erin stood behind him, her hand barely touching his shoulder, offering him support while he paid his respects to his friend.

Soon after their reconciliation Patrick had started seeing a therapist, a wonderful man who had helped him overcome the guilt he felt about the death of his friend. Neither Jerry nor Patrick had close living relatives and had promised to see the other would be taken care of in the event something happened. Although Patrick had made all the arrangements, just as he'd promised, this was the first time he'd visited the gravesite.

Finally standing, Patrick took Erin in his arms, hugging her tight. "I love you."

"I love you too." This visit had been the final step in Patrick's healing.

Slowly they began their walk back to the car, Patrick's arm draped over her shoulder. "You know, Jerry can be a boy or girl's name."

"Uh huh."

"You hate the idea."

Erin laughed. "Not at all. I'm just surprised it took you this long to suggest it."

"Why didn't you enlighten me sooner, then?"

"I thought you'd figure it all out on your own."

Helping her back into the car, Patrick's silence was unnerving. She had gotten used to his moods and knew it wasn't anger, but desire simmering under the surface. Even after a year being back together and eight months pregnant, a word, look or caress could have the cream flowing between her thighs. Once settled into the car, Patrick turned it around to head out the cemetery.

"I think someone needs a punishment. Too bad it will have to wait until after the baby is born."

Erin licked her lips in anticipation. "Actually, the doctor told me sex was still possible, even this late in the pregnancy."

"Really? Lucky for me then." Patrick flashed her his devil-may-care smile.

"No, lucky for both of us." Erin laid her hand on his thigh, stroking light. They had braved the fire and finally healed their wounded hearts.

 THE END 

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Liz Andrews is a critically acclaimed, multi-published author who enjoys writing erotic romance almost as much as she enjoys reading it. A romantic at heart, Liz is a fierce believer in happily ever after and heroes who make the heart swoon. When not writing, the Ohio native enjoys reading, going to the movies and hosting dinner parties for her friends.

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