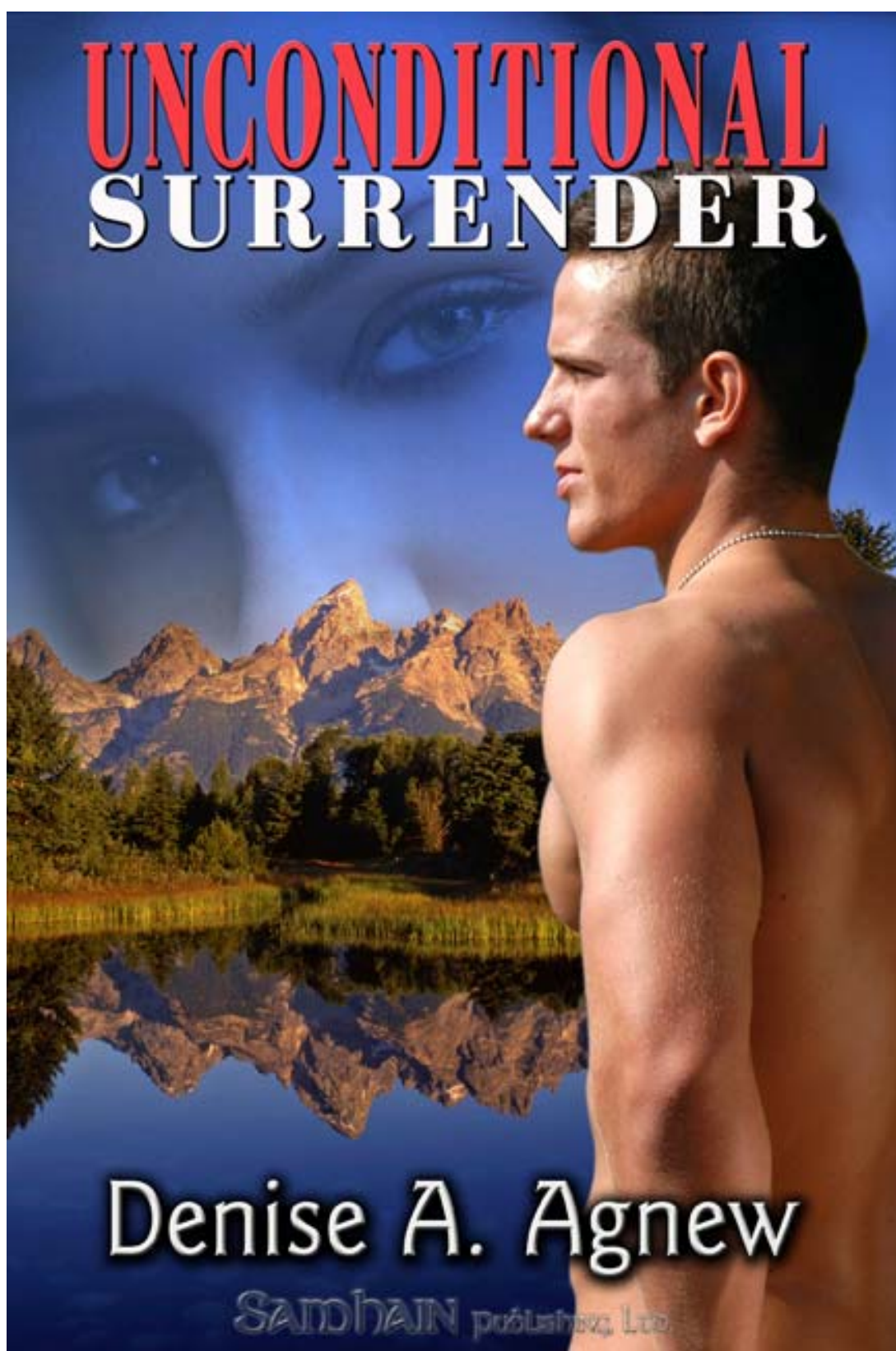


UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER



Denise A. Agnew

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Unconditional Surrender

Denise A. Agnew

Dedication

To Ernestine (Pam) Banikowski October 12, 1926-April 13, 2007

I'm honored to have known such a classy, spirited, and creative woman.

Rest in peace, Pam.

The name Ernestine was written into this tale before I learned of Ernestine's passing. That, among other things, compels me to honor her here in this dedication.

Thank you to my husband, retired Chief Warrant Officer Terrance B. Agnew, Lise Fuller, Thomas B. Fuller, Jody Allen, E.F. Leddy, MG Spikers, and Mark Pfeiffer for information on Army Special Forces.

Silly Fact That Made It Into My Fiction:

Once upon a time and long, long ago, I walked into my workplace one morning and discovered that winds gusting upwards of 100 miles per hour had torn the double front doors to pieces. Insulation, glass, and ceiling tiles were littered everywhere.

And that wasn't even during a tornado.

Chapter One

Fredricka Ann Bodine had never seen a book she didn't like.

Maybe read one she didn't care for, but certainly never *saw* one she didn't like.

But there was *one* she qualified as most favorite. As she cruised down the long aisle filled with books, she inhaled the bouquet of old leather, fine paper, and—well—dust. The head librarian, Ernestine, didn't keep this old place as clean as she used to.

Freddie stopped at her favorite area in the aisle and reached for the huge picture volume. *Ah, yeah.* She grinned. She couldn't believe it was still here after all this years. Twenty years to be exact. Thank God she'd been working out. This book weighed a ton.

She hefted the huge book and headed toward the end of the aisle near the wall. A cozy spot waited. She sank into the padded chair and laid the book on the desk in front of her. The tall sides of the library desk shielded her from prying eyes.

Yeah—like—you're the only one in here other than Ernestine.

Still, the deliciousness of the moment, the clandestine feeling surprised Freddie. The ridiculousness also teased her. Clarksville, Wyoming had a lot of secrets, and while her love for this book wouldn't cause a scandal, she still counted it as one she didn't want everyone to know. Satisfied, she smiled, tucked errant strands of hair behind her ears, and opened the colorful volume.

And stopped dead cold.

"Damn it," she said in disbelief. "Damn it."

"Freddie?"

She almost came out of her skin. She whirled to the left. Standing at the very end of the aisle, Keith Wallace stared at her with a furrowed brow.

"Oh—um, hi." Her voice cracked and she cleared her throat. "I didn't know you were here. Or even in town."

"I didn't know *you* were in town." His voice, deep and overlaid with a sexy huskiness, had always melted her insides like the most delicious combination of peanut butter and chocolate and stirred feelings she didn't want to have.

As he sauntered toward her, she sighed. The gods could not be so cruel. Or maybe they could. The changes in him had only increased his attractiveness. Boy, oh boy, howdy, he'd matured like a fine Merlot, rich with nuances that made her mouth go dry and her heart do a silly two-step. At thirty-eight he defined disgustingly gorgeous man with a capital G.

When she'd left this town twenty years ago, she'd never considered that he'd still have this effect on her. She recalled his attractiveness at eighteen, mature for his age, brooding and intense. At eighteen she'd wanted to date happy-go-lucky guys with uncomplicated backgrounds. Sure couldn't say that about Keith. Still, nature had matured his physique in all the right ways.

At six feet and probably two inches, he made her five feet five inches feel small. The navy blue T-shirt stretched over his broad chest and wide shoulders. Muscles rippled in his biceps and forearms. Jeans defined his hips and muscular thighs and made his legs look miles longer. His work boots looked well used and scuffed. Always rugged, his face had matured into angles and planes that screamed danger and forbidden sensuality. His mahogany hair wasn't the tousled boy anymore, but clipped military short. Without strands flopping over his face, nothing hid the thoroughly masculine lines that screamed the proverbial dark and dangerous.

Her heart did a flop, a flip, and started thumping away so hard she felt the pulse in her ears. Okay. So *that* reaction hadn't changed in twenty years either.

When Keith hovered over her, staring down with those dark chocolate eyes, his frown showed genuine concern.

"What brings you here?" she asked.

"Came to pick up a book for my mom. Ernestine said you were here." He crossed his arms, and then nodded at her huge book. "I heard you cursing. What's wrong?"

Embarrassment heated her face. "It's nothing significant."

He came closer. "Oh yeah?" His lips quirked, and rare humor danced in his eyes. He glanced at the book lying open on the desk. "Sure it's nothing?"

Freddie frowned. "I never was good at lying to you. This is—was—my favorite book in the library."

"Was?"

"I used to check it out every once in a while when I was a kid."

He moved nearer yet, leaning his hand on the side panel of the desk to look at the book. “A ripped page?”

She closed the book cover so he could see the photo on the front. “Archaeological sites in Mexico. Tikal. Or what my archaeology professor at Western used to say, Chicken Itza.”

He laughed, the low, rumbling sound sending vibrations through her stomach. She clenched her legs together in reaction. Holy, holy crap. A hot pulsing gathered in her loins. Talk about a record time to get turned on. Her mouth watered as her gaze traveled quickly over his chest.

“I’m sorry some asshole wrecked your favorite book. Why don’t you buy a copy for yourself and keep it so you can look at it any time you want?” he asked.

She sighed and opened the book again. “You always were a practical kind of guy, Keith. But I liked the ritual of coming into this quiet library occasionally and flipping through the pages undisturbed. Besides, the book is now out of print.”

He nodded, that slow grin creeping over his mouth again. “I get it. With your brothers and sisters running around that old house, I can see why you used come here for peace.”

Memories of twenty years ago flooded her mind, some of them good, some of them not so good. She swallowed hard as the impact hit her. She looked down at his boots.

“What brings you to town?” he asked.

“For the twentieth class reunion. Twenty years. Can you believe it? How about you?”

“Visiting the ranch.”

She couldn’t help smiling at him again. “When I arrived the other day, I wondered if you ever came back to town.”

He shrugged. “I don’t very often. Been too busy.”

She’d heard rumors, but didn’t want to blurt out what. Small towns really were chock full of bullshit sometimes. “Doing what?”

“I’m in the military.”

She nodded. “I heard the Army.”

“Yep.”

Oh, yeah. There it was. He had that brooding, intense look she'd never forgotten. Now that he'd reached thirty-eight years old, the gloominess appeared far more serious than it had before. Gloomy, hard, and oh so sexy.

"So you had time off?" she asked.

"My unit was sent back from an overseas deployment two weeks ago. I had some leave coming and decided to get away. While overseas I managed to get hurt, and since I have thirty days I need to use or lose, Mom and Dad asked me to come out to Clarksville."

Concern twisted her stomach, and her gaze cruised over him quickly. "What happened? I mean, how were you hurt?"

A disturbance flickered in his eyes. "A bullet. It hit me in the left thigh."

"Oh God, Keith." Worry braided through her midsection and made her stomach muscles clench. She stood automatically, and squeezed his shoulder. "I'm glad you're okay."

"Thanks." He winked, and his mouth turned up in a teasing grin. "It's just a flesh wound."

She returned his smile, not wanting to think about him more seriously hurt.

"Our unit will probably go back in six months."

"Damn," she said softly.

He didn't react to her quiet statement, and when his eyes shuttered, she knew she'd lost the lightness of their earlier conversation. A heaviness wrapped around her she couldn't deny.

"You're still an archaeologist?" he asked.

"Yep. Got my Ph.D. and I'm working at Western College starting this fall."

His eyebrows winged up. "You chose to come back to this town? When you left I thought you said you were never coming back permanently."

She nodded. "Yeah, but what you say when you're eighteen doesn't always stick, does it?"

"No. No it doesn't."

Was he remembering that last dance they had? The one she'd cherished all these years? Her face heated with the memory. God, she didn't know if she wanted Keith to remember. The evening hadn't ended quite so well as that slow, sensual turn about the

floor she replayed in her fantasies on lonely evenings when it rained. Rained just like it had at the town hall dance on prom night.

“Are you going to the class reunion?” She tried not to sound hopeful. “It should be fun.”

He snorted. “Right.”

She threw him a dirty look. “Come on. Here’s our chance to show off to those cheerleaders and football players that we made something of ourselves. And I hear cheerleaders and football players have a tendency to get fat and lose their hair after high school.”

His grin widened. “You don’t really care about that, do you? Half the time I can’t remember any those putzs’ names.”

“Of course I don’t care that much. But don’t tell me you aren’t like everybody else and don’t wonder occasionally what happened to those people. And it’s nice to relate to some of them on a mature level instead of teenage hormonal imbalance.”

“You’re assuming some of them don’t still have a hormone imbalance.”

“Hmm, well... It’s good to have the proof, even if it’s just for one selfish second, that you did make it in the world even though you weren’t the most popular guy on the block.”

His brow furrowed. “That’s for sure.”

“I didn’t mean to insinuate...”

“It’s okay. I wasn’t popular. It’s no big deal.”

“Come on. You didn’t feel that natural twinge every teen does when they aren’t popular?”

He gazed at the floor, his eyes shuttered. “Not really.”

“Well, I was so glad to escape high school I couldn’t see straight,” she said. “I wasn’t popular either.”

Keith shook his head. “Can’t understand why not. You were so pretty.”

Her mouth did fall open then, and she wondered if the shock would kill her. She managed to find her voice...just barely. “Um...thank you. That’s sweet of you to say. I don’t know how braces, unruly as hell hair, and poor fashion sense made me pretty, but—”

“I saw you.” His gaze cruised over her now, warm and searching and way too intimate. She felt his attention like a sensual caress. Admiration burned in his eyes. “Just because you couldn’t afford all the trendy crap the cheerleaders were wearing doesn’t mean you weren’t pretty.” Once more his attention glided from her hair, over her face, and then with unrepentant precision straight over her breasts and back up again. His voice, when he spoke, was low and husky. “And now you’re beautiful.”

“Wow,” she said in amazement, her body flushed with heat and an ache gnawing low in her stomach. Beautiful? No man had ever called her that, and it sent wild flutters dancing over her skin and settling in intimate places. “Way to flatter a woman, Keith. Do you do this often?”

“Hell, no.”

“Thanks anyway.”

“You’re welcome. But I understand what it was like, remember? I spent way too much time on my parents’ ranch to participate in after school events. Made for a tough social life.”

She tilted her head to the side. “There was Tiffany. She broke you out of that shyness thing you had going on, and your intellectual prowess was pretty legendary.”

He winced as if it might be a rough subject. “Intellectual prowess?”

“I remember you were quite the chemistry geek.”

He grunted. “Way to flatter a man, Freddie.”

“Payback is a bitch,” she said lightly.

“Tell me about it.”

She wondered if the whole Tiffany fiasco still played in his head sometimes like a needle stuck in a record groove. When he stayed quiet, she moved on to another subject, something much lighter, thank goodness.

“I’m taking a vacation soon myself. That’s one of the reasons I was nostalgic for this book.” She tossed a gaze at the tome. “I’m finally squeezing in a trip to Mexico.” Excitement crept into her voice. “Just like I always said I would.”

His gaze hardened, and he crossed his arms. His eyes narrowed. “By yourself? Where exactly?”

“Los Diablos? Why?”

His face turned to granite. “No damn way.”

“What?” she asked in surprise.

“No. There’s no way you’re going there.”

Chapter Two

Freddie's mouth dropped open as she stared at Keith in amazement. Then she got pissed. "Why not?"

His mouth twisted a little, as if he wanted to tell Freddie the truth but couldn't. "Is it a large bus tour? How many people are going?"

His clipped requests held so much authority she answered without thinking. "One bus with probably about thirty-five people. Not large."

"Who's putting it together?"

"Arnold Bannon. He has a travel tour company in Cray just up the road—"

"Christ," he said under his breath, dismay written all over his face. "Figures. That muckerfother."

"Muckerfother?"

"That's what everyone called him in high school. In this case I think they should've just said it like it was...motherfucker."

"God, Keith. He wasn't that bad. He's a nicer guy now—"

"Huh." Disbelief tightened his mouth. "I've heard what he's like now and nice is just the face he puts on. He hasn't changed."

"And neither have you," she said with rising consternation. "You still interrupt people."

He stopped dead, his gaze capturing and holding hers. He rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

Confusion made her bristle. "Look, I don't think it's any of your business what I do on my vacation. Why the interrogation?"

"Because..." His gaze traveled over her face. "It's not safe."

"What?" Taken aback, she stared at him like he'd grown an extra limb. Then it dawned on her why he'd taken this stance, and this time pissed didn't cover the full

extent of her dismay. “This isn’t really about safe travel is it?” Understanding mixed with her desire to berate him. “Just because your sister was...” She couldn’t push the words past her lips. “People go to Los Diablos every day on tours, Keith. It’s no big deal.”

Gazing down at her with that smoldering gaze, Keith’s expression lingered somewhere between wanting to throttle her and desiring to kiss her.

If that was possible. The kissing part, that is.

And oh my, my. If he wanted to kiss her...

Something potent crackled to life between them, hot and dangerous and setting her on fire. Heat swept over her at the mere thought of tasting him. Anywhere. Everywhere. She couldn’t believe that arguing with him turned her on. But it did.

She inhaled and his warm, musky scent filled her with a sensual excitement. If she had the nerve, if she had a reason, she’d grab that handsome head of his and kiss the life out of him right here, right now. Just so she could say to herself she’d tasted him once. Because even all these years on she wondered what she’d missed never kissing him. And hell, if she admitted it to herself in the dead of night, she wondered what it would be like to sleep with him. Wild gyrations danced in her stomach, and not from nerves either. Her body recognized what her mind tried so hard to ignore. Yeah, he could eat crackers in her bed anytime.

She heard the swish of a skirt and looked up. The woman parading down the aisle was all long legs, flowing blonde hair, cherry lips, a swinging walk and bod that screamed fashion model. Tiffany Alexander in the flesh. A grown-up, impossibly pretty beach babe.

Right now Tiff, if she was still called that, was definitely in a *tiff*. The cheerleader had walked into Keith’s life during the prom in high school and taken Keith right out of Freddie’s arms. Sure, it had only been five minutes of dancing before Tiff had wormed her way between them, but he’d let it happen and that stung even to this day.

Tiff’s lips drew tight, her blue eyes as cold as chipped ice as she drew up beside them. She slipped her hand through his arm and clutched at his biceps with a possessive grip. “Come on, Keith. We’re late.”

Whoa. Way to be a bitch, Tiff.

Anger hooked Freddie before she could head it off at the pass. “Nice to see you, too, Tiff. What’s new?”

Tiff sighed and puzzlement filled those chilly eyes. “Do I know you?”

“Yes, you do.” Freddie put her hand out, and Tiff gave her a wet noodle handshake. “Fredricka Bodine. We were in high school together.”

“Oh,” Tiff said with a slight wrinkle to her nose. “I didn’t recognize you. You’re taller.”

Actually, she wasn’t, but what could she say to that lame statement? Then the answer came to her in a flash, something that almost never happened at an opportune time. “I recognized you. You’re blonder.”

Tiff’s eyes widened a little, mouth opened to deliver a comeback. When nothing came out, Freddie smiled in guilty satisfaction.

Keith looked down at Tiff, his expression brittle. Maybe he didn’t like being handled like a side of beef. But instead of saying anything to Tiff, he said to Freddie, “I need to talk more with you about that vacation of yours.”

Freddie picked up her huge book and hefted it back onto the shelf, then edged past the couple. “No, you don’t. See you guys around. Nice talking to you.”

With that, Freddie headed down the aisle and wondered if she’d walked out of his life forever.

Damn Freddie’s cute little ass. Though cute didn’t exactly describe Freddie’s unique combination of beauty. With her long chestnut hair, and her midnight brown eyes, she’d always fired something hot and needful inside him in ways he didn’t want to admit. She’d haunted him all these years.

And hanging dumb decorations from the walls of the high school gym couldn’t banish Freddie from his mind.

He kept imagining her hair spilling around her shoulders, the wild tumble soft and sexy. He wanted to bury his hands in it, sniff it, brush his face against it.

Fuck. She was stalking his daydreams now.

But he had a job to do and getting a hard-on in the middle of it wasn’t an option.

Tiffany had roped him into a second day of decorating, and he knew now he’d left his brain somewhere in Iraq. He winced as his left thigh protested. Yeah, he’d left his mind and had almost left his body there, too. Standing on a ladder didn’t usually hose

him up like this. But with bullets, he'd discovered that even a flesh wound could feel more serious and act more serious than the name implied.

Still, wounded was a damn sight better than getting dead.

Returning to this small town had taken a lot of courage, almost more than facing down a firefight in the desert. What did he know about this place anymore anyway? Years had passed, and somehow he found his butt right back where he didn't want to be.

Well, he couldn't say that with one hundred percent clarity. When his mother called him and said his father needed his help, he'd hesitated. Dad didn't do anything without conditions and one of them would probably be presented to him during the month.

Stay and run the ranch.

I can't. I'm still in the military.

When you get out.

No.

He knew this conversation would come one way or the other. It had happened before and would again. Sacrifice his career or sacrifice his family.

Now he'd gone and done a stupid thing. Telling Tiffany Alexander he'd be her date for the reunion. What was he thinking? He wished he'd seen Freddie before Tiffany had run into him at the coffee shop the other day. He could have asked Freddie to come to the reunion.

Ah, hell. Who was he kidding? What did it matter? He'd screwed up the other day in the library when he'd come on so strong. No, she shouldn't go to Los Diablos, but convincing her of that would take some work.

Then again, he hadn't convinced himself. His reaction to her vacationing in Los Diablos didn't make sense. When she'd mentioned the place his gut had clenched in absolute fear for her safety. But that fear didn't have a rational basis, and if he could say anything about himself, it was that he was rational as hell. His sister's death notwithstanding, he couldn't relate Freddie's trip with what happened to his sister. Not really...

"This is what it's all about," Arnold Bannon said in his rumbling voice. "This place looks great, guys."

Bannon stood by the stage, his seventies-cut hair fitting his baby face. The tall, gangly man still looked about seventeen. The guy dressed like a Wall Street broker most of the time, and money oozed from his appearance. So did his attitude of importance.

Women seemed to find the fucker attractive for some reason totally incomprehensible to Keith. But hey, he didn't have to understand.

Several women nearby fixated on Bannon, their gazes admiring. Sometimes they threw Keith intrigued looks, too, but whenever he challenged them with a returning gaze, they almost reacted as if he scared them. Standing surrounded by women who he'd gone to high school with should have made some impression on Keith, but he didn't feel much of anything. Lately his heart seemed cold even to him. Isolated.

Good thing he didn't care.

Yeah. You didn't care until you saw Freddie again and felt your head fill with memories of what never happened. With what he wished had happened with every fiber of his being.

Bannon's laugh echoed in the room and reminded Keith of why he hadn't enjoyed high school that much. It went deeper than lack of popularity. Memories bombarded Keith. Dancing with Tiffany, her fine young body supple and beautiful as she rotated her hips and his cock had come to attention. Cheerleader girl had come onto him, and his young body had forgotten why he should hate her gorgeous, popular ass. He hadn't questioned.

Then another memory blocked that one entirely. Freddie's far sweeter body, a little shorter, a bit smaller, nestled against him with trust. Trust and innocence he couldn't...wouldn't corrupt. He'd never forget holding Freddie as long as he lived. He gritted his teeth. Hell, no. He couldn't go there now.

"Keith?"

Tiffany brushed Keith's arm in a proprietary way, and he stopped his half-hearted decorating. "Yeah?"

"We're still okay for the reunion, right?"

Uncertainty filled in her eyes, but no real worry. Instead she looked like she'd tear him a new one if he didn't agree. Hell hath no fury like a Tiff Alexander scorned.

"Yep," he finally said.

"Good. I thought maybe that Freddie whatever-her-name-is might have asked you."

That stopped him cold. "What?"

"She's interested in you. Always has been. I figured when you ran across her in the library she'd pounce on the opportunity."

"To do what?"

Her glare insinuated he was a dumb ass. “Ask you out. I think she’s been dying to.”

His laugh held disbelief. “Well, she didn’t.”

He’d leave it at that. Whatever game Tiffany played he didn’t want in on it.

When he didn’t elaborate, she smoothed her fingers over his biceps. “You sure have changed. God, you’ve worked out. When I saw you the other day I was—” Her gaze slid over him in a devouring fashion. “Astonished. You’ve changed for the better.”

He kept on working. “I’m not that different, Tiffany. I used to work out in high school.”

Her touch should have felt good. He hadn’t slept with a woman in a year. Despite that, her skin brushing over his did nothing for his libido.

She laughed softly and started twirling a strand of her hair around one index finger. “Everyone changes in twenty years. You’re...hard. It’s something a woman notices.”

One of his eyebrows tweaked upward. “Hard?”

She blushed. “You know. Tough. You really have changed.”

“Not as much as you think,” he said and moved a ladder into place along the wall.

She looked puzzled for a half second, then shrugged. “I’ll be the envy of half the women in town.”

He grinned and didn’t speak.

He’d thought maybe when he’d run into Tiff again that he could slake some serious horniness with mindless, meaningless sex. But now that she gave off all the signals of wanting him, he didn’t want her.

“Hey, Wallace.” Bannon’s voice carried across the cafeteria. “Help me with this, will ya?”

What the fuck now? Keith left Tiffany and headed toward Bannon. Bannon grunted as he tried to shove some bleachers back to the wall with no success. Keith helped the other man shove the bleachers back against the wall.

Bannon dusted his hands off. “Thanks, Wallace. Say, I have a question for you.”

Keith just crossed his arms. For a second Wallace looked disconcerted.

“I wanted to talk to you about the tour I’m putting together to Mexico.”

Keith kept his face neutral. “What about it?”

Bannon tilted his head to the side, his blue eyes inquisitive, his hands on his hips. “Freddie Bodine told me you have reservations about it. Why?”

Surprise hit Keith. Maybe his caution to Freddie had made some impression. Good. “Does your tour company research the political situation of a country or area before you set up travel there?”

The man’s eyes narrowed. “Of course.”

“Apparently somebody fell down on the job this time. Los Diablos has been unstable for a lot of years. Several drug cartels have been fighting for supremacy there and the violence escalated just last year. You have no business sending anyone in there.”

“What do you know?” Bannon asked, his voice sounding far more competent and concerned.

Good question. “Take my word for it.”

“I can’t do that.”

Keith sighed, patience on a short leash. “It’s just not a good idea, Bannon, to go there.”

Bannon’s wide mouth twisted with a fake smile. “Oh, yeah. You’re one of those whatever you call them...special soldier types. You know secrets and stuff.”

Special soldier types? Bannon made it sound like a bad taste in his mouth. Shit.

“Yeah, I know secrets. But this has nothing to do with secrets.”

“People take tours in there all the time. It’s not dangerous.”

The man’s insistence made him want reach over and choke Bannon. But what could he say? That his intuition was screaming danger? “You got a piece of paper?” Keith asked. “I have the name of a guy at the American Embassy in Mexico you need to talk with. Tell him I referred you. At least get an update on the political situation in the area, okay? It can’t hurt.”

Bannon almost appeared as if he’d argue. Finally he turned toward a nearby table and grabbed a pen and steno pad.

“Shoot,” Bannon said.

Keith gave him the name and number. “Call him before you settle on taking this tour.”

“Oh, the tour’s already settled and everyone is signed up. I figured I’d just call your friend and learn what I need to know before we leave.”

Keith barely held back a livid curse. He took one step toward Bannon, and the other man flinched and stepped back. “When is the trip?”

“In two weeks.”

“Shit.” He considered kicking Bannon’s ass until his boot came out the man’s nose. He drew in a breath and took control of his emotions. He pointed at the tour operator. “If Freddie goes on that tour with you and anything...and I mean *anything* bad happens to her, I’m holding you personally responsible.”

Bannon’s mouth dropped open, shock taking away his bravado. “Nothing’s going to happen. Freddie’s important to me. I’d never let her get into trouble.”

A harder, deeper emotion he couldn’t define rode Keith. “I never said she’d get into trouble on purpose. Trouble has a way of finding people all on its own.”

“What’s eating you, Wallace? Like I said, I’ll take care of her.”

The odd feeling vibrating through Keith escalated until it filled his thoughts with nothing else. Nothing reasonable, nothing soft, but sure as hell honest.

He did not want this man touching Freddie. “You interested in her?”

The words came out harsher than he intended, but then Keith realized he hadn’t intended on the words escaping at all.

“None of your business,” Bannon said.

Fuck that. He took another step toward Bannon, his intent to scare the shit outta the toad. “Be careful with her. I know where you live.”

“She’s a big girl. I don’t think she’d appreciate your overprotective macho garbage.”

Keith grinned, but there was no humor inside him. “You’re lucky I’m not a violent guy.”

Keith never discovered what he would have done to the mealy-mouthed son-of-a-bitch. A high-pitched cry of distress came from nearby. Keith turned just as Tiffany teetered precariously on the ladder and started to fall sideways.

Keith launched toward her.

Freddie walked into the gym in time to hear Tiffany’s startled wail and witness her topple from the ladder. A flash of movement out of the corner of her eye caught her attention.

Keith hauling ass.

Tiffany’s frightened squeal sounded genuine and so did the surprise on her face as Keith caught her before she could hit the floor. Conveniently his arms held the blonde in

a pose that reminded Freddie of a hero embracing a heroine on the cover of a romance novel. With one arm around her shoulders and his other arm under her knees, Keith bristled with strength. Heat settled in Freddie's stomach. If he held her like that, Freddie knew she'd feel a hell of a lot more than minor excitement. An emotion she never enjoyed rose inside her with volcanic force.

Jealousy.

Oh, damn.

People made sympathetic, concerned noises, and around that chatter Freddie heard Keith ask if Tiffany was all right. He set the woman on her feet, and Tiffany kept her arms around his neck as she smiled.

"Thanks to you," Tiffany said and kissed him on the cheek close to his mouth.

Jealousy spiked, and Freddie reined it back. Well, she couldn't honestly blame Tiff for beaming like halogen headlights. Freddie could imagine far too vividly what it might feel like to have Keith's arms hooked around her again. Time hadn't erased that solid, sensual memory. Tiffany's smile faded when she saw Freddie. Keith disengaged from Tiff entirely. He looked almost relieved.

Nah. Couldn't be. What guy wouldn't want a buxom, curvy blonde wrapped around him?

While people fluttered around the former prom queen, Freddie stood in the doorway and watched the big soldier stride her way. Her heartbeat betrayed her once more with its skip, hop, and restart. *Oh, man, man, man.* Would she ever stop having this extreme reaction to him? She'd better learn. Anything else, any more dreaming would lead right to a tsunami-sized disaster for her heart. She could get way too attached him way too fast.

"It's Keith to the rescue," she said.

Amusement twinkled in his eyes. "I was in the right place at the right time."

"Glad you were there."

He grunted, in only the way a man can. Never could tell if a sound like that meant he agreed or disagreed or didn't care. "Don't tell me you're on this decorating committee, too?"

She waggled her eyebrows. "No. I managed to wrangle my way out of this one. I stopped by because I was curious. I haven't stepped foot in this school since graduation. Things have changed, obviously."

His attention rested upon her in a warm, inquisitive fashion she enjoyed whether she should or not.

“I need to talk to you. Tonight,” he said.

“About what?” She hitched her hobo bag higher on her shoulder. “If it’s about my vacation, you can’t talk me out of it.”

He leaned one hand against the door jam. Keith’s closeness resurrected buried needs. As a woman she couldn’t deny his appeal. Today he wore a red polo shirt that molded his strong torso just right, and he’d tucked it into his chinos. Chinos. Now that wasn’t something she expected to see him wear. Despite his preppie attire, she couldn’t deny his edge remained. She couldn’t forget he was dangerous. In more ways than one. He smelled delicious, like a special spice and musk designed to drive her nuts. He radiated confidence and a predatory sensuality that heated her from the inside out.

“I’ll admit it’s mostly about your trip,” he said. “You going to tell me get a life again?”

“I should.” Instead she took the high road. “But no.”

His cocky smile edged with pure heat and sent a pulsing straight between her legs and across her nipples.

“Can we meet somewhere tonight?” he asked.

Regret filled her. “I can’t. My parents are having a big dinner. Wait, would you like to come?”

She’d blurted the invitation without thinking.

“I’d love to. What time?”

She hadn’t expected him to say yes. “Six o’clock.”

“Can I bring anything?”

“Just yourself.”

“Nah, that’s not good enough.”

She winked. “Surprise us, then.”

“I’d better get back to work or Tiffany will have my ass.”

As he walked away, she whispered, “I just bet she would.”

Chapter Three

“A Navy SEAL is coming to dinner?” Freddie’s sister said as she waddled into the kitchen.

Freddie smiled with great affection at her enormously pregnant sister. Dee was thirty-five and almost ready to pop out her third child. The Bodine family had grown in leaps and bounds in recent years. Her twenty-two year old sister, Tina, had just had a baby girl three months ago. Her brother Doug, forty and the oldest in the family, had just had his second girl. Last but not least, her brother Kirk had just had his first baby boy at twenty-three. All were married.

And here she sat at the huge dining table with her siblings awaiting the answer. The sounds of her nieces and nephews playing in the big living room echoed. Only Kirk and his family and Dee and her family had made the trip this time to the farm. It was hard for everyone to match up in one place, except at Thanksgiving and Christmas when they all tried to gather here at the ranch house.

Kirk yawned. “Navy SEALs are the biggest bad asses in the business. At least that’s what they’ll tell you.”

Freddie sipped the last drop of her coffee. “He’s *not* a SEAL. He’s Army Special Forces.”

“What’s the difference?” Freddie’s mother asked as she placed a platter of chocolate chip cookies down on the table in front of them.

Dee echoed Carolina’s question. “Yeah, what’s the difference?”

“A lot of difference.” Freddie snatched up a huge cookie. She took a bite and moaned in ecstasy. “Better than sex.”

Her family laughed—good thing they didn’t have hang-ups about sex. Too bad she really meant it. She hadn’t had sex in—well, fuck, she couldn’t remember.

Freddie's father leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head. With his slightly balding head and hard face, Jackson still looked handsome as ever. "Yeah, I remember those Special Forces guys I worked with way back in the day."

A rumble of thunder heralded more rain, but then the rain just stopped dead.

Kirk stopped chewing on his cookie. "You worked with Special Forces?"

Dad just grinned.

The doorbell rang and Freddie jerked in surprise. "I'll get it."

As she left the kitchen and headed to the front door, unusual self-consciousness made her stomach twist.

Face it, Freddie, you have a thing for Keith. Always have. She sighed. *Suck it up and continue.* Just because she had a crush on him didn't mean she'd take the route of lovesick puppy. *Keep that dignity.* She crossed into the expansive living room and checked the door peephole. Keith stood outside, a handful of colorful carnations in one hand and wine in the other. He was also soaked from the rain.

She took a deep breath and opened the door. "Welcome to the Bodine bar and grill."

An irreverent grin warmed his mouth as he passed her the flowers and wine and stepped inside. "Thanks. These are for the party. The flowers are for your mom."

She blinked in surprise. "You remembered that my mother likes carnations?"

He chuckled. "No. Amber down at the flower shop said she likes them."

She gave an exaggerated sound of relief. "Oh good. For a minute there I thought you might have gone all girly on me."

They shared a smile, and she felt that delicious communication all the way to her womb.

"Well, hello, Navy SEAL," Kirk said as they crossed into the dining room. "Looks like you've been out swimming."

A farcical exchange of jokes and welcomes followed when Freddie's family surrounded the newcomer. He took it with good humor, and times like these with everyone enjoying the moment reminded Freddie that she enjoyed being with her family. Dad stood back, his demeanor quiet as usual. She realized she wanted him to like Keith. But what did it matter? He'd never been that enthusiastic about any man she'd brought home.

You haven't brought Keith home. Not really. Get a grip on the imagination, Freddie.

Soon after her family stopped inspecting Keith like they'd never met him before, her mother said, "Dinner is almost ready, but I'll bet you'd like to dry off, Keith."

"That would be great," he said.

"Show him the spare room upstairs," her dad said. "You can towel off there."

She showed Keith the spare room with the bathroom but discovered it didn't have towels. Once she'd retrieved a towel from the linen closet, she returned to the bedroom and opened the door.

She came to a dead stop. "Oh."

Keith stood in the bathroom door with his shirt off. *Oh* was an understatement. Try drop-dead, out-of-this-world, dreamy gorgeous. She gawked at his broad shoulders and powerful arms. Dark hair scattered over his pecs, down his six-pack abs and disappeared into his jeans. Keith bristled with testosterone. It wasn't until he walked toward her that Freddie became cognizant that she stared at him like a teenager drooling over a favorite movie star. Beads of water gleamed on his hair. God, she didn't know if she'd ever catch her breath. The muscles between her legs clenched in reaction. She couldn't help but respond. She ached to touch him.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

She managed a mischievous smile. "Nothing. I was wondering...um..."

He waited, and her tongue seemed to grow thicker. He moved even nearer, and her face flushed. Lordy, she'd lost all control. As if he'd turned a key and opened everything wild and wanton inside her. She stepped forward, bold, desiring to touch hard male flesh. Lightly tanned, his skin looked firm and tempting.

She held out the towel, and when he reached for it his fingers brushed hers. She drew in a quick breath as tingles raced up her arm.

"Thanks." His voice rumbled gently. "You seem nervous."

Just blurt it out, girl. Tell him the truth and let the chips fall where they may. "I am. Sort of."

His brow furrowed as he scrubbed the towel over his chest. "Why?"

She heaved a sigh. "Because you're...you."

He stopped scrubbing. Puzzlement entered his eyes. "That's a reason to be nervous?"

She threw her hands up. "It's hard to explain. When we were teens I thought you were cute. Now you're just freakin' awesome."

He laughed in earnest, his strong chuckle sending vibrations of hot desire right to her loins. “‘Freakin’ awesome?’”

She gritted her teeth for a moment. “Okay, I’m mortified enough already, and I’m not explaining this very well. You’re a tough guy. You’re bubbling over with testosterone. There’s something about you that makes me twitch.”

He laughed, but it didn’t sound mocking. He came closer, and Freddie loved it. No more stepping away for her, at least in this moment.

“I could take that as a compliment or an insult. Which is it?” he asked.

She waved one hand in denial. “No, no. It’s not an insult.” She twisted the wide-band Celtic design silver ring on her right ring finger. “You’re good looking, Keith. Any woman with a hormone left can see that. Damn it, I’ve never seen you with your shirt off, all right? It’s...disconcerting.”

Seeing you with your shirt off makes other men pale in comparison.

Once more his grin teased her. The towel dangled from his fingers, and he stood tall and as masculine a figure as she’d ever seen. “I make you nervous because you think I’m good looking?”

She threw her hands up. “Yeah. Sue me.”

When she looked at the floor, he lifted her chin with his index finger and stared into her eyes. “You’re attracted to me? Damn.”

“That’s a bad thing?” she asked with apprehension.

“No. Just...I didn’t expect it.”

She marveled he found the concept surprising. “You must have women after you all the time.”

“Nope.” He tapped her gently on the nose with his index finger. “Of course, there weren’t too many women where I’ve been recently.”

His tone sounded lonely.

“Do you get a lot of mail when you’re away?”

“I’m usually somewhere I can’t get mail.”

“Oh, right. Of course. How long are you staying in that life?”

“At least another few years until I can retire. Dad keeps trying to convince me to move back to the ranch after that. I don’t know.”

She imagined a woman loving him and yet never knowing when, or if he'd be home. Her heart ached.

"A woman would have to be tough. Independent to put up with that life," she said.

He nodded. "That's been a problem for me a couple of times."

Her eyebrows flew upwards. "You were married?"

He turned away and walked back into the bathroom. He folded the towel and hooked it over the towel rack. "Never. I was engaged once. She decided me being in danger wouldn't cut it. I figured up until that point that a woman who loved a guy would put up with it. I was wrong."

A silence enveloped them. When he came back to her, his searching gaze felt so intimate and embracing that she wanted to move nearer, to feel his warmth wrapped around her. To take away the darkness that must have marked him over the years.

A knock on the half-open door startled her. Her brother peeked around the doorway, his slim face carved with mischief. "Dinner's almost ready. Let's rock."

Kirk left the door open as he headed back downstairs.

"Dad has an old flannel shirt in that closet you can put on until your shirt dries," she said. "I'll put your shirt in the drier."

She hurried downstairs, jumpiness sending her feet quickly over the stairs. She wondered what more Keith would have said without the interruption.

They sat down to dinner a few minutes later. The red flannel shirt was almost too small for Keith and the sleeves too short, but he wore it like a king, totally unconscious.

Nauseatingly self-possessed.

Conversation at the table stayed non-controversial and polite. Not too soon after her mother's apple pie, everyone chilled out in the living room with kiddies running amok as entertainment.

She cornered Keith in the kitchen as he put his desert plate in the dishwasher. "You said we needed to talk."

He glanced around. "We need someplace private."

"We can walk in the garden. Let me find my sweater. I'll be right back."

After she grabbed her sweater from the living room, she told her mom she planned to show Keith the garden, and her family threw inquisitive glances Freddie's way. She couldn't help a twinge of self-consciousness.

"Mom's kept the garden going. It's cool but she planted a few things early," she said as they left through the back door.

For a long time, as they cruised the pretty flower beds her mother so lovingly attended, she felt a companionship with Keith that warmed her. Flower tops danced in a soft breeze. Her hair tossed around her shoulders in the wind, then blew across her face. The rain had left freshness on the land, and the scent cleared her senses and invigorated her spirit.

"Thanks for inviting me. Your mom cooks a mean lasagna."

"That's for certain. So, tell me what you've been doing all these years." She wriggled her eyebrows. "You going to tell me some deep secrets I shouldn't know?"

He leaned close, his breath brushing across her cheek. "Yeah." His voice was husky. Filled with sin. "A deep secret about my demons."

"You hunt demons in your work?"

Another step closer and he was so, so near. God, if he leaned forward now...

She inhaled quickly. He smelled so delicious and his closeness aroused on a primal level.

"Only the human kind."

She continued walking, and he followed. "Everyone has demons, even those they suppress."

"My secrets are sacred. I'd love to tell you, but you know I can't do that."

"Of course. Not about your work in the military, anyway. I was hoping you could tell me interesting tidbits about your civilian life."

He drew back somewhat. "That's pretty boring."

"Hmm. Why don't I believe that?"

"I remember that about you. You're a little suspicious of everybody."

She wanted to be indignant, but she couldn't. "You remember that? But we weren't around each other that much in high school. Ships that passed in the night."

"You made an impression on me. I used to take in vibes like that with regularity when I was a teen. I could read people easily."

Surprise moved her to say, “That’s something I never would expect a big bad soldier to admit.”

His grin this time was rueful. “I’m not a stereotype.”

She touched his forearm. “Oh, I know. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to insult you—”

“It’s okay. I know that’s not what you meant.”

Freddie felt the sting of guilt. “Honestly, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have reduced you down to a caricature.”

“Don’t spend any more time worrying about it. Everyone reduces everybody down to a caricature sometimes. Keeps things simple.”

She sighed. “Can you still read people?”

He put a hand on the fencepost, his stance casual. “Sometimes. Not as much as I did when I was a kid. I guess I grew up too much and shut down some of that ability.”

“That’s too bad.”

“Is it?”

“Yes. Otherwise you’re too...clogged.”

He chuckled. “Clogged is an interesting word for it. Do you mean screwed up?”

“Not exactly.” How to explain this? Impulsively, she touched his arm again. “You know the cliché of getting in touch with your inner child?”

“I’ve heard of it.”

“It means you need to find a center. To learn new things and not let your job enfold everything. Be who you are.”

“You’re telling me I need to get a life.”

She released his arm. “Essentially. Yes.”

“I’m not sure if I know how.”

“Take a vacation at the least.”

“What do you think I’m doing now?”

She tilted her head to the side. “Somehow I don’t think coming to a class reunion would be your first choice of vacation.”

“Now who’s the super sleuth?”

She buttoned her sweater as wind ruffled through the trees and grass. “Am I right?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Damn it.” She laughed, and they enjoyed a tad of silence before he spoke again. “Then tell me more about you, and I’ll let you in on a secret or two.”

She threw up her hands. “Not sure I’d know where to start.”

“Start anywhere. I heard you’ve been all over the world.”

“A few places. Digs in Israel, Jordan, England, but mostly working here in the U.S. I wanted a college or university job so I could teach. And I’m dying to see Los Diablos. It’s this incredible place so rich with ruins and beautiful mysteries. The archaeologist in me wants to explore all I can.”

“I guess I can understand that.”

Gratified he hadn’t launched into an immediate lecture on why she shouldn’t travel to Los Diablos, she said, “Okay, your turn. Tell me something about you.”

“Not much to tell. I’ve been in the military most of that time. I’ve been to tons of interesting places.”

“Interesting? Such as?”

“The jungle. The desert. The beach.”

He looked out on the grass as it undulated in a field beyond. Tall pines reached into the blue nearby. A breeze danced with leaves in the lilac bush nearby and flowed through her hair and whipped it across her face.

“I’m sorry that I pushed so hard the other day in the library,” he said. “And when you saw me in the gym I’d just finished talking with Bannon about your trip.”

She crossed her arms and didn’t slacken her pace. “Uh oh.”

A grin flicked over his face. “It wasn’t that bad.” He shrugged. “Okay, maybe it was.” He stopped walking and so did she. “I asked him if he understood what he was getting into taking a tour to Los Diablos. It’s a dangerous place, Freddie.”

Oh, she’d been stupid. She hadn’t thought past the end of her nose. “My God. I understand now. You weren’t in the desert on your last tour, you were in Mexico.”

“No, I was in Iraq. But you know that intuition I had as a kid? It’s screaming that it isn’t a good idea for you to go to Los Diablos.”

At first she wanted to take in his caution, a rising anxiety making her vulnerable to fear. “Arnold wouldn’t set up a tour if it was dangerous.”

“Yeah, I think he would. He told me he’d checked out reports and heard nothing about extraneous danger. I told him to call a guy I know at the embassy down there.” He

shifted closer, his eyes serious and dark with emotion. “Do you think I’d lie to you about something like this?”

“No. No, I don’t think you’re lying about what you feel. But I’m a scientist, Keith. Intuition is all well and good, but when it comes down to it, I need more than a passing gut feeling that Los Diablos might be dangerous.” She sighed. “Are you sure this isn’t because of what happened to your sister?”

She saw him wince, and then anger flashed through his eyes. “No.”

For all of a few seconds she considered his plea. Then she realized if she agreed to abandon her dream, she’d never forgive herself. She’d worked too long and hard and paid her dues. Giving up would hurt to the bone. “I’ve worked for this and come a long way. I’m not giving up my dream because something bad *might* happen. No one’s life ever gets lived thinking like that. If I don’t go, there will always be a part of me that would regret it. Haven’t you ever taken a risk for something you wanted?”

He clasped her shoulders, then caressed gently. Desire melted in her stomach. She didn’t want him to stop touching her, even if he gazed down at her with consternation.

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

She didn’t need to think. She knew. “Of course. But Keith—”

“A man you haven’t seen in twenty years?”

She went silent.

He cupped her neck, and she fell into his eyes, finding a heat there she didn’t want to ever leave. He brought her up against him. She wanted his touch, and craved his kiss. As he leaned in, she touched his hard chest. He felt so good. Solid. Reliable.

“I know one damned thing for certain,” he said, his voice husky. “You’re dangerous to me.”

Keith tasted Freddie’s mouth softly. Tenderness flowed through her as she fell into the moment. His tongue plunged in to take, to caress with hot intensity. Passion erupted inside her as she sank into his arms, embraced him wholeheartedly. His arms wrapped tight about her back. Her body reacted as if she’d loved him, made love to him forever. Heat burned low in her belly and pooled between her legs. She felt wet, hungry, aching to know him deep and hot. God, she wanted him.

He drew back and took in deep breaths, his eyes smoldering with his intentions.

His arms stayed tight around her. “That was...wow.” He grinned ruefully.

She couldn't help but smile along with him, the happiness swelling in her chest and dying to escape. "What are we doing here? Are you kissing me to convince me not to head to Mexico?"

His eyes cooled. "No, damn it. Why do you think that?"

Instant regret charged through her. "Keith, what is this we're doing? Are we starting something that..."

"We can't finish." His expression turned somber. "That's what you think?"

She cupped his face. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I'm...this whole thing took me by surprise."

He released her. Keith traced her chin with his index finger. "Me, too. Let's just take it one day at a time, okay?"

Her heart sank, but she should have felt relief. Maybe. Otherwise she'd have to admit inside that she didn't want to take it slow. She wanted him between her legs, pumping out his satisfaction and firing hers. She wanted him with a fierceness that stunned her.

Oh, yeah. I've got it bad.

"Come on. Let's go back inside before one of your siblings sneaks out and sees us kissing," he said.

"In that case, let's give them something to look at."

His eyes widened, then a slow smile broke over his lips. "You sure?"

She giggled, feeling girlish despite the seriousness of their conversation a moment ago. "If I know my family, they're probably taking a peek right now trying to see where we went."

"That nosy, eh?"

"That nosy."

She slipped back into his arms, and they came together in a fresh kiss.

This time Keith kept his kiss civilized, not as uncontrolled. His earlier kiss still raged inside him, a ferocious explanation for the tumult he experienced. Temptation slammed him. He wanted her. Here. Now. He wondered if she was as hot for him as he was for her. Her breasts pushed against him, warm circles he longed to cup. He wanted her hard nipples under his tongue, wanted to taste the folds between her legs. Freddie's tongue flicked over his lips, but he pulled back. Part of him wanted her writhing in his arms. The other wanted her yearning for him, dying for it.

They heard the screen door squeak from far away, and she eased from his arms. She sighed, and he wanted to hear other sounds coming from Freddie's throat. Moans of satisfaction, his name on her lips. His restrained his lust enough to keep his cock under control, but it wasn't easy. He wanted her with a sword-sharp pain. Her dad walked toward them, a mischievous grin on his face.

"You think he's walking this way now to kick my ass?" Keith asked.

She laughed. "No. And I don't think he could kick your ass."

"Never underestimate the protective instincts of a father."

"Maybe I don't need protecting. I'm a big girl, remember."

"Yeah, I can see that."

Her irreverent smile stayed with him, even after he'd left for the night.

Chapter Four

Keith groaned as he rolled over in bed. Now was not a good time to feel like shit. He had planning to do, things to arrange, ideas to present.

And by God, he would find a way to stop Freddie from vacationing in Los Diablos.

Sleep fogged his brain and so did the lethargy that grabbed his body and held it hostage. He honestly wanted to curl up into a ball and return to sleep.

A tap on the door brought him straight out of the fog. He sat bolt upright. "Yeah?"

"Darling, it's Mom."

"Come in."

His mom walked in, her bright smile making him feel better.

Her face went from cheery to frown in a heartbeat. "Keith, what's wrong?"

She sat on the edge of his bed. He scrubbed a hand through his hair. "Nothing. What time is it?"

"It's nine o'clock. You're normally an early bird, so don't tell me nothing's wrong."

"A guy can't sleep in on vacation without it being unusual?"

She shook her head. "Not you."

He shifted on the pillows. "Tired I guess."

"Uh-huh." Her crystal blue gaze stayed steady on his face. "Is it your leg?"

"What? No."

Her palm slipped over his forehead, motherly concern pinching her small, still youthful face. Her short blonde hair and petite stature gave her a pixie appearance that often fooled the unwary. She was tough.

"You have a fever, Keith."

He did feel achy and hot. "Great. That's all I need. I have things to do today."

“Won’t do you much good, Keith Wallace, if you fall flat on your face. Why don’t you stay in bed and read that new Dean Koontz you brought with you? You can have the chicken soup you love.”

“Good timing, Mom. I’m glad you made it. But I don’t think I’m ready to pack in for the day before I even get out of bed.”

“What’s so important you can’t stay home?”

“Helping Tiffany finish those decorations. But there are other things—”

“They can wait. If you’re sick, you need to rest.”

He smiled and eased down until his head hit the pillows. “That feels better.”

Her frown deepened. “What’s so important? You’re supposed to be on vacation.”

“As you keep reminding me, Mom.”

“Are you…interested in Tiffany?” Her voice brimmed with disapproval.

“You never did like her, did you?”

Her severe expression eased. “She’s a cold person. Has been since she was a child.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not dating her.”

“But do you like her?”

“You don’t normally give me the first degree about my girlfriends.”

She sighed. “Tiffany’s different. If you like her there’s nothing I can do about it. You’re an adult. I just don’t care for her.”

“I’m not interested in her, so don’t worry.”

She patted his forearm. “I’m your mother. Of course I worry.”

He shifted, the aches in his body increasing. “I need to find some aspirin.”

She rose from the bed and headed for the door. “Stay right there. I don’t have you around much these days, so I get to baby you while you’re here.”

He smiled. “Don’t mention that in public. Everyone will think I’m a momma’s boy.”

She stopped the door and snorted. “Right. Not a chance, Keith, that anyone in their right mind would think that.”

He groaned and relaxed against the pillows. When she returned with the aspirin and water, he gulped it down.

“We don’t have any cold or flu medicine,” she said. “I can get more when I run errands.”

“Don’t worry about it. I need to go into town even if I do have a cold. I’ll pick up the medicine.”

She frowned, then sighed in obvious resignation. “Can I get you anything else?”

“No, thanks. Guess I’ll catch up on my reading. For a while.”

When she exited the house, though, it didn’t take long for him to leave the bed.

The phone rang as Freddie sat down to eat her omelet. She leapt up from the table even though the answering machine would pick up the call.

She grabbed the phone just outside the kitchen on the phone table. An unfamiliar voice came over the phone. “Hello, Freddie?”

She frowned. “Yes?”

“Hi there. This is Arnold Bannon.”

“Oh, hi.” She carried the phone back into the kitchen and flopped down in the booth like breakfast nook. “How are you?”

“Excellent. Are you ready for our trip?”

Wariness made her pause. “Well, yes.”

“You sound uncertain.”

“Not at all.”

Bannon grunted in disgust. “Don’t tell me. Keith Wallace said something to you about it being dangerous.”

“He did say that, but I’m not bothered by it.”

“Good.” He sounded triumphant. “I wanted to tell you that I did call this guy at the embassy about Los Diablos, but he says it’s just as safe as any other tourist area down there. Most of the drug cartel has moved to another area. I thought I’d call and let you know so that Wallace couldn’t influence you.”

“I’m a big girl. I can make up my own mind.”

“Maybe Wallace is on a power trip. Trying to impress you with some of that secret spy stuff.”

Though he put no weight in the words, she couldn’t mistake his genuine dislike for Keith.

She didn't hold back this time. "You don't like him." The pause made her wish he was in the room with her so she could analyze his expression. "Arnold?"

"He's okay. Look, the deadline is coming up to get your money back on this tour. If you change your mind, you know."

"I'm not changing my mind."

"Good." His voice sounded relieved. "Say, do you have time to meet me for lunch today?"

"Sorry, no. I think I'm coming down with a sore throat. I should stay home."

After they hung up, she returned to her breakfast and considered what Bannon had said. She stared at the table, the magazine in front of her forgotten as she fell into her thoughts. Freddie sipped tea with lemon and honey to ease the soreness in her throat and it helped. Her consolation was the quietness of the big house. Her parents had left for groceries some time ago, and her siblings had hightailed it out of town this morning, back to their respective homes out of state.

She pondered Bannon's assertions that the trip couldn't be dangerous, and Keith's clear statement that it was. She groaned. She didn't have time for this. She'd come to this town for the twentieth class reunion, a family visit, then a glorious vacation of a week in Los Diablos.

After she'd taken a shower, she felt better. Despite what she'd told Bannon, she had errands to run. She dragged her butt out of the house, into her sedan and headed into town.

"Birds do it, bees do it, mmmhummm..." Freddie murmured softly as she perused the travel section of the bookstore.

When the lady next to her gave her a dirty look and left the aisle, Freddie grinned. "Oops."

She'd become so absorbed in her search for a book that she'd jumped into singing without noticing.

"Do you do it?" a deep male voice asked behind her.

She jumped and swung around. "Keith."

“Hi.”

Pleasure ran through her at the same time as surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“Stalking you.”

Her mouth dropped open, and his grin widened big time.

“Sorry,” he said. “I honestly didn’t know you were in here until I heard your voice.”

She cringed. “I didn’t know I was singing that loudly. No wonder that lady looked like she wanted to twist my head off.”

“It wasn’t that loud. I only heard you singing when I reached this aisle.”

“Thank goodness.” She peered at him. “You’re really flushed. Is something wrong?”

He stuffed his hands in his jean pockets. “I’m coming down with something.”

“Oh, no. I can’t believe it. I’ve got a sore throat.”

“Do you think we gave it to each other?”

The kiss. Kisses, actually, to be accurate. She blushed at the memory of his mouth upon hers. “Maybe.”

“You’re out spreading your germs.”

“So are you.”

“Want some chicken soup?”

“What?”

“My mother makes a mean chicken soup.”

“So does mine.”

He quirked one eyebrow. “We gonna have a dueling recipes competition?”

“I’ll try your mother’s soup if you try mine.”

“It’s a deal.”

The made it to the parking lot when she turned to him. “Why were you out wandering around if you’re sick?”

“I’m a restless guy. Gotta keep moving. I hate to lie around. As soon as my mother left the house, I ran away.”

She laughed. “Which house first?”

“Mine.”

“That was easy.”

They piled into their separate cars. By the time they cruised down the long driveway toward his parent's farmhouse, she wondered how wise a move this was. Was she playing with fire? Would she get burned standing too close to Keith's vibrant flame?

Once in the living room, she half expected to see someone else home. "Everybody gone?"

"Dad's in Gatlin and Mom went into town."

Keith took her coat and put in the hall closet with his. She gazed around the living room with admiration. Where her mother's taste was more chintz and flowers in the home, Mimi Wallace and her husband liked leather, rustic, jewel tone colors that screamed masculine. Freddie loved the homey, easy style this house provided.

She remembered one thing about Keith's father she didn't want to recall. With the years that had passed, she hoped Keith's father didn't still harbor his hard-headed, perfectionist attitudes.

They sat down to wonderful bowls of Mimi's chicken soup, and the ache in her throat eased as she glanced across the table at him.

"So are you feeling okay? How's that cold?" she asked.

"Peachy."

"Grumpy, you mean."

His mouth quirked. "Sorry. Am I?"

"Getting that way. Maybe you should lie down."

His gaze swept over her from head to toe. The jeans and T-shirt she wore felt thin and insignificant to protect her from his appraisal.

"Are you always this bossy?" he asked.

She smirked at him and settled into her chair across from him. "Only around you."

"I wonder why. What is it about me that gets to you?"

"I told you. All that testosterone." She grinned.

He made that proverbial male grunt once more.

While she felt cold, the heat of his big body somehow reached out for hers. It disturbed her, on some fundamental level, that already his presence demanded a sacrifice from her. A continuous awareness of herself as a woman. He simply turned her on too much to ignore.

“So what’s the truth?” She allowed her skepticism to explode. “Bannon told me the guy he called at the embassy denied that Los Diablos is dangerous.”

Keith’s eyes flashed. “I figured if there was anything really ripe going Nicklas Hollstrom would know.”

“This information should put you at ease.”

“No, it doesn’t.” He stood and prowled the kitchen, hands on hips. “Damn it, I ought to call up that son-of-a-bitch Bannon and—”

“Whoa.” She held her hand up. “Don’t do that. It’s not worth it. No matter what you say to him, it won’t change his mind. I get the impression he’s that kind of guy. He knows what he knows.” She winked and grinned. “You know.”

That pulled an obviously reluctant grin from him.

He stopped pacing, hands still on his hips and gaze piercing. “You’re not going to listen to me about Los Diablos, are you?”

She waited before she answered. Seeing the passion, the extreme belief in his face gave her pause. “Why is this so important to you?”

He glowered. “I can’t believe you’re asking me that, Freddie.”

She waved one hand in dismissal. “I didn’t mean to imply that you don’t care about others. But you seem so zealous about it. More than most people would be.”

Keith raked his hands through his hair, walked over to the sink and leaned back against the counter. His glare said he didn’t believe her. “This is a special occasion.”

“Arguing about my travel plans?”

“This isn’t arguing. We’re talking about deep shit.”

She chuckled. “We are, aren’t we?”

Silence between them grew into a comfortable quiet, until she knew she’d have to confess. “I’m sorry. I did it again, didn’t I? Stepped in it when I asked you why you care.”

He didn’t speak for a while, his gaze latched onto her with disconcerting thoroughness. Finally, he asked, “Do you like Bannon?”

When she hesitated, he strode to the table and looked down at her. He towered over the small kitchen table, bristling muscle and testosterone. Most women would find him intimidating as hell. In a way, she did. On the other hand, his balls-to-the-walls attitude

also set off something primitive within her she couldn't resist. It bubbled from within like a force beyond control.

Holy shit. His damn manliness and protectiveness turns me on.

Really, if she took the time to dwell on it, she knew why he was this way. At least she thought she did. His defiant anger stirred an aching regret inside her.

"Do you like him?" he asked again.

"Like him?"

"Yeah. Are you interested in him?"

"As in dating?"

He scrubbed his hand over his jaw. "Yeah."

"Bannon can say or do whatever he wants, but I'm not interested in him that way." Then she blurted out, "You sounded almost jealous."

He squatted down in front of her. "What if I am?"

Stunned, she couldn't speak. She hadn't expected this. He took her hand. His large palm, slightly callused, dwarfed hers. Shaken by the power of her emotions, she allowed his scorching attention to wash over her.

"I give a damn, Freddie. If you go down there, I'll worry every minute. Why is that so hard to believe?"

"You haven't seen me for years. We didn't keep in touch. You hardly know me."

Naked longing entered his eyes. "I wish we had kept in touch."

She placed her other hand over his, feeling the seductive promise in his words. "Me, too."

Up this close he stirred all her feminine needs into high gear. His long lashes were gorgeous enough to start any female heart fluttering big time. His gaze held hers, melting with pure male interest. Despite the sharp edge that always surrounded him, he looked weary.

"Maybe I should leave you to get some sleep?"

His gaze intensified. "Stay and talk with me. We still haven't caught up."

She allowed him to guide her into the living room. When they slipped onto the denim fabric couch, he settled beside her. His arm went along the back of the couch, and she smiled. Well, okay. He was flirting, and not subtly either.

"So catch me up on those years, Wallace."

He shook his head. "You first."

"Why me first?"

His fingers cupped her shoulder. "Because then I can sit here and hold you and watch your pretty face."

A short laugh escaped her throat. "Are you flirting with me?"

"Yes."

She smiled, keeping her eyes locked with his. "You're incorrigible."

"I know. It's one of my better qualities," he said with a straight face.

"All right. But I already told you what I've been doing the last two decades. Archaeology."

"Tell me more."

She tried to relax under his touch. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back on his arm. "In college I fumbled around a bit."

"I thought you always wanted to study archaeology."

"I did. Mom and Dad wanted me to do something practical. I started off in business. Went with that for a year, then realized I couldn't stand the subject."

"What did your parents say?"

"They gave me a hard time. A really hard time. I told them I'd pay my own way through college if they wanted to withdraw the funds from me." She sighed, remembering that time with more clarity than she wanted. "When they did...well, it hurt big time." She shrugged. "But I gave them an ultimatum."

"And they jumped right on it."

"Exactly."

"Obviously you did what you wanted anyway."

She nodded. "I worked two part time jobs and took out more loans. I finished my degree in six years instead of four. That whole time my parents tried to convince me I was doing the wrong thing. That I'd never make any money at archaeology and end up regretting it all."

When she glanced over at him, tiny lines creased between his eyebrows. "Did you ever regret choosing archaeology?"

She chuckled. "A few times, actually. I think everyone does even in a job they love. The road was long, hard, and archaeology doesn't pay much overall. But now I can't

complain. I've been one lucky woman traveling and seeing so many countries. Not every archaeologist has the opportunities I did."

"But you made your luck. It didn't fall in your lap."

"Most of it didn't."

Warmth clear in his eyes, he said, "I admire what you did. I...didn't take the high road." He swallowed hard, regret lining his face.

She shifted sideways so that she could see his face more clearly, even if it meant his arm didn't secure her shoulders any longer. "Tell me about that."

He leaned forward so that his forearms braced on his thighs, and he clasped his fingers together. Such big, gorgeous hands. A man with purpose. Strength. Sensuality. Her heartbeat quickened just watching him. Even relaxed he owned a virile force that threatened to unwind her thread by thread.

"I left here right after graduation. As fast as I could."

The memory of his leaving pierced her with a strong ache. "I remember that."

"It was a crazy time. My parents were fanatical about what they wanted me to do, too. So I guess you and I have that in common."

"Sounds like it. What did they want you to do?"

"Mostly it was my father's idea, but he wanted me to stay on the ranch and work with him."

"Let me guess. You didn't want to stay."

"Nope. I needed more. I needed something else."

"It sounds like you made a decision and stuck with it."

"I left, yeah. But I didn't enter the army right away. I worked in a factory making car parts in Michigan. Things were dicey between my parents and me. I recognized that making car parts wasn't something I wanted to do either. I decided I'd see a bit of the world and joined the military. Finally got my bachelors in history and went to officer's candidate school."

"I didn't know you were an officer."

"Captain." He shrugged. "Not sure I want to go farther than that."

She nodded. Her hand touched his back and the heat under her palm reminded her how alive and vital Keith was. "But you've put in a lot of years."

He turned his gaze to hers. "And?"

“Retirement pay?” She allowed her palm to slip down his spine until it touched the middle of his back.

“That’s true. I might hang on that long.”

“It isn’t fun anymore, being a soldier?”

He leaned back against the couch, his hands behind his head. He sighed. “You could say that.”

She contemplated his situation. “Where are you stationed?”

“Fort Anderson, Colorado.”

“That’s just in the next state. You can visit your parents often.”

“Not as often as you would think.”

Freddie heard solid skepticism in his voice.

This time it was her turn to put her arm along the back of the couch. Her fingertips almost touched his shoulder. She couldn’t stop noticing what a nice shoulder it was.

She stepped off the edge, deciding there were heavy undercurrents in what he’d said. “You know, when I was about ten, something happened that strained my family life.” She made a half laugh devoid of humor. “Hell, it was more than a strain. It was a rupture.”

He returned his arm to the back of the couch, and their skin touched. Heat teased her forearm where his much stronger muscles touched her.

His eyes narrowed with curiosity. “What happened?”

“My father was having an affair. He met the other woman at his work.”

“Shit.”

“Absolutely, it was shit. I was young enough that I don’t think I understood what was happening between my mother and father at first.”

“Kids pick things up. You knew something wasn’t right.”

She nodded, and tightness grew steadily in her throat. “Mom was quite a nagger at the time. Her voice was like nails over the proverbial blackboard.” She shrugged. “Anyway, everything is a little hazy in my memory. Bits and pieces come back to me. Somehow Mom discovered that Dad was thinking about leaving her for the other woman. I don’t know if he had a physical relationship with the other woman.” She winced and then glanced up at him. His full attention remained on her. “I remember spending too much time in my room crying because Mom and Dad were arguing. Even now, when I think about it, it cuts like a knife. I’m not sure I understand why it still bothers me.”

"Maybe because it disrupted your sense of security. You were afraid of what *would* happen. You were afraid of what *might* happen."

She smiled gently. "Bingo. I thought the world might end. It felt like it anyway. I was one angst-ridden kid."

"But the world didn't end."

"No." She hesitated before she spoke next, worried about what he'd think. "Isn't that why you don't want me to travel to Los Diablos? You're concerned only about what *might* happen? You imagine I'll suffer the same fate as your sister?"

His eyes went cool. She'd hit a sore spot, but she didn't know if she'd regret digging this deep with him. It could be a monumental mistake.

He sighed. "Jenna's been dead a long time."

"Ten years."

"I warned her, too. I hadn't been there, and yet I knew about Los Diablos's reputation at the time. I had a bad feeling about the place. She still went. Now I'm having a bad feeling about Los Diablos again and you're going anyway. You can't look past your science one minute to see that what I'm saying might be right."

She leaned forward, eager to make eye contact. He granted it. Looking deep into his eyes started a new pulse inside her both delicious and dark. It heated her blood like the whiskey she'd consumed. "The sky isn't falling, Keith. I lived through my parents' situation. You lived through your sister's death."

"You're telling me to just get over it, eh?"

"In a manner of speaking." Exasperated that she couldn't seem to explain quite what she wanted to convey, she stood and took a page from his book, pacing in front of the big stone fireplace. "I'm not giving up one of my dreams for what *might* happen based on a gut feeling, Keith. That's all there is to it."

He stood and when he came toward her, he did it fast. He clasped her shoulders gently, but the heat and temper in his eyes showed lack of calm. "Damn it, Freddie. What would make you change your mind? This?"

And before she could blink, his mouth came down on hers.

His kiss started a firestorm within her. Heat swamped her body as she gave into the wrenching tension that always existed between them. She had no scruples, no doubts about what she needed in that moment. His tongue found hers, his kiss ruthless in its seduction. Arms around her, he embraced her tightly. Pressed into his hard frame, her

body reacted with inflamed need. Each taste flowed into another until wherever his touch roamed, she flamed with desire and a need to enjoy a deeper physical connection. His hands skimmed over her back and down to her butt. He drew her hips into his and groaned against her lips.

She squirmed and a sharp shock of mind-blowing arousal spiked into her lower belly as his hard cock pressed into her stomach. Small whimpers left her throat, and she couldn't stop searching his body the way he discovered hers. His broad shoulders anchored, his strength added enticement.

His hands toured over her hair, her face, her neck. Light and seductive, he touched her with slow attention. Keith's body trembled slightly, and his very gentleness and vulnerability increased her desire. Nothing more wonderful could penetrate her thoughts but finding a secret and longing for heaven in his arms.

His fingers inched under her T-shirt and found her bare waist. The heat of his palm felt forbidden and good. Freddie shivered, her body reacting on every level as his tongue flicked deep, tasting her so thoroughly a throbbing built within her loins. Warmth pooled between her legs, and she grew wet, hot, needing him deep inside her. He cupped her breast, and when his thumb flicked over her nipple, she gasped into his mouth. A second later he located the front closure on her bra, and then he touched naked flesh.

She moaned as he teased her nipple, his thumb and forefinger tugging and twisting gently. She wriggled under his touch, pleasure too acute on her sensitive skin. He tore his mouth from hers, and then he pushed up her shirt and found her nipple with a wet, hot swipe of his tongue.

"Keith," she gasped.

His mouth covered her nipple and he sucked. She writhed in his grip as the pulse between her legs ached for more. He kept her breast within his tender hold, his tongue flickering on her nipple, his mouth suckling strongly. He drew back, his hand still around her breast. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes wild with a desire she knew must be reflected in her own gaze.

Oh, damn. Damn. She ached. She desired. She longed for a climatic finish as a steady wash of pleasure engulfed her. Having him now, fast and hard, would appease this burn within her. But it wouldn't be genuine...at least not in the way she needed. Not with this conflict between them. And not where his mother could walk in on them.

They couldn't do this here and they couldn't do this now. "No. We can't."

Keith released her and backed away a couple of steps. He put his hands on his hips and closed his eyes, his chest rising and falling with deep breaths. She fumbled to reclose her bra.

“I should...I’m going,” she said, heading for the closet where he’d put her coat. He followed her to the door as she put on her coat.

She turned toward him. Something made her touch his face so she could enjoy the rough stubble along his jaw. “I’m sorry. I just...can we talk about this later?”

His brow furrowed, he nodded. He clasped her hand, holding it against his face. Tears unexpectedly welled in her eyes, blurring his image. Before she could stop it, one tear rolled onto her cheek.

“Oh, damn,” she gasped and pulled away from his grip.

She had just enough time to see his bewildered, concerned reaction to her tears. She turned and left. Once she flopped into the car, started the engine, and had made it about mile down the road, she pulled over to the side. She shoved the gear into park. Her face crumpled. Tears ran like rain down her face as she sniffled. God, why did she react this way?

Maybe because no man had ever reached this deeply inside her before.

And she knew it.

Chapter Five

When the phone rang later that evening, Freddie was eating dinner in the kitchen with her parents.

Her father said, "Let the answering machine get it."

As the machine finished the greeting message, Keith's husky, deep voice came over the line. "Hi. This is Keith Wallace for Freddie. Freddie, if you could call me back at..." He rattled off his number.

Freddie tried to eat nonchalantly, but her parent's curious expressions burned a hole in her. She glanced up and both of them stared at her. "What?"

"You're connecting well with Keith," her mother said.

"We visited today." Freddie kept her voice even. She continued eating her mashed potatoes, way too aware that she sounded guilty. Guilty of what, she didn't know.

I've been an adult for years and yet when it comes to complications with men, I feel like a teen around my parents. Maybe every woman experienced that sensation. Her appetite vanished.

"The reunion is in two days, right?" her dad asked.

Freddie pushed away from the table and took her plate to the sink. "Yes."

Mom looked up from her plate. "He's going with you?"

Freddie almost dropped her plate in the sink. She held on to the serviceable white ironstone as she put it next to the sink to wash. "No. Tiffany is his date."

Her father grunted. Which could mean he understood the angst the idea caused Freddie. More than likely...not.

"I'll call him back after we do the dishes." Freddie hoped that would end the conversation. But with parents, she couldn't be that lucky.

After her father left the table, her mother brought her plate to the sink as well. A short time after that her mother put on rubber gloves and they started washing. Freddie dried.

“So, why did he call you?”

Freddie paused in drying and frowned. “I don’t know. Why?”

“I think he likes you a lot.”

A mild panic rose up inside Freddie. She hadn’t always found it easy to be honest with her mother. “Yes, he likes me. I like him.” She added almost as an afterthought, “But it isn’t going anywhere.”

Her mother’s eyebrows rose, but she continued washing the broiler pan. “Why?”

Why indeed? “Where do I start? He’s in the military and has several more years before he gets out. I live in Wyoming now, and he lives in Colorado. He’s...”

Her mother handed Freddie the broiler pan. “What?”

Freddie juggled the pan and dried it. “He doesn’t want me to go to Los Diablos.”

There. She’d said it. Revealing relationship issues to her mother guaranteed an earful of advice, or sometimes condemnation. Freddie waited.

“Hmm.” Her mother’s unanimated expression often meant she disapproved. “Didn’t his sister die in a bus accident around Los Diablos?”

“Yes. Ten years ago when the area was highly unstable. Her bus was run off the road by some creeps who got into a road rage stunt with the bus driver. Everyone was...killed.”

“Does he have inside information that says it’s dangerous now?”

“No. He just has a gut feeling.”

Her mother didn’t speak right away, continuing to pinpoint Freddie with a stern stare that spoke volumes. “Gut feelings can be right you know.”

Freddie automatically placed the broiler pan in the correct cabinet. “Are you having a gut feeling, too?”

“No. I’m just wondering if his instincts could be right.” Her mother scrubbed at a stainless steel pan. She stopped punishing the pan. “Honey, I know you’ve wanted this trip since you were a little girl.”

Freddie let the towel dangle from her fingers. “But?”

“But sometimes there are dreams and wishes that don’t come true. We don’t get what we want.”

Irritation boiled up inside Freddie, though she knew it shouldn’t. She attempted to hold back an overreaction and failed.

She tossed the towel onto the counter. “But I know what I want. I’ve gone after the career I wanted and traveled this world without fear.”

Her mother’s mouth flattened. “It’s that dangerous sense of immortality you have. It will get you into trouble some day.”

Anger pressed Freddie to continue the conversation without backing down. “I’m not reckless. I do my research. I pay attention. I don’t take risks and play dumb. I follow my dreams. What’s wrong with that?”

Freddie thought she saw her mother’s mouth soften. “Absolutely nothing. I’m just asking for you to think more about what Keith is saying.”

Freddie sighed. “All right. I’ll think about it.”

Freddie walked away, well aware she left dishes to dry. But ridiculous sadness had gripped her in a firm hold.

She went into the guest bedroom—the little room that once harbored her twin bed and dolls. She sat on the bed and allowed a shuddering breath to part her lips. She rummaged in her purse and found her cell phone. Then she recalled she didn’t have Keith’s cell phone number. She returned to the kitchen. Her mother was nowhere in sight, the remaining dirty dishes in the dishpan. With guilt she finished off the last two pans and dried them. She played back the answering machine. As she passed by her parents’ den, she noted they sat on their loveseat watching the news. A distance remained between them that had never mended. She never wanted that in a marriage and vowed then and there if she ever married, she wouldn’t make the same mistake they had. She swallowed hard and returned to her old room. Once there, she punched in Keith’s cell phone number with a nervous tumble in her stomach.

He answered on the second ring. “Hello?”

“Keith?”

“Hey. Thanks for calling back.”

“No problem.” God she sounded so uptight and antiseptic. “How’s your cold?”

“It’s pretty mild. How about yours.”

She smiled even though he couldn't see her. "It's no big deal. A bit of a runny nose. That's it."

"Good. Listen, about earlier..."

"I'm sorry I rushed out on you like that."

"It's okay. It was...heavy. We couldn't finish what we started anyway when my parents might come home."

"Of course."

"Freddie, I don't want to leave it like this between us."

"Like what? Uncomfortable? Tight?"

"Yeah. Let's dance during the reunion and find time to talk. I'll find you."

"All right." She had a vision of Tiffany coming unglued and making a minor scene. "You're sure Tiffany will approve?"

He grunted. "I don't care if she does or not."

She chuckled. "All right."

"There's something else I need to know. Why were you crying when you left? It about tore me in half to see you like that. I almost went after you."

Embarrassment warmed her face. "I guess I felt too much right then. I don't know how else to explain it."

"I'll take that as a compliment, only if you tell me it wasn't sadness."

"I don't think it was sadness. What I felt when we kissed...when we touched...well, it was mind-blowing."

"Good." She heard the satisfaction in his voice. "A woman's never told me that before. Freddie I don't want you to be afraid of me."

"Why would I be afraid of you?"

"Because the other night I moved fast. When I had you in my arms...when I tasted you...God..."

She shivered under his seductive tone. She imagined other women in his arms and the green-eyed monster reared its head. Freddie didn't want another woman to feel with him what she had; she wanted it all for herself. "Like you said, let's dance at the reunion. We can talk some more."

When they hung up, she wondered what the reunion would bring. Excitement darted into her belly. She'd be with Keith again and taste his brand of sweet seduction. She

loved the idea and yet feared it deep down. For if she found herself any more attached to him, her heart would dissolve into little pieces she could never puzzle back again.

When Freddie walked into the bustling interior of the high school gym two days later, she wondered if she'd lost her mind. All around her the large crowd sounded way too loud. She wanted to feel happy about this event, wanted to blend right into the crowd and discover old friends and enemies. After all, didn't people attend reunions out of pure curiosity? A desire for fun? None of these things seemed to matter now. She moved out of the doorway and into the sign-in area. A few moments later she'd completed the process and slapped the stick on badge to her chest.

She glanced around for signs of Keith and his date.

His date. She hated, deep in her gut, that he would be here with one of the women who'd made part of her high school experience a major headache. She sighed and decided to get over it.

Right.

Instead of brooding, she gazed around the gym at the mild pandemonium

The gym had been transformed into a wonderland of spring colors. It was all well done, if a little cheesy. But with the Handeman the only hotel in town, the reunion didn't have many choices for the gathering, and the Handeman wouldn't hold a gathering this size. The gym buzzed with voices and laughter. Music throbbed steadily, but not at an obnoxious level. She recognized much of the music from the three years she'd attended Carson High. Once in a while the D.J. would slip in an incongruous choice like Ella Fitzgerald's "Night and Day". She scanned the crowded room but didn't see Keith or Tiffany anywhere. She didn't know whether to be disappointed or relieved. After all, she didn't look forward to seeing them together. Freddie headed for the bar where she purchased a glass of merlot. After she took a sip she frowned. The wine sucked, but it was alcohol. And on a night like this, alcohol seemed appropriate. With the weird disco ball turning from the high gym ceiling, the dance floor in the middle of the gym was already hopping.

"Well, hello." Tiffany purred from behind her. "You're here."

Freddie turned slowly.

“So I am,” Freddie said quietly.

Tiffany’s disdainful gaze cruised over Freddie as if she’d spotted an abhorrent creature not yet known to humankind. Freddie’s short sleeve red dress, a sexy, curve hugging piece she rarely wore, seemed to have caught Tiffany’s dislike. Tiffany, though, had worn a similar style. Her body hugging turquoise blue sheath flowed along the taller woman’s body like paint. The low-neck line and short hemline screamed sex, and so did the spike-heeled sandals. Freddie had worn small-heeled red sandals. Her feet wouldn’t tolerate fuck me shoes. And Freddie’s hemline touched her knees.

Tiffany nodded toward Keith, who walked toward them holding two plastic beverage glasses with what looked like champagne. “Don’t plan on horning in on my time with him.”

Freddie wanted to slam dunk the woman into the nearest basketball hoop. “God, Tiffany, this isn’t high school. We’re grown women.”

Tiffany sniffed, but before she could launch into another attack, one of their classmates asked Freddie to dance. Shortly afterward, Freddie escaped the touchy-feely guy. She felt eyes boring into her and saw Tiffany steering Keith onto the dance floor for a fast song. Determined not to fixate on Keith, Freddie approached old classmates and started long conversations. People Freddie hadn’t seen since high school turned out friendlier than she anticipated. Before long she could almost ignore Tiffany hanging onto Keith like a crustacean. A few men asked her to take the dance floor with both slow and fast dances, and she accommodated them. Finally, when she thought she wouldn’t obtain that long awaited with time with Keith, a large, warm hand landed on her shoulder. She started and turned around.

Keith grinned down on her. His gaze danced over Freddie with undeniable male hunger. “Hey. Wow.”

“Wow what?”

“That dress is...fantastic on you.” He skimmed his hand down her arm. “You’re beautiful, Freddie.” His voice went rough with heat. “Damn beautiful.”

His gaze traveled from head to toe, pausing on her breasts and then sailing slowly with pure fire all the way to her feet.

“Thank you.” Heat flushed her cheeks.

He winked. “You’re welcome.”

She perused his unassuming dark red polo shirt tucked into well-tailored dark dress pants and dark shoes. His chest filled out the polo shirt and his arms looked powerful. The man was sin on two legs, and she couldn't resist looking him over the way he'd taken survey of her.

"You're not so bad yourself, Wallace."

"Thanks."

She glanced around and spotted Tiffany dancing slowly with a tall, thin man. "Who is Tiffany dancing with?"

"Remember Gerald Buttermen?"

She squinted through the dimmed lights. "That's Gerald Buttermen? He used to be a real geek. Now he's handsome."

"Tiffany is finding him pretty interesting. Thank God."

She eyed him with two conflicting emotions. Amusement and trepidation. Suddenly the D.J. eased into another oldie but goodie, Etta James's "At Last". The soothing purr tantalized her body, an aphrodisiac of sultry vocals.

"Want to dance?" she asked.

"You're on." He took her hand and led her onto the dance floor.

Several other couples joined them on the already crowded area. Maybe Etta's soothing, sexy vocals crooning about dream-like love made everyone a bit mad. And it gave couples an excuse to slide against one another in a ritual as old as mating. Freddie wanted both rituals to blossom between her and Keith.

While Etta wailed her sexy ballad, Keith slipped his arms around Freddie and they moved as one. He didn't bother keeping her at arm's length. Pretending they hadn't taken their relationship into an intimate level wouldn't work. Someone lowered the lights even more, and she closed her eyes. Keith folded her closer, and she sighed. God, the way he held her, his powerful arms so secure and protective about blew her mind and ignited her body.

Keith enjoyed the warmth of her body touching his chest, brushing his stomach, hips and thighs. He sank into the moment and relaxed. When her hands swept up over his biceps and shoulders, he almost groaned. Her small palms made him shiver as white hot pleasure stiffened his cock. His heart sped up as her arms linked around his neck. Etta's song ended, but a new sultry tune filtered into the gym and surrounded them. God, he wanted her. When she'd been in his arms the other night, he'd considered asking if she

wanted to check into the Handeman Hotel for the night and fuck until they couldn't move a solitary muscle. It was tempting. When she'd almost cried, it about ripped his heart out through his chest. He couldn't remember ever feeling that torn into shreds.

Except when his sister died.

His sister had been sweet, a light in his life. Then she went on that fucking trip, and it ripped his family to bits. He didn't think, in retrospect, that any of them regained a sense of security. Not even him. But then, he never had owned a belief in safety, understanding that anything could happen at any time. He savored life for the moment, enjoying the now.

He drew her so close he could whisper in her ear. "Feel what you're doing to me?"

"Yes," she whispered back.

"I can't control it. I've tried thinking of prime numbers and counting backwards and nothing is working."

She caressed his shoulder, then the back of his neck. "I'm not exactly in good shape myself."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

His entire body trembled.

Whoa, boy. Take it easy. You're in the middle of a dance floor and it's not like you can do anything about this crazy heat. He looked around for Tiffany and saw her leaving the dance floor with another man wrapped around her like a taco with her as the filling. The man kissed Tiffany's ear. Fine. He didn't feel a thing. If Tiffany wanted to fuck the whole football team, a good half of which had made it to the reunion, that suited him fine.

He craved connection and something Tiffany's snarky personality wouldn't give him. Damn, he wished he'd come with Freddie. Her head lay on his shoulder, and he loved how she nestled so perfectly along his chest and cock. He drew back from her just long enough to grab Freddie's right hand and tug her gently off the temporary dance floor.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Someplace private."

He thanked the low lighting because the erection tenting his pants would be damned recognizable.

He wandered out of the ruckus and headed for the one place he hoped still existed. They emerged from the gym into a shadowy hall. Light barely reached this area.

He plunged into the semi-darkness, his grip firm around her hand. Down deep it scared the shit out of Keith to want her this much. He felt eighteen rather than thirty-eight, a man who should have some idea what he wanted and how to get it. He stopped in the hallway as a sobering thought intruded. Christ, what if she didn't want a quick fumble in a dark place, didn't want to appease this gut-wrenching necessity filling his body and soul? She might tell him to go to hell.

"Keith?" Her hand squeezed his. He could barely see the concern on her face in the shadowy hall. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm great." It was only a half lie. He wanted and needed this.

"Then why are we standing here? I thought you had something to show me."

He couldn't stop the smile spreading over his face. "I thought maybe I'd scared you, and I stopped to double check how you're feeling."

Her eyebrows quirked upward. "I'm not afraid of you. You'd never hurt me."

He caressed her cheek. "God, no. Never."

"Then show me what you wanted me to see."

Relieved, he continued down the hallway. He tugged her around a left corner and then said with satisfaction, "Bingo. It's still here."

He stopped in front of a door only lit by the glow from an exit sign.

She grinned, understanding now why he'd rushed for this place. "The supply closet? Now this is interesting. I remember this used to be a sneak make out place for the really bold."

"It might be locked." He turned the knob with ease and the door creaked open. "Hot damn."

A thrill spiked high in her body, excitement overflowing. "I never...no one ever took me in here."

He kept her hand within hers, and his voice lowered. "Where *did* they take you?"

She realized she'd made a double entendre and heat filled her face. "I mean, in high school I never went...you know...necking. Anywhere."

"You're kidding?"

"No. I didn't date."

“Uh-huh. Well, that’s all about to change.”

Exhilaration inside her tripled, her heart pounding a new beat of desire, her stomach dancing with proverbial butterflies. Her smile wouldn’t leave as he drew inside the dark closet and snapped the door closed. Her pulse spiraled out of control, and she reached for the light switch near the door. When the glow illuminated the big closet, she saw shelves covered all sides. She glanced up into his eyes, and gloried in his intent, devouring look.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

He drew her into his arms, and she linked her arms about his neck. His eyes twinkled now with genuine humor. “I’d love to see you come apart in my arms. I want to watch your eyes as I give you pleasure. But if we have this light on, someone might find us in here. We have to stay quiet. Think you can do that?”

She snorted a soft laugh. “You think I’ll make a lot of noise?”

“I want to find out.”

His provocative suggestions stirred cravings inside her far more powerful than the ones she’d experienced with other men. Desire burned in his eyes, and she knew whatever happened next, she couldn’t regret it.

“Then let’s turn it off and get it on,” she said softly.

He groaned and reached over to flick off the light. “Damn, that sounds way too tempting, Freddie.”

While they’d danced, Freddie had wanted to practically crawl inside him. Then, as now, she marveled at his gentleness as he explored her back. Her pulse spiraled out of control.

She leaned into his strength, ready to experience whatever this secluded time would bring. Warm shivers danced upward along her back and then filled her entire body. His arousal was a hard bar of masculinity, and a heady sense of power ran through her as it reminded Freddie of how much she excited him. Keith settled his mouth over hers to taste with a drugging kiss so soft and tender. A moment later he cupped her ass and inserted one thigh between her legs. He drew her into the hard muscle, and her clit stung with pleasure at the continuous pressure. His kiss turned harder, more aggressive as his tongue plunged deep.

As Keith’s rock hard thigh shifted, a pulsating, wonderful excitement blossomed inside her. She gasped and moaned as his thigh pressed and aroused sensitive tissues. Mindless with pleasure, she fell into the moment, a blinding passion so strong she went

with it regardless of consequences. His tongue explored her mouth with a carnal dance that assured a deeper and more unimaginably wonderful connection lay right around the corner.

Keith's touch wandered upward over her ribcage until he gently cupped her left breast. As he captured her nipple through the thin bra and tugged, she moaned again. She held on to the pleasure as it increased. His thigh rubbed and rubbed. A hungry ache pounded inside her, eager to find appeasement. He tormented her with a lush kiss. The ache between her legs turned into a raging fire.

His lips coasted over her cheek and he whispered raggedly into her ear, "Ride it."

She felt wanton, hot, heavy with a potent need to explore and find the danger rippling around them. Like a live thing her desire grew, clawing its way into her body with movement after sensual movement. Her head fell back as she gasped for air and reached for the fire. As it pulsed and heated within her, she shuddered and moaned with the effort. Time ceased to exist. She flowed into the passion that consumed her body and soul. Shivering and shuddering rose inside her to uncontrollable levels. She gasped and tried to hold back a quivering, shaky moan. As her body clenched and released and pleasure overwhelmed Freddie, Keith plucked her nipple gently.

She allowed the waves to crash around her in a stunning, mind-melting jolt of bliss. She cried out and his mouth smothered her wild scream. Her body quivered and shook as orgasm wracked her. She moaned softly and sighed in happiness.

"God, that was..." she said between panting breaths.

"Hmmm?" He breathed into her hair, his body rigid. "I'll say it was."

She laughed softly as his thigh abandoned its delicious place between her legs, and his hands clasped her waist.

"You don't know what I was going to say," she told him.

He whispered into her ear. "Yeah, I do. You were going to say what we did just now was incredible and hot and you want to do it again soon."

She reached up and captured his face between her palms. "Okay, you're right. I was going to say that."

Feeling bold and hungry to experience the next level, she allowed her hand to slide slowly down to his cock. She cupped him, and his breath sucked in violently.

"Ah, shit. Freddie."

"I think I know what you mean."

He grunted as she reached for his pants and worked at the button. “What are you doing?”

“What does it feel like?” Mischief danced in her heart. She almost flipped on the lights so she could witness his expression.

His hand closed over hers. “No. Wait.”

He kissed her again in a way that stroked and tasted and brought her desire to a renewed pitch. She cupped his head again, to bring him into the kiss with all the enjoyment and participation she could muster. She couldn’t believe how much he turned her on and how much she wanted him.

This was the truth, this man in her arms, a sweet and enduring reality she’d never forget as long as she lived. It resonated in Freddie’s heart in a way she’d never known until this moment and place. Being here right now with Keith felt special, so honest she couldn’t remember a better time in her life. Not one moment more precious.

When he released her, his voice growled with a sexy roughness that sent hot desire surging into her system. “I want to be with you tonight. Away from this place.” His voice roughened even more. He leaned in and whispered in her ear, “I think you want me, too.”

His wildly erotic words fired her up, destroyed any last thought of resisting. Keith’s declaration aroused her so much that she couldn’t speak. And when he reached out and switched on the light, she witnessed a burning reality in his eyes. He more than wanted her. His gaze held genuine affection and caring for her as a person, as someone he wanted with a soul-stirring intensity.

His mouth was close to hers when he said, “I want you. Hard. Deep. In every way.”

She flushed. The man knew what to say to send her libido into overtime. “Keith, you’re a very naughty man.”

He brushed his fingers over her collarbone. “If you think this is naughty, you haven’t seen anything yet.”

He redid the button on his pants. She half regretted that move. Freddie longed to experience his naked cock against her skin, in her grip as she pleased him with touch and long licks and tender suctioning. If she thought the ultimate pleasure had faded, she knew by instinct she’d discover more to come. Freddie sensed erotic depths within Keith that would fuel her desires higher and harder.

“Come home with me. If all you want is to sleep, then nothing more will happen.” He tapped his fist to his chest and gave her one of his trademark cocky grins. “I’m a man of honor.”

She trailed her touch down his arm and admired the ripcord strength. Damn, but he was ripped. He sucked in a breath, and she caressed him again. “You are so hot.”

He chuckled. “Yeah? Thank you. No woman has ever said that to me before.”

She couldn’t be more incredulous. “You’re lying.”

He gave her an ironic smile. “No, I’m not. Why would I?”

“Then they were total idiots.”

He cupped her face tenderly and kissed her on the nose. “Thanks.”

“I have to clean up,” she said softly as he opened the door and stepped into the hallway. “There’s a lady’s room not far away.”

He nodded and turned off the light in the supply cabinet. I’ll be inside the gym waiting for you.”

“Wait. We can’t.”

“Can’t what?”

“You came here with Tiffany as your date. You have to take her home. I mean, you have to take her back to *her* home.”

He grinned. “You’re right. It would be damned tacky to leave her here.”

“And we’re staying at our parents’ homes.”

He scrubbed a hand over his jaw. “Fuck. How could we forget that?”

She tried a lopsided smile. “Must have been the making out.”

“Must have been.”

An idea popped to mind that spurred her excitement. “How about we meet at the Handeman in say thirty minutes or less?”

He cracked a grin. “Deal. I’ll see you there shortly.”

The excitement of subterfuge reminded her that she’d better call her parents and tell them she wouldn’t be home tonight. She smiled. This would be damned awkward, but she didn’t want them to worry.

She hurried down the hallway. Instead of feeling nervous, a languid contentment ebbed and flowed inside her. Blame it on the orgasm. *No, it isn’t just that. It’s him. It’s the situation.*

She spent time in the bathroom cleaning up, and then remembered her cell phone was in her handbag at the coat check. She hadn't wanted to mess with carrying the purse. No sweat. She'd grab it and then make the call. Freddie listened for a moment as rain poured outside, drumming on the roof. Great. She didn't relish sloshing across town. She smiled. Well, when she holed up in a hotel room with Keith—God, the excitement was almost too much—she'd be plenty warm.

She headed for the bathroom door. And that's when she heard a strange roaring noise, as if the wind had increased ten fold, roaring louder and louder. She frowned. In the distance she thought she heard a siren wailing.

What the hell—?

The bathroom door burst inward. Keith rushed in, his face frantic. "It's a tornado. There's no time!" He grabbed her arm and shoved her toward a corner away from the single small window. "Get down!"

Keith crouched with her, his body acting as a shield. His arms covered her head, and she realized he wasn't protecting himself at all.

"Keith!"

The roar increased, a freight train of sound barring down. Fear struck her then, in a single, icy burst up her spine and spreading over her skin as goose bumps. The next few seconds mushroomed into an explosion of furious sounds. A huge shudder went through the room, and she burrowed deeper into his embrace. The window burst, and she felt Keith flinch. She wanted to run, to hide from the earsplitting sound as she heard things rip, fall, the building outside the bathroom cocoon attacked by horrendous forces of nature. There was a tremendous ripping noise followed by a sucking sound. Then something slammed into them.

Chapter Six

Freddie felt the impact and heard Keith grunt in obvious pain as an object plowed into him. She gripped him harder. Less than a second later, the wind died to a whine and the mayhem abated. She shuddered and felt his grip tighten. His fingers slipped through her hair as he took a deep, gasping breath. He drew back and cupped her face. When Freddie looked into Keith's eyes, she saw blood along his hairline.

"You okay?" He gasped out the question, his breathing a little harder than normal.

"Yes."

"But you're shivering like crazy." His hands traced over her shoulders, then her arms.

Water had come through an open hole in the ceiling and had splashed them with a considerable amount of water.

"It's the rain...it's so cold." She reached up toward his head. "You're cut." The bathroom door lay not far from them. "Oh, God. Did that door hit you?"

He gave her a cockeyed grin. "Yeah. But I'm okay. Nothing's broken."

"You sure?"

"Absolutely. Come on."

He eased with her into a standing position and then drew her into a tight hug. She cherished his embrace.

"Damn." He buried his face in her hair. "A fuckin' tornado."

"How did...I thought I heard a siren but I wasn't sure."

"There probably wasn't time. It's not like tornados are a frequent occurrence around here. One of the guys came running in and said he'd heard about the warning on his car radio and then the siren went off outside."

She shivered again, and he caressed her back. "You came for me...you could have headed for the basement."

He drew back and looked into her eyes, the low emergency lighting giving her a clear view of his expression. “Jesus, honey. Are you kidding me? There wasn’t anything more important than finding you and keeping you safe.”

Shivering once more, but happy they’d made it through this alive, she reached up and drew him down for a kiss. He tasted her hungrily, and she responded in kind. Her heart pounded as he kissed her with all the passion of a man who cared for her deeply.

When he released her, they moved carefully past glass, ceiling tiles, and other debris littered on the floor. As they moved into the hallway, Keith saw the building appeared mostly intact. Double doors at one end of the hallway had twisted and torn inward. Glass from the doors was strewn on the floor. Insulation torn and ceiling tiles littered the hallway. He slipped his arm around Freddie’s shoulders as they maneuvered down the hallway toward the gym and the basement where so many people had fled. Another shiver wracked her wet body, and he wanted to wrap himself around her to shield her from cold. His heart still thudded an anxious beat from the fear that had slammed him when he’d run toward the ladies’ bathroom in search of Freddie. God, he never wanted to feel that way again. If she’d been hurt—

No time to think about that now.

“Where’s Tiffany?” she asked.

“Probably in the basement. I shoved her in that direction and told her to get down there immediately.”

People poured out of the basement and the mayhem grew. Everyone was safe and other than a small cut to Keith’s head that had already stopped bleeding, no one had a scratch on them. Keith saw the fear etched on everyone’s faces, their worry for loved ones overcoming everything. Frantic calls on cell phones resulted in jammed circuits. Tiffany grabbed Keith while Freddie walked away to grab her purse and phone from the makeshift coatroom just outside the gym.

“God, Keith.” Tiffany threw her arms around his neck and sobbed.

His natural reaction was to put his arms around her, but somehow her crying seemed unreal, as if she’d put it on. Sure enough, when he drew back from her, he didn’t see a sign of tears in her eyes. God, what this woman wouldn’t do for fuckin’ attention. Bannon walked their way, and Keith eased from Tiffany’s grip.

“You’re okay, Tiff?” Keith asked.

“Now that you’re here.” She pouted.

God, if he hadn't already decided he didn't like her before, he knew he didn't now.

Tiffany pushed back his hair. "Oh, God, you have a cut."

He couldn't tell if she harbored genuine concern or found drama exciting. "I'm fine. It's a scratch."

Bannon strolled up, his self-important tone booming over the crowd. "Please everyone! Listen! We made it through to 911. There's damage across town, but most of it is minor. The biggest problem right now is flooding on some major roads. It's not advised that anyone who lives or is staying east of Craycroft and Almeda venture that way. Roads are impassible."

Damn it. Both his parents' house and Freddie's were past Almeda and Craycroft. His anxiety for his parents rose.

The large crowd milled about chattering and deciding what to do.

"I'll take you home, Tiffany," Keith said. "Where's that guy you were dancing with?"

Again that mercurial smile appeared. "Jealous were you?"

"What? No."

"I think you were."

God, he so fucking didn't want to deal with her right now. Before he had to formulate an answer for her ridiculous assumption, Freddie returned with her handbag and cell phone. She looked thoroughly relieved.

"I made it through to Mom and Dad," Freddie said, and handed him the phone. "They're fine. The tornado didn't make it out their way. No damage."

"I'm glad everything is okay." He dialed his parents while Tiffany engaged Freddie in conversation.

He located his parents at home safe and sound. "Don't try to come down Craycroft," his father said. "Damn thing is totally washed out."

"That's what we heard. I'm staying in town tonight at the Handeman if I can get a room."

"Good idea. Is Freddie with you?"

"She's here and safe. She's staying in town, too. Her parents are fine."

He glanced over at Tiffany and Freddie and saw that Tiffany watched him like a hawk. Shit.

Once he assured his dad he'd stay safe and his mother finished giving him the third degree, he ended the call. Bannon now stood in their little group.

Bannon edged nearer to Freddie, his expression concerned. "Heard you were quite the hero, Wallace, and saved Freddie's life." Bannon's arm went around her shoulders.

What was this freak doing? He didn't like the bastard's arm around her, but he wouldn't make a scene. She could take care of herself. And she did—she tugged out from under his grip.

"He's a true hero in every sense of the word." Tiffany snaked her arm through Keith's. "Come on, take me home."

Keith followed Freddie's example and pulled away from Tiffany's possessive grip. Then he thought of a way to put Tiffany off his trail. "Freddie's coming with us."

Tiffany's mouth opened and closed as if she wanted to object but couldn't think of a good reason.

"Oh, I see." Tiffany's eyes cooled. She folded her arms and eyeballed Freddie. "And where are you staying?"

Freddie cleared her throat. "I'll see if the Handeman has a room available."

"You could stay with me," Tiffany said, her rapid response surprising Keith.

What did this woman have up her sleeve? Keith had one prayer. *Please don't take her up on it Freddie.*

"No, thank you." Freddie smiled. "I appreciate the offer, though."

Thank you, Freddie. Keith exhaled in relief.

Right then several firefighters and paramedics entered the area looking for injured.

Freddie stepped forward and attracted their attention. "Over here."

"I'm fine," Keith said when the paramedics came his way. He pointed at the cut on his head. "Nothing a little bandage wouldn't fix."

Freddie put her hand on his shoulder. "Don't believe him. He was hit by glass and an entire door."

"Sit over here, sir," one of the paramedics said. "We'll check you out anyway."

Freddie's stern look said it all. He'd better do what she wanted or she'd kick his ass. He grinned in resignation and followed the paramedic's order.

"Tiff, why don't I take you home," Bannon said. "No use in you waiting around. Looks like Freddie can keep a watch on Wallace."

Tiffany's face went hard and stubborn. "I'm not leaving him when he's hurt."

Seeing an opportunity to escape Tiffany, Keith waved one hand while a blood pressure cuff was being wound around his bicep and the paramedic checked his pupils. "Thanks, Bannon. I appreciate you taking her home."

Tiffany's mouth twisted slightly, then she glanced around at the bystanders as if she couldn't decide whether to press the issue or not. "Okay. Let's go."

Without another word, she stomped off with Bannon in tow. Keith couldn't hold back his sigh of relief. The paramedic tending him smiled, then quickly schooled his face back to serious.

One small bandage later, the paramedic declared Keith healthy. The paramedic went on to check other people.

"Told ya I was okay," Keith said as he helped Freddie on with her sweater.

"Good." Her pretty face was way too somber. "But I had to be sure."

He couldn't resist leaning in and whispering in her ear. "You want to examine me?"

She gazed into his eyes and gave him a smile. "You know I do."

"Then come on. Let's go."

He slipped his arm around her shoulder as they exited the gym and headed through the parking lot. Debris from the building littered part of the parking area, and across from the high school they could see minor damage on other buildings. Rain had stopped some time ago, but a cool wind blew and sheet lightning enveloped the sky to the north.

He walked her to her car, a concern building inside him. "You're still getting a room at the hotel?"

She turned toward him, standing close. "Absolutely. I don't have anywhere else to stay for the night."

Even slightly mussed and with worry still marring her expression, she was still more attractive than any woman he'd known. More than that, he liked everything about her. He couldn't resist. He cupped her face.

"Stay with me. I still want you with me tonight. Even if we don't make love—"

"I want you," she said. "I want you even more now than I did before."

He smiled. "Now that's what I like to hear. We'll get one room."

She slipped her hands around his wrists and held him in place. "Sounds like a deal."

Keith took the kiss. Her lips felt so damned supple and when her tongue brushed against his, he couldn't hold back a groan. His cock went hard instantly.

She pulled back and her slightly parted lips tempted him back. Then he thought of something important he couldn't avoid.

"We need condoms," he said. "I'll stop at a convenience store and get some."

Her cheeks flushed pink. "Very good idea. Come on. We'd better go."

Freddie drove with the radio on and listened to the news. The tornado hadn't touched down in town but on the outskirts. Severe micro bursts had caused the damage they'd seen. She followed him across town and hoped the Handeman had a room. Part of her felt like a teenager sneaking off with her boyfriend.

Soon she pulled into the driveway of the Handeman Hotel and found a place to park. The welcoming lights of the elegant old brownstone gave her a sense of comfort. She needed to understand the craving she had for him. Sheer nervousness sent nervous gerbils pulling cartwheels in her stomach. Anxiety added to her confusion.

It didn't take long for Keith to show up, and he parked next to her. She hurried from the car. Keith clasped her hand gently, and even that simple touch sent warmth flooding through her body. Checking in didn't turn out to be as easy—the hotel had one basic room left on the third floor.

"It's really tiny," the front desk clerk said.

"We don't care," Keith said. "We'll take it."

They took the elevator to their third floor room in total silence. His arm slipped around her shoulders, his touch light and gentle. When she glanced sideways at him, his gaze held a fire that started a heat within her lower stomach. Here they hovered, on the cusp of creating something extraordinary, and she hoped with all her heart they could feel it deeply and give to each other what they could for no matter how short a time.

His hand clasped hers, and when they stepped out of the elevator on their floor, they quickly found their room. He used the Victorian style old key and when they stepped inside, she gave a small gasp of pleasure. "How pretty."

He didn't give her any time to contemplate the lacy old-fashioned bed or the accoutrements that screamed old world and quaint. His arms slipped around her waist, and the heat of his body surrounded Freddie with a return to desire. She thrummed with excitement as he took a soft, almost chaste kiss.

“I have an idea.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I need a shower. Want to join me?”

Shaking inside with anticipation, she nodded. “It’s a deal.”

“I’ll jump in first and test the water.”

Her excitement also held nervousness, and when he continued to stare at her, the feeling grew.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

She wanted honesty, and the only thing she could do was to give him the truth as well. “Well, it’s been a long time since I’ve done...anything like this.”

“Like this?”

She smiled ruefully. “I haven’t stayed in a hotel room with a man in many years.”

He pressed her shoulder and leaned toward her. His mouth hovered close to hers, his whisper husky with promise. “We’ll take this as slow as you want. No pressure.”

She touched his jaw. “I’m not saying I don’t want to be with you. I just feel a little awkward. I was never any good at sex.”

“That’s crazy. You’re beautiful. Warm. And fuckin’ delicious.” He shook his head, and his eyes held hot, devouring intent. “The way you kiss...the way you touch me...it’s the best thing I’ve ever felt in my life.” He whispered, “I know you can feel it between us. It’s powerful. But if you’re not comfortable, we can stop now.”

His words made her dizzy, his objective clear. He wanted her. Fiercely. “No. I don’t want to stop.”

She placed her purse on the small roll top desk in one corner, and slipped off her sandals. As he sat on the bed and took off shoes and socks, her stomach dipped and her loins tingled. Yes. This is what she wanted and needed. Keith stripped his polo shirt over his head, and she smiled.

Oh, yeah. He returned her grin, and in that few seconds before he turned and disappeared into the bathroom, she admired his chest. His glorious, delicious chest. The man screamed hottie, and that word understated his appeal. She’d known he had muscles, but seeing them naked again...oh, wow.

She sat on the bed and heard water running in the bathroom, her mind in a daze over everything that occurred tonight. She couldn’t quite grasp the events in sequence, her mind a bit tired but her thoughts also focused on how much she wanted Keith. Rejuvenated by the thought of finally being with him, she stripped off her panty hose and

panties, and dragged the stretchy dress over her head. As she reached for the front clasp on her bra, the bathroom door opened. She hesitated, standing there mostly naked. *Oh, the moment of truth.*

He stood in the bathroom doorway completely nude. Her mouth watered as she took in the long, thick proof of his arousal. When she glanced up at his face, his gaze was pinned on her as well. His attention traveled over her body, and his lips parted.

“Jesus.” He breathed the word as his gaze became pure male hunger. “You’re so damned beautiful.” Then he smiled. A slow, seductive twinkle touched his eyes. “Join me when you’re ready.”

She knew he took things slow, giving her time to decide how much or how little she wanted. Despite their initial embraces, the hunger they’d shared, she loved his gentleness, the way he kept his control. Bless him for patience, but she knew once they stepped into the shower, the fire that had bubbled between them would explode.

When he turned away, she admired his tight backside, and a new flutter of sexual awareness blossomed strong and hot. Desire coiled tight as a spring. His wide shoulders flexed and his broad back looked like it could support the world. When he stepped into the water spray, the droplets cascaded over his ripped physique. She was ravenously jealous of the water as it flowed, touched, lingered on his body. Steam rose around his form, and before he could draw the curtain on her view, she removed her bra and tossed it away. She grabbed the box of condoms lying on the bed and joined him in the room. He watched her as she placed the condoms on the sink counter. He opened one of the small soaps provided. Freddie watched in fascination, unable to resist the lust coursing and swirling through her loins. He drew the soap upward over his biceps, his shoulders, across his chest. Keith’s palm drifted downwards until it massaged over his stomach then fisted around his cock. She licked her lips. Freddie sighed in appreciation. *Man, oh, man.*

His other hand cupped his balls, and that about did her in. When he stroked over his cock once, twice, three times, the moisture between her legs heated. Her breathing increased in the excitement of watching him touch that thick flesh. She stepped into the shower and drew the curtain until it enclosed them in a cocoon that felt right. Inevitable and beautiful. The passion she’d thought would consume them in a flash fire now bubbled with languid promise and amazing possibility. It hovered in a state so sweet and wonderful tears came to her eyes. He grinned down at her. He was so handsome and this moment so special heaven must have designed it.

She grasped his shoulders and admired his strength. Keith turned her around and massaged her shoulders and back, water cascading, the trickling sound soothing. His strong fingers dug in with gentle pressure and eased last remaining tension. She closed her eyes and enjoyed as he played her like an instrument until she sang from within. Arousal ebbed and flowed and demanded attention. He pulled her back into his chest, his cock a hard bar of insistent masculinity pressing into the middle of her back. He circled over her belly, spreading soap. Then he concentrated on her breasts, smoothing round and around each globe without touching her nipples. She squirmed with excitement, her breath coming harder. His touch inched down until he slipped between her legs into sensitive folds. She parted her legs, wanting him there with everything in her being. He slipped one finger deep. She gasped as pure pleasure rose on a swift wave.

“Oh God. Keith.”

He murmured against her ear. “Want more?”

“Please.”

Another finger joined the first, and he pumped with steady movements that caressed her slick, sensitive walls.

“Hmm,” he purred. “So wet.”

Deep, rhythmic, his movements worked inside Freddie and increased her arousal tenfold. She flexed around his fingers, the pleasure too concentrated to control. When he brushed over one nipple and plucked, she gasped. Her body throbbed, dying for a hard, hot orgasm to relieve the tension gathering speed within.

“Let it go. Now,” he whispered into her ear.

He rubbed against a spot inside that sent her into a riot. She quavered on the edge, reaching for ecstasy. Her heart pounded, her breath coming fast. She squirmed in his hold, excited beyond bearing.

Ecstasy exploded hard and fast, and she cried out loudly. Freddie contracted deeply, strongly around the fingers that moved within her slick depths. Pleasure radiated from her center, and washed over her without remorse.

Panting, she gasped her next words. “Keith. Please. I want...”

“What do you want?” he asked, his voice husky and warm in her ear.

“Make me come again.”

“With pleasure.”

When he brushed over her aroused clit, she groaned. His touch wisped along her nipple, then he tugged. Panting, undulating in his arms, Freddie took the pleasure he gave and held on. Her hands went up to clutch at his head as he licked her shoulder and pressed hot kisses to her left ear, then her right, his eager words driving her closer to the top with every lush caress.

“Come on,” he whispered. “Come on.”

With one more touch over her nipple, and one more brush over her clit, she came apart. She moaned loudly. Fire rippled inside her, a flash of blinding climax that made her writhe in Keith’s arms. She twisted in his grip as rapture expanded and the hard, starburst orgasm threw her into a brilliant storm of pure bliss.

Slowly Keith turned her around and gazed into her eyes. His head tilted slightly to the side, his eyes meshing momentarily with hers until his lips were...oh, yes...there. Touching hers, taking hers with heart-melting sensuality. One drugging kiss followed another. He pulled back long enough to reach past the curtain and grab a condom.

She’d never had sex in a shower before, and the thought built a torrent of new arousal. He opened the package, extracted the condom, and tossed the packet aside. He sheathed his cock.

Hot need flashed in his eyes. “God, I want to fuck you.”

The deep, rasping need in his tone fired her hunger. “Yes.”

“Put your arms around my neck.”

She did, and when he palmed her ass cheeks and heaved her upward, her legs came around his waist. He propped her against the shower wall. He probed her opening and eased with a slow precision deep inside her.

Oh, oh, God. So thick. So hard.

He plunged strong and sure into her center. He spread her wide, stretching but not hurting as he buried his cock to the hilt.

She gasped and caught his gaze with hers. “Keith.”

“All right?” His voice quavered the slightest bit, rough and husky.

“Yes.”

He touched his forehead to hers, and when he closed his eyes, she did the same, eager to concentrate on the unbelievably wonderful sensations. She groaned as his hips pulled back. He began to thrust, sliding in and out with slow, steady pumping.

He gasped. “Oh shit. Oh, God you feel good. So damned tight.”

His husky declaration fired her arousal to new heights. His hips drew back, thrust, engaging hers in a steady dance that promised a glorious rush to the finish. His cock pushed through her soaked folds and the steady friction threatened to drive her insane with pleasure.

Water pounded over them, and yet she knew nothing but the exquisite sensation of iron-hard cock caressing and withdrawing, plunging and taking. She whimpered deep, turned on by the masculine grunts, his heavy panting as he fucked her with harder and harder thrusts. She writhed in his grip, but his hands stayed tight under her ass as he held her to the wall. Her body sang with indescribable joy, and as the first sweet tingling gathered low in her belly, she welcomed the plunge into the deep well.

Her head tipped backward as the orgasm burst in a luscious climax that caused her pussy walls to clamp down on the hard erection burrowing again and again inside her. He shoved hard and held still.

“That’s it,” he said between gasps. “God.”

When he lowered her and his cock slipped from her, she murmured a protest.

“It’s okay. There’s more,” he said, his eyes wild with passion yet unspent. He urged her to turn around and place her hands against the wall. He smoothed her juices upward until they bathed her tight nether hole. She shivered, uncertain what he planned, but wanting it with everything inside her. His cock slipped between her pussy lips and eased deep. Freddie moaned in pure satisfaction. Using his thumb, he teased her most forbidden entrance, stroking over the sensitive area.

She wriggled as he softly manipulated while his hips pumped against her. His thumb, slipped into her nether hole. Freddie gasped at the illicit pleasure, moving her hips in time with his steady thrusting. After what seemed an excruciating time later, he removed his thumb, gripped her hips and jackhammered. She came apart, a high-pitched whimper erupting from her throat. She cried out at the abrupt explosion, the orgasm hot, splintering and violent. His gasps and growls of male need were sharp in the air.

Keith thought he’d lose his mind, his gaze at first centered on watching his cock moving in and out of her channel. Then he closed his eyes and enjoyed the way her body clenched hard on his cock, contracting and releasing over his flesh. She was lush and wild, a feminine power incredible and strong. As she moaned and panted in pleasure, his mind concentrated on the flesh surrounding him. The pleasure threatened to obliterate all senses until he melted into her. He drove against her again and again, the screaming need to make her come once more top priority.

He slowed the pace and urged her with what was left of his voice, "Come on my cock. Come on. Fuck me."

His words seemed to unleash her, and Keith's satisfaction escalated. Before he could climax, he withdrew from her. He turned her around and drew her into a kiss, his tongue searching her mouth aggressively. She clung to him, her hands tracing over his wet shoulders. He drew back long enough to turn off the water.

He took her hand and they stepped from the shower. They took their time drying each other, the sensual play of the towel rasping over skin threatening to send him over the edge. His desire raged; his hard-on hadn't diminished, his need to fuck her riding him hard. Water beaded on her nipples. He almost rubbed them with the towel, but they looked too sweet. He stared, mesmerized as a droplet rolled over her breast.

Before the droplet could fall off her nipple, he lowered his mouth to the softness and suckled. She gasped and the towel fell to the floor. Licking, tasting, he sucked at her responsive flesh until the desire screaming inside him threatened to break free. She clasped his head, her fingers tangling in his hair as she moaned.

She dropped to her knees and slipped the condom off his cock. When her lips touched him, he almost lifted her in his arms then and there and marched to the bed. Instead he closed his eyes and took in sensation after sensation. Her tongue flicked, tasted, her long fingers wrapping around his length. Tremors rolled through Keith as Freddie loved him, lathing and licking with hot sweeps. Her hand followed, gripping him at the root and drawing up and down, threatening to pump him dry.

"No." He stilled her movements. "Wait."

A small frown creased her forehead. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He tried for a smile, but his lips parted in ecstasy as she bestowed one more kiss on his cock head, tongue swirling a delicate and tormenting path. She drove him wild, and Keith wanted to know every inch of Freddie until she understood how much she meant to him.

"I need to be inside you," he said.

She stood and held her hand out to him. Reassured, he followed as she pulled him toward the bed and they fell upon it in a tangle of arms and legs. She lay on her back, her arms outspread and thighs parted in welcome. Keith licked his lips as anticipation drove him. He would have her now. Now.

He reached for a new condom and within seconds sheathed himself. He braced over her, and his cock entered soft, tight wetness. Nothing felt as mind blowing as sliding home within her heat. He savored how her flesh closed firmly around him. He wanted this to last and fought with his body's urges. Her breath gasped inward. Savage desire ripped apart his patience.

He drew her legs upward until they embraced his hips. He closed his eyes and anchored on his forearms so he wouldn't crush her into the bed. Her hands traced frantically over his shoulders, then his arms as he pressed deep and stayed motionless with her. He shuddered, sweat beading on his body as he wavered between complete control and hammering into her with animal fierceness.

Her passage tightened, shivering with one pulse. Two.

"Please." She quivered, her breathy plea a signal he couldn't resist. With a growl he shoved hard and deep like a beast unleashed. His hips undulated, grinding against her, each thrust causing her to moan and thrash under his grip.

Shit, her body was so fucking hot.

Nothing had ever blown his mind like this. She shrieked as her pussy clenched hard on his cock, and he picked up the pace. He was out of control, a fuckin' machine as his heart threatened to pound from his chest. Sweat beaded on his body, and he became mindless motion and heat, a man seeking to dissolve in pleasure. Raw and bestial, his primitive wants roared up and obliterated all thought.

Freddie didn't think, she simply felt. With each thrust, she gasped with on-the-edge pleasure, her heart pounding, her breath rasping. She grasped his buttocks and tilted her hips as he powered into her. She cried out and then whimpered as orgasm tore her into a million pieces.

His restraint disappeared as his thrusts quickened and his breath escaped him in fierce, animal gasps and groans. Growling deep in his throat, Keith exploded in fiery satisfaction.

Chapter Seven

As they lay in each other's arms, Freddie recalled how often she'd dreamed—no—hoped for this single moment from the time she'd first seen Keith all those years ago. Freddie understood many things now she never could have believed possible last week. Here she lay in the arms of a virile man she wanted and admired, and at least for a while all remained right with the world.

His hand caressed her bare back with long, warming strokes. "You all right?"

She heaved a sigh. "Wonderfully, fantastically great."

"Yeah?"

She heard the smile in his voice and lifted her head off Keith's beautiful chest so she could see his smile. "I'm stunned, too."

His eyebrows lifted. "About?"

"You're...I..." She laughed and slipped her fingers through the hair on his chest. "See, my brain is mush."

He grinned. "Tell me more."

She cleared her throat and dared to enjoy the deep warmth in his eyes. "I want this to continue. I don't want to forget or pretend it was a onetime situation."

He touched Freddie with a reverence that warmed her from the inside out. "Of course."

His tone sounded almost too easy. "But? I hear a but in there."

"What we have—I need to know what it means to you."

She slipped from his arms and sat up, her legs tucked to the side. A weird alarm started inside her. Sweet truth called for her, but she didn't know if she could confess what she felt.

"You thought I'd say this was a one night stand, didn't you?" His eyes turned serious.

She touched his muscled arm, her voice conciliatory. “No. I hadn’t thought so far ahead until now. I want our relationship to continue.” She swallowed hard. *Out with it Freddie, before you lose all courage.* “I’m crazy about you, Keith. Nuts, as a matter of fact.”

Concern melted from his eyes and a huge smile exploded over his face. “Is that all?”

Astonished at his answer, she stayed speechless.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean that the way it probably sounded. I meant that I was worried you wanted to keep this casual when I want more,” he said.

God, she hadn’t expected this...really. In her experience, most men ran like hell when a woman expressed a desire for deeper connection. Now he’d surprised her with his openness, with declaring his plans to further their relationship. Fear rallied inside her, until she shoved it away long enough to say what she meant.

“I want more, too,” she said a bit breathlessly.

This time his smile was so boyishly warm and devastatingly attractive that tears came to her eyes. “Good.”

Still, something unsaid hovered between them. “Something else is on your mind.”

“*You’re* on my mind.” He touched her knee, encompassed it in his big palm.

Skepticism managed to rear its ugly head. She drew in a tight breath. “I’m moving back to town, but you have more years in the army. How can we...”

He put his hands behind his head, and watching his exquisite muscles flex made her want to groan in pure female appreciation. “Yeah, I’ve got at least five more years.”

“And you don’t know where you’re going or when, do you?”

He frowned. “I’m stationed in Colorado at Fort Anderson.”

She nodded. “You have missions that you can’t tell anyone where you’re going or why. Your family, no one will know where you are or what is happening.”

“That’s right.”

“You sound resigned.”

“Of course. It’s my job.” He sat up, pulling his gorgeous body upward in a display of strength and exciting manhood. He propped against the pillows. “Does my career bother you?”

“No. Well...yes. It’s dangerous, and I don’t want to see you hurt.” She looked down at the scar on his thigh, the evidence he’d been in peril. “It’s natural to worry about you.”

A frown marred his expression, a deep darkness entering that she couldn't define. Memories seemed hidden in his eyes. "When I came here, I wanted to rest, to remember what it felt like to lose myself in a safe place." He scrubbed his fingers over his jaw. "Where I could restore my innocence just for a few days."

She winked at him. "Have you ever been innocent?"

His hand slid upward until it rested high on her thigh, and she shivered as it tickled and teased. "Hell, no." He snorted. "Okay, maybe. But then..."

"Then what?"

"My sister died and my optimism took a nosedive."

She winced. "That's understandable. But even before that, you always seemed a bit morose. Like there was this darkness hanging over you."

He smiled and erased the seriousness for a bit. "Did I? Damn. I guess it was all that brooding. I sometimes think too damned much."

"Then we have that in common."

"See...opinions differ. I always saw you as sunny. Optimistic. You're one of the things that always brought me out of a slump. When I was raging with teen hormones and misunderstandings, seeing your smile did things to me. Made me whole."

Her heart contracted with a bittersweet pain. "If I'd known that all those years ago..." Tears rose to her eyes. "That's so beautiful. Thanks for telling me."

He sat up all the way, his gaze intense. "You made a difference with me, Freddie Bodine. You always have. Always will."

Before she could stop them, tears flowed from her eyes. She laughed, a happiness and sadness mixing in one big soup.

"Damn," he whispered as he brushed away her tears. "I didn't mean to make you cry. I'm sorry."

"It's all right. You touched me, Keith. You also made a difference." She tapped her chest. "Right here."

"Okay now?"

"Of course. I tend to get sentimental and mushy. Bet you didn't know that about me, eh?"

He grinned. "Glad to know it now."

She segued to another subject, but one she had to know the answer to in no uncertain terms. “Where do we go from here, Keith?”

“I’m returning to Fort Anderson soon and reality will come sailing straight for me again.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“Yes.” His gaze turned intense. “What it means is that I’m not sure what the hell is going to happen.” He snorted a laugh. “Fuck it. I sound like a cliché.” He wagged his eyebrows. “Hey, baby, tonight may be the last night I have on this planet. Screw me until I’m blind.”

She laughed, and his joking erased some of the heaviness that had crept into the conversation. She planted her palm in the middle of his chest and gently pushed him onto his back. As she straddled his hips and leaned over him, her breasts brushed his chest.

“It’s a deal soldier,” she said with what she hoped passed for a devouring tone. “I want you any way I can get you.” Keith’s eyes went supernova, the pupils dilating as he drew her into a hungry kiss. When he released her, she said, “Now I have a cliché of my own.”

“Yeah? What?”

“Spend tonight with me, soldier. I’m leaving Clarksville soon for Los Diablos and who knows where that will lead.”

As soon as the words left her lips, she understood what a horrible error she’d made in vocalizing them.

He stiffened and released her, a hardness obliterating all the warmth in his expression. “Damn it, Freddie. That’s not fucking funny.” His eyes blazed. “And you are *not* going to Los Diablos.”

Anger roared up, his bossy statement digging deep into her independence. “Just because we’ve made love doesn’t give you the right to tell me what to do, Keith. You don’t own me.”

His gaze didn’t soften. He slid off the bed and headed for the bathroom. He shut the door with a firm bang, and she winced. She flopped onto her back with a groan, and the annoyance she wanted to feel turned into sadness. Maybe she should cut and run before the relationship between her and Keith could hurt her. She wouldn’t abide a man bossing her around and thinking he could control her life. She stiffened her resolve.

When he left the bathroom a short time later, the hardness in his eyes hadn't lost one ounce of force. He settled on the bed again, lying down beside her and staring at the ceiling just as she did.

"I'm sorry, Freddie. I won't pretend that I like that you're heading to Los Diablos. It scares the shit out of me, and that's the honest to God truth. Like I said, I have a bad feeling about the place."

"And I'm not going to pretend that I'll stay with a man who thinks he can own and control me."

He rolled until he hovered over her, his left arm caging her to the bed, his eyes blazing. "I don't want to own you."

Frustration made her say, "I know your sister was killed there, and I think that's what is coloring your perspective on my trip. It's making you think there's extraordinary danger when there isn't any."

"Not just killed there, Freddie. Killed on a fucking tour bus. Exactly what you're planning on doing. Those rebels wanted to kill Americans and they did."

"That was a long time ago and nothing like that has happened in Los Diablos since then." Her irritation broke loose. She almost shoved him away. Instead she glared up at him. "I don't think this is as much about me as it is about your guilt."

"What?" The word came out sharp.

"Part of you thinks it was your fault because you think you didn't do enough to try and stop her."

His lips pressed together, and unmistakable torment filled his eyes. "Yes."

Silence overwhelmed them for a short time and then she spoke. "Don't you see it's the same thing I feel about you? You're putting yourself in danger going to far off places full of unrest. I know you're probably heading to the Middle East again soon and when you do I won't even know where. Do you know how that makes me feel, knowing you're in danger? Iraq is a far more dangerous place."

"It's not the same. I signed up for this gig. You don't have to go to Los Diablos."

"I don't have to. But I want to. If this relationship is to work, you have to ease up on this, Keith. I know you care for me, but this is too...too much."

He hung his head, and she wondered if, as the military sometimes said, she had just shit in her mess kit. He would walk away from her now, and her heart would break all over the place, the pieces scattered to the wind.

“Ever since we ran into each other again, I’ve felt damned possessive.” His voice sounded almost as if his throat ached. “When I saw that Bannon asshole flirting with you, I wanted to march right up to him and tell him to stay away. It shook the hell out of me, because I’ve never felt like that about a woman before. So, yeah. I feel a little overprotective, I’ll admit.” He sighed. “But you’re right. I won’t tell you what to do.” His voice softened, and so did his eyes.

Here it comes. He will say goodbye.

“But can you do one thing for me?” he asked. “Before you go, I want to spend time showing you how to protect yourself in case anything does happen. It’ll make me feel a hell of a lot better.”

Relief overwhelmed her. “Thank you. And yes, I’ll take any advice you can give me about this trip. Any at all. You understand why I want to go, don’t you? I can’t give up my dreams. Without dreams, there is nothing to look forward to.”

“I need something to look forward to also. You, coming back to me.” After a short pause, he said, “There’s more to you wanting to vacation in Los Diablos than just a lifelong dream. Tell me what it is.”

Yeah, she had a secret of her own, and since he’d spilled his truth, she could, too. “I dated this one guy for quite a while in college and frankly, I let him take over too much of what I did and what I thought. It was stupid and immature of me, but I ended up feeling like I’d lost who I was. I was basing quite a few decisions on what I thought he would think or if he’d approve. In the end he left me, because I got a clue and said I wouldn’t take it any more.”

Understanding filled his eyes, and when she touched his handsome jaw line, he winked at her. “He was an idiot, Freddie. I don’t want to control you or make you subservient to me or anything like that. And I was an idiot for coming on too strong about this. Do you understand why I freaked out? You mean too damn much to me to stand around and not express my concern.”

“I understand now.”

And then he enveloped her in a heated embrace where only the sweet tangling of limbs and the moans of their pleasure meant anything at all to her.

Chapter Eight

Four weeks later

Keith groaned as he walked into his apartment. He gazed at the mess on his non-descript dark wood round coffee table. He should have cleaned up the place this morning, but he'd stayed late participating in a marathon teleconference that had dragged for far too long and then some additional training that required physical exertion.

He flopped down on his couch, bone-tired and ready to fall asleep in his smelly camo desert uniform. He sprawled out and sighed as his eyes closed. A shower and bed would feel mighty damned fine. Still, his eyes wouldn't open, and he drifted into the world that skirted awake and asleep. God, what he wouldn't give to see Freddie, with her cheerful expression and laugh. He wanted her in his arms, he wanted her sleek, warm body next to his and his cock deep inside her. He moaned. Yeah, that would feel fantastic right about now. He'd talked with her a couple of times during her tour to Los Diablos, and both times she sounded like she loved the trip. He'd started to feel like things would be okay.

Tiffany had contacted him once saying she wanted to continue a relationship with him, and he'd made it clear there was no relationship in the first place and that he was with Freddie. Tiffany's reaction had been grudging, though she claimed to understand.

The phone rang.

Keith jolted. He practically vaulted off the couch, his nerves jangling like the insistent sound of the phone. The answering machine clicked on before he could grab the receiver.

He snatched the handset in the small kitchen. "Yeah?"

"Keith?"

"Hi, Mom." He leaned a shoulder against the wall. "What's up?" Silence greeted him. "Mom? You there?"

"Honey, I've got some bad news."

The hair on arms prickled. His stomach lurched, and his heart sped up. Few things in this world scared him, but his mother's hesitant, fearful tone brought every nerve on high alert. "What is it?"

"I just got a call from Freddie's mom. The tour bus that Freddie is on was..."

His heart slowed, seemed to come to a complete rest in his chest. Total, creeping fear riddled him. He started to shake. "Shit. What happened? Is she all right?"

"The bus has disappeared, honey. No one knows where it is."

"Fuck." He didn't normally curse in front of his mother, but the realization that Freddie could be hurt or worse shook him to the core. "How did this happen?"

"No one knows. We're trying to get information out of the tour company but they only say the bus didn't report back to the hotel after a trip to the ruins at Los Diablos. When they didn't come back people started to get worried. Authorities are looking for the bus."

He couldn't say a damned thing. His mind wouldn't cooperate, and neither would his tongue.

Finally his mother said, "Are you still there?"

"Yeah." He gritted his words out. "Goddamn it. I told her not to go. I told her!"

"Honey, you couldn't have stopped her short of tying her to a tree. And you know how well that would have gone over."

He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the cold wall. Suddenly his apartment seemed barren and lonely and he wanted to be in Mexico. *Right. Now.*

Clarity came. He knew what he had to do.

"How many hours has the bus been missing, Mom?"

"I think they said twenty-four hours overdue."

Fuck, fuck, fuck. His right fist flexed and relaxed, flexed and relaxed as tension vibrated through him, ready to spring like a trip wire.

"Honey, I know her parents are out of their minds with worry," his mother said. "There was a report of a bombing close to the ruins and now things are in chaos in that particular area."

"Oh, shit," he mumbled, his throat thick with emotion. "I've been up to my eyeballs in work and haven't watched news. I'm going to call some of the guys I work with and—you didn't just hear me say this—I'm on my way to Los Diablos."

“Will the army just up and let you go down there?”

He smirked. “I think there’s a training op in Mexico that’s been rescheduled to right now.”

Fifteen hours later near Los Diablos, Mexico

Weariness wore away at Freddie’s resolve, but as soon as the tour bus ground to a halt along the side of the road, out of gas, she sighed in some resignation. After all, Bannon, herself and the other thirty-five passengers had survived something she never wanted to repeat again. They were damned lucky. It could have been so much worse.

And Keith’s intuition had been right on target.

At least she’d gotten to see Los Diablos and its fabulous ruins before all hell broke loose.

The bus driver, his voice thickly accented, turned in his seat. “I’m so sorry.”

“A lot of good being sorry did us hours ago when we learned you don’t have a damned radio or cell phone,” one man in the back said. “What do we do now?”

While the man had a legitimate complaint, his whiny voice had grated on her nerves for hours.

“Put a cork in it, Stan. We’ll think of something. We made it through earlier. Running out of gas is peanuts.” Ida Hambly’s gravely, low voice came from across the aisle.

“This tour company sucks. I think I’ll sue,” Stan said.

A wave of dizziness passed through Freddie, and she closed her eyes and leaned her head back on the bus seat. All she needed was sleep and water.

“You okay sweetie?” Ida asked. “You look ill.”

Freddie shook her head. She opened her eyes and smiled at Ida’s lined, concerned face. “Just tired and thirsty. Nothing serious.”

Freddie knew she hadn’t consumed enough water—no one on the bus had. She’d tried to make her own water supply last. But they’d sweated like pigs on the bus after the air conditioning quit late last night. Another thing the tour company had failed to do was bring enough water in case they broke down so far from their home base back at the hotel. Bannon would have hell to pay, she knew that.

“Here, take my water,” Marisa Clyde said to Freddie. She’d discovered that she really liked the tall, ebony-haired young woman.

Marisa had held up wonderfully during their ordeal, including keeping some of the bandits from harming one of the old people on the bus.

“I can’t take your water.” Freddie waved away the water bottle. “You need it.”

“I’m feeling okay.” Marisa pushed the bottle into Freddie’s hand. “You’re looking a little green. Take a few sips at least.”

Freddie smiled and sighed. Marisa had shown she could be extraordinarily strong along with stubborn, so Freddie might as well do this one thing. She took only a few sips, then returned the bottle to Marisa.

“This is a damn fine mess.” Ida’s tone was grumpy.

Freddie grinned at the white-haired seventy-year old. “We made it this far. We’ll make it to the hotel. It’s only three miles.”

“How? We don’t have any gas,” Ida said.

Bannon rose to his feet at the front of the bus. “We should walk. It’s not that far.”

“Bullshit,” another man in the back said roughly, his mustache almost quivering with indignation. “We’re not walking. It’s dangerous out there. Or have you already forgotten what happened?”

Freddie couldn’t forget. The last several hours, among all the grueling hours before, weighed heavily on her mind and body. A litany of Keith’s warnings ran through her head, including the ones he’d given her about jungle survival.

“Mr. Griffith’s is right. We shouldn’t leave the bus. This road probably isn’t safe.”

“Who told you that?” Bannon asked imperiously.

She frowned and rubbed her forehead in frustration. “It’s common sense. Besides, we just endured a scary situation and everyone’s exhausted.”

A chorus of agreement rang around the bus. Bannon’s face fell, his expression chastened, and he sat heavily.

Stan’s expression held doubt and indignation. “What makes you the leader now, Miss Bodine? I think we should listen to our tour guide.”

Freddie smiled, certain she didn’t want to get into a pissing and moaning match with the guy. From the top of his comb-over hairstyle, sweat-stained khaki camp shirt and matching shorts, he screamed wealth, privilege, and asshole.

Ida stood, her cane clasped in her right hand as she glared at the man. “We’d all be deader than door nails if it wasn’t for her and Marisa. If Freddie hadn’t suggested we leave like bats out of all Billy hell when that bomb went off at the ruins, we’d be dead.” Ida used her other hand to gesture back at Bannon. “*If* we’d listened to her rather than Mr. Bannon and taken the regular road back to the hotel rather than some back woods crap, we’d be relaxing at the hotel right now or flying out of this hell hole. If she hadn’t talked down those thugs we could have lost a lot more than jewelry and money—”

A woman in the back of the bus let out a blood-curdling scream. “Oh, God! Soldiers!”

Oh, shit. What now?

Voices erupted, panicked words and alarm thick in the air. Freddie swung around in her seat as people peered out the windows. Twelve men wearing green camo gear and packing serious automatic weapons surrounded the bus. As her heartbeat raced, she heard one soldier bang against the bus door and demand entrance. The bus driver spoke in Spanish, his voice harsh and shaking. The soldiers outside held their weapons at the ready. Their faces were smeared with camo paint, and they wore no insignia, rank, or other identification that could name their army.

Dread sent a jolt up her spine.

She didn’t know how many more surprises she could endure in two days, but she hadn’t made it this far for more criminals to take advantage of her and everyone else on this bus. Pure survival kicked in.

“Get down!” Freddie motioned with her hand. “Everyone get down.”

They obeyed.

“Don’t let them in!” Someone from the back of the bus cried out.

Then the soldier outside shouted louder, his voice clear. “United States Army! Open the bus!”

“What the hell are Americans doing down here?” another man asked, disbelief in this tone. “It’s a trick. Don’t let them in.”

Freddie let her instincts dictate her next move as she rose from her seat. “Let me see them close up.”

“Be careful,” Marisa said.

Ida made a very unladylike curse. “Sweetie, sit down!”

Freddie continued toward the door. Bannon tried to snatch at her arm but she pulled away. “Freddie, what are you doing?”

She looked at the man who stood, weapon at the ready, outside the bus doors. Through the camo paint, the fierce determination in his eyes and the razor sharp cut of his jaw, she recognized him and relief doubled inside her. “It’s all right. I know him.”

“You know him?” came Stan’s disbelieving question.

Freddie smiled so broadly her jaw ached. “It’s Keith. My boyfriend.”

“Your boyfriend?” Ivy squeaked the question.

“Yes. Captain Keith Wallace.”

“Oh.” One of the younger women a couple of seats back sent out a breathy sound of appreciation. “Holy crap.”

A couple of people let out a chuckle.

Ivy grinned from ear to ear. “You have your own SWAT team?”

“They’re not SWAT. They’re army. Open the door, Carlos, before Keith breaks it in.”

When Keith saw Freddie peering through the glass door, he smiled and gave a thumbs up sign. He hoisted his automatic weapon over his shoulder. His fellow soldiers moved in closer to the vehicle, their eyes still watchful.

Her bottom lip trembled and those damn tears tried to overwhelm her again. Carlos opened the door, and before Keith could move forward, she was halfway down the steps and Keith’s arms came around her. He lifted her off the steps and into his secure embrace.

“Are you all right?” His voice was husky and rough as he gathered her tightly to his chest. “What the hell happened?”

She trembled, shivering despite the heat. She buried her face in his shoulder. “I’m hungry, tired and thirsty, but otherwise I’m fantastic. And I’m never taking your intuition for granted again. I’m so sorry I didn’t listen.” She pulled back enough to gaze into his concerned eyes. He smelled like the jungle, camo paint, sweat, and the man she knew inside and out.

“It’s all right, babe.”

“Quite a bit happened.” She didn’t really want to talk about it, but knew he’d want more answers.

“Was your bus at Los Diablos when the bomb went off?”

“You heard about that? Somebody decided they’d blow up the tourist center but we weren’t in it...yet. It blew most of us down but no one was hurt. We ran back to the bus and our driver took us out of there as fast as he could. Bannon suggested this back road even though I thought we should return the way we came. We got lost and the bus driver has no cell phone or radio and no one else had a cell that works down here. This truck with six armed men overran us on the road.” She couldn’t suppress a shudder, and his arms tightened around her. “They stopped us and...”

“And?”

She shook her head. Those moments on the bus when the men had forced them off the road would remain in her mind like a bad dream for the rest of her life.

She glanced around without answering his question. His fellow soldiers had moved in and entered the bus. Exclamations of relief from inside touched her ears. She clutched him tighter and shivered as those damned tears threatened. She squeezed her eyes shut.

Ida and Marisa had both left the bus, assisted by a good-looking, very tall soldier with dark eyes and a serious expression.

“She was a damned brave girl, soldier,” one of the men from the tour said to Keith. “When those creeps came on the bus and grabbed our money, Freddie kept them from taking hostages and from beating the pulp outta Bannon. Bannon’s got the black eye to prove it. Then those jerks tried to take her off the bus.”

Keith’s voice went harsh. “Jesus. They didn’t—”

“No, they didn’t take me off the bus. I was lucky,” Freddie said quickly, hearing the tension and anger in his voice. “Benito, one of the bandits, grabbed me thinking he’d take me with him. I struggled and he came out the worse for wear when I cracked his nose with the back of my head.” She rubbed the back of her head ruefully. “It’ll be a bit sore back there.”

He grinned slightly and shook his head. “God, Freddie.”

“I think we single-handedly owe her our lives,” one woman said.

Freddie sighed. “That’s an exaggeration. Everybody on the bus was cool under fire. Especially Ida and Marisa.”

“Poppycock.” Ida’s expression filled with mischief. “I’m an old woman. About the only thing I could do was hurl harsh language at them.”

That brought out a laugh in their little group.

Freddie noticed, incongruously, the way the handsome soldier standing between Ida and Marisa gave Marisa a thoughtful, appreciative look. Even though tired, a bizarre thought ran through Freddie's head. *Watch out, Marisa. I think you've already acquired an admirer.*

Ida snorted. "Bannon there was a ninny and a half. He'd better watch out or Stan will name him in a lawsuit. Now, how do we get the hell out of here?"

"Don't worry," Keith said. "Transportation is coming."

Freddie couldn't help laughing, but then a wave of dizziness passed over her, and she clutched at Keith's arm.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Keith asked.

"Could I have some water?"

"Of course. Sit down." He eased her down to the ground, then kneeled next to her. "Small sips. Take it slow." Keith eased his arm around her and held the canteen for her.

Freddie sagged against his arm, needing the support. "I'm waiting for you to say I told you so."

His gaze held nothing but concern and warmth. "I'll say that later. Right now I'm just damned glad I found you. Plus, I need to get you out of here."

She sighed. "Sounds wonderful. Then we can go somewhere, I can sleep about ten years, and you can kiss me."

He smiled. "Now that sounds like a special op I can get into."

Two days later

"Ida thinks you're hot," Freddie said to Keith as she traced her fingers through the hair on his chest, then kissed one of his pecs.

As they lay naked on his bed, she enjoyed the delicious contentment flowing through her heart and mind.

Keith groaned in reaction. "Did she actually use that word? Hot?"

"Well, she *actually* said foxy."

He laughed.

"And did you see the way those women on the bus were ogling you and what's his name? The guy who was a little uptight and yet so polite? The one who watched over Ida and Marisa so much?"

“Yeah. That’s Jake Sullivan.” He hauled her onto his chest. He cupped her butt and squeezed. “Damn, this is a beautiful ass.” He drew her into a hungry, wonderful kiss that went on and on.

Lying in his arms back in his apartment, she welcomed having time with him before he returned to work.

When they broke the kiss, she said, “I think Jake was really interested in Marisa.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“You didn’t notice?”

“Hell no. All I gave a shit about was you.”

A wave of love overcame her. “Thank you, Keith.”

He pushed hair back from her face. “For what?”

“For coming after me. For pulling strings. How did you get weapons into Mexico anyway?”

“We didn’t. We borrowed them from a friend of mine...Miguel.”

Her eyebrows went up. “And your Army buddies just happened to have time off and wanted to help you find your wayward girlfriend?”

He rolled her over so that she lay on her back and his hips dipped between her legs. His newly erect cock touched her soft folds. “We’re a cohesive group. And we were going back there on a training op soon anyway.”

One of her eyebrows winged upward. “A training op?”

“Yeah.” He winked. “We just moved up the training a bit early.”

“Uh-huh.” She heard the doubt in her voice and new she wouldn’t extract more out of him in that respect. “Well, all I can say is that I’m eternally grateful to your friends for being willing to help us.”

He kissed her forehead, and when he moved his hips, his cock brushed over her sensitive clit. “It was twofold, Freddie. We’re family...all of us on the team. And second, they were protecting and rescuing United States citizens while on a training operation. All in a day’s work. Although we didn’t actually do much rescuing. You seemed to have things pretty much in hand.”

She snorted. “Right. I was about at the end of my rope.”

“You were fantastic. I’m so proud of you.”

“Aren’t you going to ask me if I regret traveling to Los Diablos?”

When he looked down at her, darkness entered his eyes. “Do you?”

“Wouldn’t have missed seeing a place I’ve wanted to go all my life. But I do regret not listening to you about it being dangerous.”

He kissed her neck. “I don’t blame you really. You’re used to hard facts, and so am I most of the time. A hunch was all I could give you. Bad memories of my sister’s death just made it more real for me. More frightening.”

“You were so right, though.”

“When I heard that your bus was missing I was scared to death. It was like my nightmare was coming true. I was so worried about you. It made me realize something else.”

“What?”

Genuine devotion and staggering passion heated his gaze. “I love you.”

His statement melted her defenses as nothing else could. Teary with happiness, she kissed his face all over. “I love you, too. When I was on the bus and the bandits were attacking...well, I figured for just a few minutes there that we’d bought it. That I wouldn’t get to see you again. That I wouldn’t have the chance to tell you how much I love you.”

They dissolved into kiss after kiss, caress after caress, until she writhed against him with a need that made her arch her hips in a silent plea. He found a condom on the bedside table, sheathed himself, and then thrust deep into her. She gasped with pleasure.

As his hips pumped into hers with slow, erotic strokes he asked softly, “Marry me?”

“Yes. Absolutely yes.

About the Author

To learn more about Denise A. Agnew, please visit www.deniseagnew.com where you can view excerpts, enter her monthly contests, sign up for her Yahoo Group, and subscribe to her newsletter.

Look for these titles by Denise A. Agnew

Now Available:

Male Call

Coming Soon:

Private Maneuvers

Close Quarters

Intimate Alliance: Male Call and Unconditional Surrender (Print)

Recipe for Margarita Day: Take one shy woman, toss in three determined alphas, mix liberally with sizzling sex, add a dash of intrigue, and watch the steam rise.

Margarita Day

© 2007 Nicole Austin and TK Winters

Stand alone sequel to Mimosa Night.

Jodi Matthews is the consummate gamer. One crazy night she let her hair down, stripped off her clothes, and anteed up for a night of poker and wild fantasy sex. Now she has three alpha players hot to win her hand.

Conner is a walking wet dream ready to share his vision of the future. Wiz, a high roller looking for a cherished pet to adorn his arm, while John's an average Joe who can turn Jodi inside out with a simple look.

No matter what card she chooses, Jodi risks losing something. The life she loves working as a Vegas dealer or some close friends. Maybe both.

From champagne and diamonds to mysterious parties and private jets, Jodi must accept herself and what her heart's always known. The Smut Squad is there, ready and willing to fortify her courage and orchestrate a daring hunt for the ultimate stakes.

The only thing is—this is no game, and the jackpot will be even better than her wildest dreams.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Margarita Day:

John slid his hands across his chest and abdomen, stopping only when reaching his erection. "Look what you do to me, Jodi." His strong fingers grasped both jeans and underwear. Rising higher on his knees, he shimmied his hips and peeled the clothing away, his parted thighs stopping the descent. His cock jutted straight and proud from a nest of dark curls. Clear liquid on the crown gleamed in the soft light from the bedside lamp.

Jodi watched in fascination as pre-come seeped from the slit and trailed across the thick head of his cock. Her back arched, hips tilting upward. She needed to have his shaft buried so deep inside her pussy she wouldn't know where she ended and he began. She

needed to be held in his strong arms, feel his body moving above her, and have him slam into her wet channel until all the fear and confusion disappeared in a blazing glory of sensation.

She sat up and unclasped her bra, letting her breasts fall free. She cupped a heavy globe in each small hand, lifting them in offering.

“Oh, yeah. Hold them just like that, baby.” John wet one finger with his pre-come, and traced a glittering path around one dark areola. Jodi watched the circle pebble, and the nipple grow long and hard under his light touch. He lowered his head, blocking her view of his tongue rasping across the peak, licking up his own salty essence before drawing her nipple into the warmth of his mouth.

She writhed beneath him, breasts thrust upward in response to the tugging of his lips. John’s hands replaced hers to squeeze and knead. Teeth nipped at her sensitive bud, followed by his tongue laving away the slight sting. He sucked as much of her soft flesh into his mouth as he could, his moans of enjoyment vibrating through her flesh and paving a hot path through her belly straight to her clit.

Jodi wanted to give as much pleasure as she was receiving. She moved her freed hands between them and grasped his hard shaft, pumping once, twice, squeezing her fist around the throbbing length. Damn, his hard cock felt incredible in her palm. The heat pouring off the thick column penetrated her skin and ignited every nerve. She idly rubbed her thumb over an engorged vein, the steady beat of his blood starting a matching pulsation in her clitoris.

John’s head came up, back straightening, hips thrusting his cock in reaction to the confining clasp of her hands. “Now, Jodi. I need you now.” Rolling off the bed, he toed off his boots and finished stripping in one quick motion. He reached out, grabbed her ankle and tugged her toward the edge of the mattress.

“John,” she complained, wanting him to stop dragging her all over the bed and get busy already.

“Keep your sweet ass right here, baby, and spread those pretty legs wide for me.”

Before Jodi had time to respond or even comply, her panties were off, legs pushed open and his fingers had parted her swollen labia. Cool air followed by hot breath sent shivers rocketing through her body. She thrust her hips upward, seeking the source of the teasing warmth. A totally masculine, satisfied chuckle sounded through the dim room.

Her leg muscles bunched and she once more thrust upward, wet pussy making contact with smiling lips. This time she heard a whispered curse before he sucked her clit into his hot mouth and his tongue teased her hard bud.

“Yes,” she cried out. “Yes! Like that...oh God, just like that, John!” Her hips bucked and ground against his mouth while he sucked and licked her clit. His tongue flicked along the sensitive tissues, delving into her dripping channel. Jodi felt her leg muscles tighten, toes flexing on the edge of the bed as her ass pushed high above the mattress.

John’s hands shifted to clasp her soft cheeks firmly, keeping his mouth sealed against her clit as spasm after spasm rushed through her body. A high-pitched keen pierced the air in rhythm with her blistering orgasm.

“I can’t wait anymore, honey.” Pushing her farther onto the bed, his hard body came over the top of hers, knees spreading her legs, and in one long thrust his hard cock slammed into her pussy until it was seated deep inside.

“Christ, Jodi...I wanted this to be special,” he gasped. “To take my time.” He pulled his hard shaft back, increment by slow increment. “I wanted to romance you.” His steel rod drove deep into her core. White-hot shards of sensation raced through her body.

John’s breath rasped in her ear, every muscle in his back knotted beneath her grasping hands as he pulled his cock back with painstaking precision. The slow pace was maddening. “Slip the clothes from your body piece...” he panted, “...by piece.” His neck corded with strain. “Carry you to the Jacuzzi...” His head fell back between his shoulders, and he labored to get each word out. “Hold you in the hot...water...whisper of days...to...”

His hips flexed, and his cock drove forward, a hammer pounding a steel spike home in one long percussive impact. Jodi’s back arched, tight as a drawn bow, and her vagina contracted around his shaft. Damn, one more hard stroke, one more thrust against her cervix and her world would go up in flames of glory. “Unh...John, please!” He slowly pulled back to begin again.

“Share sips of champagne.” Each word was emphasized by the hammering of his cock. “Share dreams...give you time to know the real me.” Tremors raced through his taut muscles. Bracing his upper body on his elbows, John rose and all motion ceased. He looked directly into her eyes, smoothing back the damp locks of hair from her face.

“Marry me, Jodi. Please. Come share my life with me. I promise you moonlit walks. Nights spent in the warm ocean water, our bodies moving as one. Roses, chocolates, champagne. Enough excitement to last a lifetime.”

The heartfelt words made her throat tighten around a thick lump of emotion. He finally gave in to desire and began to move in a steady rhythm. Jodi wrapped her legs around his hips, her fingers grasping his head to draw his mouth closer. Their lips met and she mumbled against them.

John pulled back, hope shining in his eyes.

“What, baby?”

“Margaritas. I hate champagne. Now shut up and fuck me, you fool.”

Love, larceny, and lies.

Miss Lonely Hearts

© 2007 Charlene Teglia

When is a love letter not a love letter? When it's mail fraud. Or in this case, female fraud.

Jason Alexander is one angry Alaskan, and he's out to get his woman; the letter-writing Lolita who's running the Miss Lonely Hearts con game in his bailiwick. She's taking lonely Alaskans for a roller-coaster ride and cashing in on love. When she hits the patrons of his bar The Last Resort, the retired gambler takes it personally and goes out for justice.

Cassandra Adams has just been dumped by ex-fiancé number two. She's fed up with Romance Roulette and ready to trade her rosy daydreams for hardheaded practicality. The logical solution? She's going to search the classifieds for the mail-order marrying man she wants.

She thinks she's found him in Jason, alias Alex Sanders. He thinks he's hooked Miss Lonely Hearts. And the regulars at The Last Resort think it's high time Jason got married, so they're not about to clarify matters when they discover his mistake.

Together Jason and Cassandra will have to cut their way through the tangle of love, larceny and lies to unmask Miss Lonely Hearts and find a happy ending that's a sure bet.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Miss Lonely Hearts:

Jason Alexander looked up from the dull and repetitive task of polishing the shiny oak bar top when the door of The Last Resort swung open. Good, a customer. Something to do, something to relieve the tedium, someone to talk to.

Until he realized the two large men making their ponderous way to the padded barstools were Dwight and Duke Lawrence.

The twins never talked. It was an amazing phenomenon, but true, nevertheless. Jason had wondered at it from the first time he'd seen them take those same seats on his first night in residence as the new owner of The Last Resort.

They hadn't shown the least bit of surprise that the place had changed hands, or any interest in his identity. They'd simply waited until one of the other locals piped up and told him they always had one shot of bourbon and one draft apiece.

Never one to back down from a challenge, Jason had summoned his considerable charm and slid the beverages in front of them with a smile and a friendly greeting.

Silence. The only sound came when Duke rustled a bill in paying the tab. Even the raising and lowering of the glasses occurred in an incredible silence, the heavy restaurant glass never clunking when it made contact with the oak bar, but settling gently on the cocktail napkins without a whisper. That this feat of steady, soundless movement came from two men big enough to be mistaken for a pair of Yeti was nothing short of miraculous.

The tandem performance had amazed Jason then, and it amazed him now. Sometimes he wondered if they even realized the bar had changed hands. The previous owner, Lucky Day, had been abandoned by his namesake in Reno. The outcome of that fateful poker game had left Jason Alexander, professional gambler extraordinaire, the sole proprietor of a rustic bar in Southeast Alaska.

Maybe, he thought with a flash of wicked humor, they couldn't tell the difference because all bartenders looked alike in the dark.

Not that it was all that dark just then. It was only spring, but already the days were visibly lengthening. The bar's traditional dim lighting was highly augmented by the sun, streaming in through the small windows at full strength. That was one of the things he truly loved about the area. In the summer, the extended daylight lent everyone a kind of exuberance that made up for the long, dark winters. Nobody slept or stayed inside if they could help it.

In fact, the restless energy of this little city on the Tongass Narrows with the dubious honor of being named Alaska's Rain Capital had appealed to his adventure-loving soul immediately.

From the moment he'd stepped off the ferry, he'd felt like he'd come home.

Here, in a place with a history of gold rushes, on a little plot of land in the former red-light district, was a place a gambler and wanderer could settle down in as easily as he could settle behind a blackjack table.

It fit him and he'd made up his mind immediately, with a gambler's sure instincts, that he wasn't selling The Last Resort. Or putting it up as collateral, either. He was

leaving the life of plush hotels and room service behind forever. He was twenty-eight years old and it was time he had a home.

So Jason had taken up his position behind the bar and never looked back. Two years later, he wasn't sorry.

But he still hadn't ever managed to get a word out of Dwight or Duke in all that time. He only knew which was which because Duke always sat on the left. Also, his well-developed powers of personal observation had detected very slight differences that distinguished one from the other. Dwight sported a faint scar on one cheek and Duke had thicker brows. Still, they were as identical as it was probably possible to get without actually being one and the same person.

But something about them was different tonight. Jason studied the two dour faces as he served the usual drinks with a flourish. "On the house this time, Duke," he said, knowing it was the left-hand twin's turn to buy. They traded off, another well-established ritual they never deviated from.

He thought he actually saw a glimmer of surprise in the man's pale eyes. "You're welcome," he responded, as if Duke had spoken instead of nearly blinking.

With these two, body language was about as verbal as he could expect.

"Least I can do for you two, since you're looking so down," Jason went on. Dwight definitely twitched as he reached for the bourbon. Interesting. Now what could these two be bothered about? Jason pondered the possibilities. Probabilities were his forte.

Odds were, they'd finally gotten tired of each other's companionship and gotten lonely in a purely masculine way. That being the case, and being as alike as they were, the two had probably then settled their affections on the same woman.

"Woman trouble does that to us all," Jason stated in commiseration. "We men have to stick together. Though in your case, I don't recommend you take that too literally. The law doesn't recognize three-way marriages." Although employers and official agencies were recognizing every other kind of arrangement these days, and polyamorous groups weren't exactly unheard of. Live and let love. But the law was conservative.

Both Dwight and Duke rattled their shot glasses when they replaced them on the heavy oak slab. Jackpot!

"You know, you two might try asking her to choose between you." He offered the suggestion in the time-honored spirit of supportive advice from the bartender to his burdened patrons. Dwight and Duke were apparently unacquainted with the custom

personally, but he suspected they stopped in night after night mostly to listen to the talk, even if they didn't participate actively.

Now, as lacking in verbal skills as they were, how likely was it they'd ever actually say something like that to a woman? It was amazing that they'd even gotten as far as saying hello. Too amazing, Jason realized. Which meant that they hadn't. Which meant they'd been doing their wooing in silence. Which meant...

"Of course, maybe you shouldn't do a thing like that through the mail. It might go better in person."

Then it happened.

Dwight's big fist curled up and thumped the bar in a single, silent shout of frustration and despair. And he spoke.

"Too late. She dumped us both."

The rusty admission drew a nod of agreement and pure misery from Duke who chimed in, "Jilted," in the heaviest, creakiest, rustiest voice Jason had ever heard.

Jilted. Now, that was serious. Jason eyed the two, surprised they'd proposed on paper. Well, not really. How else would they do it, unless they met a deaf woman and communicated by holding up a ring?

"You mean she agreed to marry both of you?" he asked as the implications of Duke's single contribution to the conversation sank in.

Two woeful heads nodded once. Two ham hands raised and lowered heavy beer mugs in unison.

Jason would have given an awful lot to meet the woman who'd do that, he really would. Imagine. Taking on the two Lawrence men. The two enormous Lawrence men. The mind boggled. Whoever she was, she was truly an adventurous soul. Although it seemed she'd thought better of her decision to walk on the wild side at the last minute.

"Well, at least you found out about her in time," Jason offered.

Two heads hung low.

Now what did that mean? He swiftly concluded it meant they'd lost more than their hearts. Jason's former life began to pass before his eyes, and the words *con artist* rang in his head. "My friends," he said, "You have just been done in by Miss Lonely Hearts."

Her sexy letters are his only lifeline in his dangerous world...

Male Call

© 2007 Denise A. Agnew

Successful computer software engineer Eve Carmichael melts under yet another hotter than hot letter written by Reserve army soldier Sean O'Callahan. Yet Eve can't take the thought of his life in danger overseas, and she resolves to get a sex life—and a life period. That means forgetting Sean before anything bad can happen to him. To celebrate her thirty-fifth birthday, Eve plans a trip to Male Call, a male review club. Still, she worries about Sean. She hasn't received a letter from him in too many weeks. And oh, how she longs for those flirtatious, hot letters.

Sean finds Eve's letters to be the only lifeline in his increasingly chaotic world. As their feelings grow hot and heavy, he can't wait to return home and kindle that pure firepower.

When Eve receives a letter from Sean saying he's been wounded, her fears are realized. But fate and a little mischievous planning by her friends will serve up the greatest surprise of all.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Male Call*:

Sean,

Glad I could float your boat. You've paid me a great compliment. I doubt any man before you has had that reaction to my photograph. What did you do with all that pent up sexual need after you saw my photo? I wish I had a photograph of you. Something in uniform and macho, if you please. Anyway, I had a dream last night, and I'm blushing right now as I recall it. I was lying on this silky white king-sized bed. Lying on it utterly naked. Okay, I wasn't totally naked. All I had on was this skimpy red bra and tiny thong panties. A filmy purple and red gauze material draped over the four-poster bed. But the ceiling above the bed is mirrored. The beautiful room is Victorian, with dark wood and green velvet. There is soft flower scents, rose and maybe lavender. Some parts of the dream were beyond hazy, as all dreams are. This one felt special. Anyway, I'm off track.

That black dress lay on the foot of the bed. I should have been cold, but the room felt comfortable on my bare skin. I was really excited and frankly, horny as hell. Okay, I'll admit it. I knew you were coming to see me. How I knew that, I don't know. Then the bedroom door opened, and you stood there. Naked. Honestly, since I don't know what you look like naked...oh, wow, I can't believe I've told you about this dream. I'd better quit now before I say something ultra incriminating and you decide to stop writing me.

Hugs,

Eve

She sighed, still somewhat embarrassed by the letter. Then she remembered she hadn't phoned Male Call.

She'd promised to make reservations and something held her back. Maybe she should find it exciting to watch male strippers dance half naked for her, but the only thing her imagination could conjure was a half-clad Sean performing an erotic two-step. She slipped off her athletic shoes and stretched out on the bed so she could enjoy reading his letters. Suddenly, she felt way too warm. She unbuttoned her shirt slowly and unfastened and unzipped her low-rise jeans. *Ah, that's better.*

Eve,

You're killin' me here. I've enclosed the picture you wanted, though I got the razzing of my life when two of the guys found out why I wanted them to take it.

His photo fell from the envelope onto her lap, and she quickly retrieved it. Oh, oh, man. When Eve had seen the photograph for the first time, it had floored her. Stunned her. Turned her on like no other picture of a man she'd seen before. She'd seen plenty of attractive men in her life, and she'd always thought Sean could be cute in a nerdy way. This picture blew away her conceptions about Sean belonging to geek city.

Decked out in desert battle dress uniform pants and boots, but without a shirt, he held an automatic weapon in front of his chest in a rough and ready pose. The grin on his face was cocky but charming. His espresso eyes held an intense, badass gaze. His military short, silvery blond hair defined his high cheekbones and made his perfectly cut jaw more prominent. And oh, his chest and arms. Sean owned well-muscled arms and a gorgeous chest sprinkled with dark blond hair that trailed down over his six-pack stomach and into

his waistband. *Oh, my, my.* He was delicious, but in a rough, sharply angled way that shouldn't have turned her on like this. Most women at the office talked behind his back about his tousled messy hair and too-big shirts. Maybe those too large shirts had been hiding this kick ass physique all this time.

He looked dangerous.

Fuckin' seriously hot.

If the office ladies could see him now...if they even knew what fantastic shape he was in—that his body was this fabulous...

She groaned and jealousy flashed through her. *Oh, man.* She had it bad.

Even now this photo created a desire that filled her blood with instant sexual attraction. His letters had turned her low-grade intrigue into full-on heat. Her mouth watered. She tore her gaze from the photo with difficulty and returned to the letter.

Now that you've seen my ugly mug, I hope you're satisfied. You asked me what else is happening. Hell, there's a whole lot I can't tell you and you don't want to know. We reached Baghdad, and things are dicey. That's about all I can say.

Let's not talk about this fuckin' place, okay? You know that dream you told me about, the one where you're lying on the bed naked? Sounds fantastic. Want me to add to the dream?

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