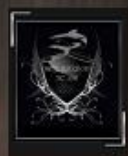


*Kincade's
Rose*



ALIYAH
BURKE

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To the men and women who give their time serving in the armed forces.
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Chapter One

Jayde Porter sat at the outdoor café in the warm tropical breeze overlooking the inviting turquoise water. Belize was so warm and beautiful, very unlike the intensely frigid weather New York was having this winter.

She sipped her iced tea and smiled sardonically as she looked around at the many couples wandering in and out of the surf. She was here alone. *I suppose this is the price I have to pay for coming all by my lonesome...*

Knowing she'd almost turned down this vacation still shocked her, but then her family, who hadn't wanted her to come in the first place, usually could keep her under their control. Then again, she could've come with the man she'd been dating for the past seven and a half months, George, if she'd not broken it off. And if she were honest with herself, she didn't want him here nor anywhere near her. That was another reason she was glad to be alone; George was arrogant, condescending, and most definitely an asshole.

She shook her head and started to drink more of her tea, determined not to let thoughts of her ex ruin her serenity, when, suddenly, a man walking across the boardwalk caught her attention. Every other person faded from her sight as if she had tunnel vision. He only wore khakis and a white polo shirt, yet he screamed virility without trying. Hell, he dripped it.

Hot damn he's fine!

It wasn't that the man bulged with muscles; his were lean and defined, but very real. He was evenly tanned and his shaggy brown hair looked like it needed a trim. Though a very good looking man, Caucasian men didn't usually turn her head, but this one was something special. The thought that he looked formidable and capable came to her mind instantaneously, along with the word sex. It was as if he were a jungle predator, beautiful and deadly at the same time.

She wet her dry lips before taking another sip of her tea, keeping a small ice cube in her mouth to help eliminate her cottonmouth. He seemed to be looking for someone; and as he turned back towards the ocean, she glimpsed the finest ass she'd seen since she'd been here. The

finest one in her life. She blinked and tried to slow her breathing while biting down on the piece of ice with her back teeth and continuing to stare at his retreating body.

"Oh, well," she murmured to the air once he disappeared. "He's probably married anyways, or has some blonde adoring girlfriend. Just another man for my fantasies." And he would be a good one.

Her beeping watch broke intrusively into her daydream. *Damn.* She might be on vacation, but she still had people she'd been ordered to call at a certain time. Gesturing for the check, she paid her bill and stood, shouldering her bag full of souvenirs.

Jayde started the quarter-mile walk back to her hotel. Two steps into her journey, she ran into something that felt like a brick wall. "Ah, hell!" she swore as she dropped her bag and stumbled, only to find herself in the strong grip of a stranger.

Looking over her skewed sunglasses, Jayde came face-to-face with none other than her fantasy man from the boardwalk. In that second, her bag was forgotten on the pavement of the walkway, its contents free for the taking if anyone were inclined to abscond with them.

After she felt the blush stain her cheeks she cleared her throat. "Excuse me..." The mumbled words came from her once-again dry mouth. She licked her lips and hoped he wouldn't notice her nervousness.

"No, the fault is all mine. Excuse me." The stranger had a deep, rich voice, the kind that made women weep with sexual yearning. He still hadn't let go of her arms. Jayde could feel his fingers molding into the soft flesh of her triceps. Almost like he was branding her as his. *Get a grip, Jayde! Focus!*

"Let me help you with that," he offered as he stared at her.

What the hell is he talking about? She was lost in his eyes. Oh, yeah, her bag. "N...n...no," she stuttered. "I can do it." She paused for a moment; his eyes were hazel with green flecks in them. "Can you let go of me?"

"I don't want to," he whispered, a response she almost missed. Almost. In a louder voice he said, "Sorry."

The second his hands dropped from her body she felt the loss. Jayde chalked it up to loads of sexual frustration and him being so damn fine. Oh, he was nice and tall, about six-three. She knelt down and began to shove everything back into her beach bag.

Moments later, she felt rather than saw, since she refused to look at him, his presence as he crouched down as well. His hands, lean yet

strong and nicely tanned with clean fingernails, reached out and began gathering some of her scattered things.

"You don't have to—" she protested.

"It's entirely my fault that it happened," he responded as he stood and offered a hand down to her.



Tyson couldn't believe his past four months. He'd been forced out from work on indefinite leave because of a "medical issue" — if that was one called a knife wound to the abdomen. Then, he'd arrived home early from the stakeout only to find his fiancée in *his* bed with another man. The guy was someone with more money and more time than Tyson.

So three and a half months after kicking her out, he'd booked himself a vacation to Belize because he had to get away from people he knew, people who wanted to check in on him all the time.

He needed time to think about his future if he weren't allowed back into the Teams. Tyson was a solitary man and didn't have many people he would call friends outside the members of the Megalodon Team. He liked to be alone. He operated best alone.

So he'd come to this particular hangout along the beach for the first time since he'd been in the tourist town, and then he saw her. Sitting alone under a big umbrella sipping on a tall, cool drink, her full lips curved deliciously around a straw. He had no idea what she was doing alone because if she were his woman, she wouldn't be left alone at all.

Tyson had literally frozen in place while he looked at her. Something from her had reached out to him and intertwined itself onto his very essence; if he hadn't known better he would've sworn he was looking across the crowded café front at his soul mate. She was not what he would've expected his soul mate to be; but as of late, his life had been full of surprises.

Her skin was a perfect medium brown and she had shiny black hair that fell past her shoulders. But it was her smile that touched a part of him he'd thought was dead. Then, while she was looking in his direction, a heated, intimate, and passionately private look had filled her face. He'd felt like a voyeur as he stared upon her. When her tongue had snuck out to wet her lips, he'd groaned. Turning around had been the only way for him to salvage what was left of his sanity. Even his ex-

fiancée hadn't affected him like this. Tyson had walked off, blending into the crowd until he'd gotten his control back.

Losing it was not his usual forte. In his line of work it could be dangerous. Lieutenant Tyson Kincade was a Navy SEAL who was currently on TAD (Temporary Assigned Duty). He was waiting to hear if he'd be allowed to continue with the counterterrorism unit while on vacation. Yet that answer wasn't as pressing as the need to see her again. When he'd turned back around, he saw she was getting ready to walk away.

Not one who usually jumped right in with a woman, Tyson surprised himself by starting for her. It had taken him over a month just to ask out his ex, and he was unsure of what to say to the mystery woman to break the ice. But before he could come up with something he'd run into her, literally. Acting on pure instinct, he'd reached out to steady her, only to find he didn't want to let her go. Ever.

So now here she knelt at his feet, taking his mind to all sorts of places. Places it shouldn't necessarily be heading. Like how those full lips of hers will—not would—feel on parts of his body. How her limbs seemed built to fit exactly in his. He loved the view she offered his lecherous eyes as her top exposed the swells of her breasts to him; he thoroughly enjoyed the green bra she wore. Unsure of what to do, he extended his hand to offer her assistance in returning to her feet.



Jayde took his hand, trembling at the slight contact. He had a strong grip that made her feel safe, protected. It was with incredible ease that he pulled her up to her feet, showing that his arms held immense strength in them. Her eyes met his and she smiled. "Thank you." She looked at his other hand and after tugging free of his grip, opened her bag for him to deposit the remaining things inside it.

"You're welcome. Again, I'm sorry about that," he said as he set her things inside the mess of her beach bag.

"I should have been a bit more careful with where I was going," she responded.

"Well, it's nice to meet you," his deep voice remarked.

"We haven't officially met," she observed and straightened her sunglasses, hiding her brown eyes from his view.

He sketched a bow. "Hello, my name is Tyson. Tyson Kincade." His greeting came with a stunning smile against his tanned skin. His lean hand reached out to close the distance between them.

Jayde took the hand and shook it, admiring the feel of his callused hand on hers for the second time in the space of a few minutes. "Nice to meet you Tyson, Tyson Kincade."

His top lip quirked along with his eyebrow as he tightened his hold on her hand when she tried to take it back. "That's it? What about your name?"

A full smile crossed her face, showing him her pearly white, beautifully straight teeth that gleamed against her darker skin. "Well, I already know my name," she answered in a sweet Southern drawl.

He laughed. The sound made her body clench with unreasonable desire. "But what about me?"

She never lost her grin and her eyes sparkled behind the shades as she responded, "I know who you are as well. You just told me, you are Tyson, Tyson Kincade. Sounds kinda like James, James Bond." Jayde finally removed her hand from his grasp and clutched her bag tighter, more than a little unnerved by her body's reaction to his simple touch.

"You're clever. I still want to know your name." He stepped in closer, bringing with him the scent of sandalwood and man, pure man.

"I don't know you well enough; besides, I have to go. I have a few calls to make." Her dark eyes moved over his body.

"Sure you aren't just trying to get rid of me?"

Another brilliant flash of teeth. "I'm sure. I have to call home," Jayde admitted.

"Husband?"

She shook her head. "No. No husband. I would hope that if I were married, he would want to be with me." George was unquestionably not the one she wanted for holy matrimony. This man, however, she could easily picture waking up next to his body morning after morning.

"I know I would," Tyson said immediately.

Jayde chose to ignore that statement. "Anyway, it was nice to meet you Tyson, Tyson Kincade. Excuse me." As she walked around him, he spun as well and fell into step beside her. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Walking you to your door," he said and continued to walk resolutely.

She blushed. "Isn't walking someone to their door done after a date? At night?" Her brown eyes glanced towards his without hesitation, for she was somewhat protected behind the glasses.

"Most of the time. But my mama raised me to be a gentleman. So I am walking you to your door," he claimed.

"Your mama, huh?" Jayde smiled at the thought of his mother teaching him manners. For some reason it tickled her.

"Yes, ma'am. Are you going to give me your name?" Hazel eyes implored.

"I don't know. I don't know you." She was glad her glasses hid her eyes.

"You know my name. How about this...have dinner with me tonight," he offered as a suggestion...or a solution.

Jayde stopped walking and faced him. "Dinner?" She even removed her sunglasses, allowing him to see the expressive eyes she had.

"Yes, you do eat don't you?" His gaze held hers unflinchingly.

Like he didn't see she wasn't rail thin. "Of course. It's just that..."

"Don't tell me you have plans. With your boyfriend?" A slight frown filled his features.

"No plans, no boyfriend, and that was not what I was even going to say." She put one hand on a shapely hip and stared at him. "I was going to say that it could be dangerous for me to do this."

"I'd protect you." The tone in his voice told her he meant it.

Who'd protect me from you? Jayde could feel her father's disapproval even from the large distance that separated them. This solidified her decision. "Meet in a neutral place?"

"Of course. We could eat at the restaurant in your hotel if that would make you feel better."

"You don't know where my hotel is."

"Not yet. I will since I am walking you to your door." His confident voice thrummed every synapse in her body.

Why not? She was on this vacation to have fun. It was a time for her. "All right. I'll agree to dinner." This man called to her body in— dare she say it—a way that she'd never felt before, a spiritual way.

"Now, will you tell me your name?" he asked as they began to walk again.

"No."

"That's not fair," he protested.

"Okay, let's trade." The words slipped out of her mouth.

Tyson grunted. "Trade what?"

"What will you give me if I give you my name?" Jayde asked. *When did my voice become so throaty?*

He touched her arm gently, and she stopped to turn those extraordinary dark brown eyes on him. "What do you want?" His tone had become even more seductive, and with those four words, had opened up a gate that Jayde wasn't sure she would know how to get back through once she entered. Or if she would want to. Something about him made her want to act wantonly for once in her life.

Unable to turn away from his mesmerizing stare, she countered, "What's up for grabs?" *Hello, double meaning!* Despite the numerous people who streamed past them, it was like they were in their own world and were the only two people.

"Name it," the words he murmured were silky with challenge.

"I don't want you to get the wrong idea about me," Jayde said softly, suddenly embarrassed for her forward action.

"I won't. Tell me, what do you want?" His voice was smooth and yet still insistent.

You to make love to me all night long. You to make me feel like a real woman. Your woman. "Dinner." Had she really been about to say what she wanted?

He arched an eyebrow at that one. "Is it going to be a date?"

"Sure. Even with the whole walking me to my door afterward," Jayde responded with a brilliant smile.

"Okay, then, since you aren't going to tell me what you *really* want, how about I tell you what I suggest?" His voice was downright primal and sex-infused.

Embarrassment was all gone, leaving lust in its wake.

"Go ahead," she said proud her words weren't hesitant.

"A kiss," Tyson said in his deep voice. His gaze remained steady and never wavered from hers.

"A kiss?" Jayde's voice broke as she imagined his firm lips on hers.

"One name, one kiss," he paused for a moment. "Deal?"

"Deal," she agreed.

He broke into a leisurely smile that contained more than a bit of eroticism. Tyson stepped right up to her lush body; she was engulfed by the smell of sandalwood and masculinity, which sent a jolt straight to her groin.

Jayde narrowed her eyes in confusion. "What?"

"I gave you two names." His wolfish smile grew. "You owe me two kisses."

Her insides melted. The rational part of her brain knew she should protest, but the promiscuous side of her wanted the kiss. Before she could form a word one way or another, he took the decision away from her.

Tyson cupped the back of her head and held her still as his firm lips slowly lowered to hers. The touch was light but it sent a shockwave through both of their bodies. As his mouth pressed harder to hers, her knees weakened. Jayde was lost in a passionate haze. His tongue swept over her teeth before plunging into her warm mouth to stroke her own tongue. In and out, in and out it went, mimicking an action that both of them wanted to experience with one another. The heat that grew between them was the kind that made lava seem cool.

They both lost track of time before the other voices grew louder and they realized people around them were cheering and catcalling them. As Tyson gradually pulled away, Jayde found she was leaning on him; her hands had balled up his shirt in her fists. His eyes still burned with a fervor that made her tremble even more than his kiss already had. "One," he said in a breathy voice, telling her he wasn't as composed as he wanted her to believe.

"Jesus," was all Jayde said as she put a bit of space between them. Her fingers touched her swollen lips as if reliving the feeling of his on hers. In all her twenty-nine years, she'd never experienced a kiss like that one.

"That's one way of putting it."

"I really have to go," Jayde stuttered, determined to ignore the hard erection that had been pressed against her while she'd been in his arms.

"And like I said, I will walk you to your door." He gestured for her to lead the way.

This time though when they walked she felt the light contact of his hand on the small of her back. Protective and a bit possessive, his touch made her feel wonderful. The groups of tourists they strode through might have gotten close, but none ever touched her. He made sure of that.

She stopped at the entrance to her hotel. "I can make it from here." Her words broke the silence that had fallen between them on the walk back.

"Dinner still?"

Jayde looked at him and nodded. "Sure. Here at..." She shrugged. "What? Six?"

"Six it is." He picked up her hand and kissed the back of it, never releasing her gaze. "This doesn't count as kiss number two."

Jayde didn't respond. She couldn't. All she could do was stare until her watch beeped again. Panic crossed her face. "Shit. I really have to go."

"Go then. I will see you at six in front of the restaurant."

"Don't be late *Tyson Kincade*," Jayde drew out his name, winking at him as she turned and ran inside the hotel disappearing from his sight.

"I wouldn't dream of it," Tyson said to her retreating back. As he walked off towards his own hotel he knew he had found the other half to his lonely soul. He felt like he'd just gone through Hell Week at BUD/S training, where boys went to become men and only a select few of those determined men became SEALs. His heart was pounding hard, his palms were sweaty, and he was exhausted. At the same time, he was as hard as he'd ever been and ready to take Jayde to bed and please her or die trying. He was pretty sure he could; her explosive response to his kiss had been proof of that.

Chapter Two

At five to six that evening, a handsomely dressed Tyson Kincade waited for his dinner date in the lobby of her hotel. He wore a light-gray, spread-collar dress shirt; a dark green tie; and a black single-breasted jacket with a pair of perfectly creased black dress pants. Military.

Bottom line, the man Jayde saw as she approached from the side was mouthwatering gorgeous. He sensed her arrival more than anything else. When he turned to look at her he smiled, a smile of male satisfaction.

She wore a dress that shimmered when she walked. It was also dark green with metallic purple threads running through it. Form-fitting yet still extremely elegant with a sweetheart neckline, it allowed him to see just the tops of her plentiful cleavage. The tempting flash of her leg peeked through the slit on the left side. She wore modest two-inch heels on her feet. Tyson appreciated all of her luscious curves in the dress.

"Damn," was all he could say when she stopped next to him. Her hair was up in an intricate-looking twist except for two tendrils that hung down by her ears. She wore only a bit of lip gloss and he was smitten. A gold chain with a pendant that looked like a locking or "D" karabiner on it circled her neck. Another mystery she had. In her ears were simple golden rose-shaped earrings.

"Good evening, Tyson Kincade. You look very handsome this evening." Her voice was melodious to his ears.

"You are stunning and beautiful." He kissed her hand, silently applauding his control to not take her right here on the floor of the hotel lobby.

She blushed. "Thank you." A smile crossed her face as she looked around, "Ready to eat?"

"Oh, yeah." The flames in his eyes didn't exactly spell out food he craved, more like her.

They walked arm in arm to the maître d'. As the tuxedoed man escorted them to their table, she nudged Tyson. His hazel eyes looked away from the dance floor they passed and down to her. "What is it my,

little rose?" *Dear God, don't let her have changed her mind.* Even though it was the first time he'd used that endearment, it felt right; there was no other way to explain it.

"Jayde."

After they were seated he asked, "Jayde? What does that mean?"

"It's my name." She took a sip of water. "Jayde Porter."

Tyson nodded. "I like it; it fits you."

"It's a freebie. Just because you look so handsome," she said with a small smile.

"Meaning you don't want a kiss for it?" he teased her and loved how she blushed. But he took pity on her and changed the subject. "What do you do?"

Jayde sighed. Leaning forward, she put her chin on her crossed hands, showing the very empty ring finger off to Tyson. "I am currently working at a customer service job. Not exactly my career choice but I needed more money."

I needed more money. That phrase set off warning bells in Tyson's head. His ex Carrie had needed more money. How could his perfect woman be the same? Was it possible? He just nodded and silently encouraged her to continue.

"I was there...listen to me like you know where there is...New York...I was there in New York to take care of a terminally ill cousin. I guess I never realized just how expensive the city really was so I had to get the other job to supplement all her medications and other expenses. She couldn't afford it on her own, especially since I was living there and her utilities went up. She passed away two months ago and I have just sort of stayed there. Working at the same horrible job. But, until I figure out how I am going to get wherever I think I want to go, this will have to do. I guess I was just long overdue for a vacation. So, here I am." She blinked and smiled softly before it brightened and she said, "What about you?"

Tyson was shocked. Could she be for real? A woman who didn't really feel money was everything and live for spas? "I am on medical leave from my job right now. Well, my second job, I was temporarily reassigned from my first one and then I got injured on my second; so now they are determining whether or not I will be able to return to my original position. Or the second one." He put his hazel eyes on hers waiting for her to ask more questions.

"I am sorry to hear that. Did you prefer the original position?" Jayde wondered.

A wicked glint entered his gaze. "I prefer all positions, the original just as much as others."

Jayde pursed her lips and her eyelashes fluttered. Clearing her throat, she clarified, "I meant your first job. Do you like that one better?"

Tyson loved being a SEAL more than anything and he didn't know how he'd manage if he weren't allowed to be one anymore. "More than anything, I love my first job."

"In that case, I hope that you can return."

"Me too." He was surprised she didn't pry further into his past. *A woman who could respect privacy, what a novelty.*

Tyson was used to the "groupies" who'd sleep with any man who wore the Budweiser, the Trident pin that marked SEAL team members. When he'd met Carrie, she was different—or so he thought. He'd believed she cared about him; turned out, all she'd wanted was his money, but apparently it hadn't been enough when she'd snuck into his personal files and discovered how much he really made. He'd just had a good savings account—"had" being the operative word.

Carrie's betrayal had had Tyson believing all women were the same until now. Something about Jayde made him want to give commitment a chance. Of course, it could be because he hadn't been with a woman in over fourteen months; since working on his latest assignment he hadn't been able to "see" Carrie. But he would bet it was because of Jayde.

They ate in silence for a bit before Tyson spoke. "Why did you agree to have dinner with me?"

The instant flare of heat in her dark eyes told him much more than she would admit to a loud. "I'm not sure. I still don't know if this is smart, but there's something about you."

His eyebrows arched. "Something about me? Care to explain that?" He tore off another piece of bread and ate it as he waited for her answer.

Jayde took another drink of her iced tea before she answered him. "You...I don't know...something about you makes me feel...well...protected. I can't explain it; you have this air about you."

"Are you saying I stink?" he asked with an affronted look and sniffed himself.

She laughed. "No, not that kind of air. Maybe an 'aura' would be a better word...I am not sure I can explain this."

"Try." Tyson sat across from a woman he'd known for only a few hours in awe. He never would've guessed he had any kind of "air" or

"aura" at all. Sure, when he'd been with his SEAL team, he supposed he gave off a dangerous vibe, but he'd been away from it for about a year now.

"Okay," she drawled, giving Tyson a real glimpse into her past. She was a Southerner. "There is this look on your face that tells people around you not to mess with you. That you know how to defend yourself. It's not aggressive, just confident."

Jayde shook her head slightly and cocked it to the side. "But at the same time I see a gentle strength in you that says you are willing to protect. And I feel safe with you, which says a lot since I don't trust many men." That blush he enjoyed so much filled her cheeks. "Anyway, that's why I agreed to dinner, 'cause I feel safe with you."

"You are safe with me," he said as he reached one hand across the table to grasp one of hers. "I would never let anyone harm you." There was a fierceness to his tone and a possessiveness in his eyes that brooked no argument.

Jayde smiled slightly and dropped her eyes to her plate of food. Tugging her hand back, she began to cut her chicken; as she ate, a tingle went up Tyson's spine. He glanced around the room and found some of the local authorities looking at him. Jayde was hidden by the person behind her, but they'd spotted him and were gesturing and speaking with agitated motions. After a moment they disappeared, but he didn't feel any relief. He'd learned a long time ago to trust his gut, and he didn't like what he'd seen.

"Is everything all right, Tyson?" Jayde's voice broke into his thoughts.

"Sure. Just thinking about work and things." He didn't want to worry her.

Jayde nodded. "Tell me more about you."

"For a woman who didn't want to give me her name, you sure want to know a lot about me," he teased.

"Humor me," she quipped as she finished her meal and wiped her mouth.

"Yes, ma'am. What do you want to know?" Tyson laid his utensils down on the table, done with his meal as well.

Jayde put her elbows on the table and leaned on her fists to stare directly at him. "Surprise me."

Tyson leaned in too. "I grew up in Texas. The Dallas-Fort Worth area. Went to college at the best—the University of Texas." He didn't

tell her that after one year there he'd transferred to Annapolis for OCS, Officer Candidate School.

"Go Longhorns," she added with a grin.

"You a Longhorn?" he asked as an olive-skinned man pushing a cart full of desserts stopped by their table. Four shelves of mouthwatering pastries sat there waiting for their decisions, tempting their stomachs that didn't seem so full anymore.

"No. But some of my good friends are." She paused to point out which dessert from the passing cart she wanted to try. A bread pudding soaked in whiskey sauce. "I'm a Bulldog. UGA all the way, baby."

He laughed. "Football fan, huh?" Tyson pointed to a triple-layered chocolate cake drizzled with raspberry sauce.

"Love it," she said with rising enthusiasm. Her entire body glowed with her animation. "I watch more professional now than anything, but I still follow college." They fell silent as their desserts were placed in front of them by a pretty young woman who was with the man; that was her only job.

"How's yours?" Tyson asked as they began eating.

Without hesitation Jayde put some of the bread pudding on her fork and held it out across the table for him to try. As his mouth closed around her fork, he envisioned himself sucking on her mouth and other parts that he desperately wanted to give his attentions. "Mmmm..." He sighed and licked his lips. "Delicious. Here, try mine."

Jayde accepted the chocolate bite. "That's good."

His hazel eyes never left hers as he drew the fork into his mouth to clean it off, relishing what little chocolate there was leftover from her taste.

"Everything he does is erotic," Jayde muttered softly under her breath. Not soft enough, though, because Tyson heard it and his body responded, hardening to the point of being almost painful.

After dinner and dessert, they ordered hot drinks; Tyson had coffee and Jayde had tea. "So tell me why you wanted to have dinner with me," Jayde suggested.

"I didn't want our time together to end so soon. I wanted...and still do...want to get to know you better," Tyson answered the woman who had ensnared him.

"Right. You just wanted my name." Her eyes twinkled with good humor.

"That too." He winked. Sliding his chair back he stood and walked around to her side of the table. "Dance with me." He didn't understand what she was doing to him; he'd hated dancing with Carrie and would avoid doing so at all cost. So why was it so important for him to dance with Jayde? Because he wanted to hold her in his arms once again.

"Okay." Jayde stood and they walked over to where other couples were dancing. With ease he maneuvered them out onto the dance floor. They moved around effortlessly, her head eventually resting against his chest.

Content to hold her, Tyson kept them out there for three songs. She moved so well in his arms on the dance floor; he knew they would move this well in bed together also. After the third song ended, he escorted her back to their table, his hand resting on the small of her back. They passed a large mirrored surface and Tyson got a good look at them. They made a wonderful couple. He fair, she dark. He tall, she shorter. He trim, she curvy. He also noticed that other people were watching them almost enviously.

Tyson helped her back into her chair and then reclaimed his seat, signaling for another round of drinks.

"Thank you," she said.

"For what?"

"The dance. You are a wonderful dancer."

"You as well. But you are welcome just the same. Tell me more about you," Tyson said as their drinks were filled.

"Not much to tell. I lead a very boring life."

"I doubt that. What about your family?" His eyes moved around the room before settling back on her face.

"My parents are alive and well in Savannah, Georgia. I have three brothers and two sisters. I am the youngest at twenty-nine. They all want to control my life and that's about it." She smiled sadly.

Arching an eyebrow, he took a sip of his coffee. "I don't see how your life could be boring with five siblings in it. If I can ask without it being too personal, how come you were the one sent to take care of your cousin?"

"Because I hadn't started what they considered a 'real' career yet. So I went to New York. But I got away from 'the bosses', my family, for a while. I am glad I went; sorry she died, but glad I was there with her. If that makes any sense." Jayde shrugged.

"It does. It makes perfect sense. You needed to get away from your 'overbearing' family and though you are sorry it took a family member's illness to do so, you were glad you got to go."

"You do understand."

"So, what is your big 'career' that you haven't started yet?" he asked. She blushed and he wondered what she was thinking.

"I don't know. I went to school for business, but I love to paint. So I doubled and got an art degree as well. But the family doesn't think that will pay the bills so I have to find a good job. I suppose I could always work for Father, but I don't want to. My whole life I have been the baby. The one who needs 'looking after' since I can't make good decisions according to them, but I take care of them all when it comes down to it. I just want to do something for me, that I love."

Tyson recalled the passion that flared in her eyes when she'd mentioned painting. "Then paint. Just do it."

"Maybe." She shrugged one shoulder. "What about you? Your family?"

"Well, I am a middle child. I have an older brother and a younger sister. I am thirty-five and my parents are also still living. My mom is a hospital administrator and my father owns a propane business. My oldest brother and I don't get along very well. He works for the post office as does my younger sister; she's a gem. You would love her. I don't get home to see her much, though. I don't see eye to eye with my father, either; he wants me to be home with the rest of the family."

If Jayde could see this was a source of tension for him, she didn't pursue it further and he was grateful. However, the light chiming of a phone reached them. "Excuse me; that's my cell phone." She opened her purse and flipped her phone open. "Hello?" She rolled her eyes, an action that brought another smile to Tyson's face. "I'm fine. I'm in the middle of dinner. No, Sam, it is at my hotel so I am perfectly safe. I'm fine. Goodnight, Sam." She hung up her phone.

"Brother one, two, or three?" he asked as she brought another grin to his face with her annoyed expression. Amazed at the amount of times he had smiled since he met her, Tyson didn't want to let her walk out of his life. Even during the three years he'd been with Carrie he hadn't smiled this much or this freely.

"Second oldest, which means the other two along with my sisters and parents will be calling soon, so I should go. Thank you very much for a wonderful evening, Tyson Kincade." Jayde gathered her purse and opened it, bringing out her wallet.

He didn't want the evening to end, but he'd never pressured a woman to share his time, so he waved for the bill. Jayde began to protest him paying for her portion until he gave her a silencing look.

As they walked through the dining area to the lobby she said, "You didn't have to pay for my dinner."

Thunder rumbled as a storm rolled into the area, similar to how the dread of leaving her rolled into him. "A date is a date. Now, I am walking you to your door."

"Of course." She led the way to the elevator and they got on with other guests and went up to the fifth floor where she motioned they should get off.

Tyson walked beside her down the hall until she stopped at her door. Room 5627. "Your key?" He waited for her to give him her card key and opened the door for her.

Jayde walked into her room, but Tyson remained in the doorway. "Again, thank you for dinner," she said as he watched her intently with his hazel eyes.

"You're welcome, Jayde."

She licked her lips nervously. "Goodnight, Tyson."

"Jayde?" His seductive voice caressed her.

"Yes?" She set her purse down and faced him again as she stood by the door.

"I am claiming number two," he warned, seconds before kissing her.

Like the first time they kissed, her world spun out of control. His touch electrified her body. As his tongue stroked hers, she felt a reckless desire deep within her soul for this man. Jayde kissed him even harder. For a moment she wondered what it would be like to have a man like him in her life, to come home to everyday. *Perfect, it would be perfect.*

He broke it off, his own breathing fast and hard. One hand trailed down her face. "Goodnight. Dream of me." Then he was gone. She'd blinked and he was gone, like he hadn't been there at all. If not for her swollen lips, she would have sworn it had all been a dream.

Still trembling, Jayde shut the door and locked it. Never had a man affected her like that. Jesus, why did he have to be such a gentleman?

Before she could dwell too much on that, her phone rang again and for the next three hours she spoke to — was lectured by — her family as they called to make sure she was still breathing and to let her know they

thought what she was doing was stupid and childish. Then she finally made it into the shower, letting the pounding spray ease away her tension for the man she'd just met this very day.

Chapter Three

Tyson left her room and headed back to his own hotel. He'd always prided himself on being cool, calm, and collected. Five seconds around Ms. Jayde Porter, however, and he was a randy school boy. Not even the rain could douse the fire her kiss had ignited within him.

He took a shower, but when he came out of the steaming bathroom wearing nothing except his boxers, there was company in his room: the two men he'd seen in the restaurant and two more he recognized from surveillance photos his counterterrorism team had taken. They had him at a disadvantage, for three of them were holding guns on him.

"What do you want?" Tyson asked as he carefully moved to where his clothes were laid out.

"Why are you here?" The one without the gun asked.

"Vacation," he said easily.

"Don't lie. Go on, get dressed."

"What do you want?" Tyson asked again.

"Answers. And we will get them. Get dressed."

Torture. Slowly he put on his jeans and clean black tee shirt. He sat down on a chair to put on his boots. Damn, he'd really stepped into it this time. No SEAL Team Seventeen, The Megalodon Team for backup. No counterterrorism team for support. He was on his own. Or was he?

The image of a sweet, sexy woman named Jayde Porter came to his mind along with the words the sangoma he'd met once in a remote village in Botswana. The old man had given him a pair of rings — rings Tyson still had no idea where or how he'd acquired them for they were solid titanium. The old man had also said, "Keep them with you and the woman you are meant to be with will find you. The rings will save you and bind the two of you together for all eternity." Tyson knew it was just an old myth; but still, the idea forming in his head had potential, especially combined with the vision of Jayde Porter.

Tyson had already been with Carrie so he hadn't even shown them to her since he'd found her prior to receiving the rings. He'd kept them on a chain that he wore around his neck. The one time Carrie had asked about them, he'd shrugged it off telling her they were just silver bands. A SEAL thing. She'd bought it.

"Let's go." The gunmen gestured for him to precede them out of the room and down the hall. "No tricks."

Tyson wouldn't risk innocent people's lives so he walked easily so not to give them a reason to get jumpy. They shoved him, none to gently, in the back of a rain-soaked Mercedes with darkened windows and drove.

After a while the car pulled into a police station. His captors roughly dragged him down a hall and some stairs to slam him into a wall before they shoved him into an interrogation room. At least that was what he believed it to be. Then all of them left him alone for two hours with nothing to do but sit uncomfortably chained and sweaty in the hot box. He knew there was a cut on his head from hitting the wall for he could feel the blood.

When the door finally opened, the only unarmed man from earlier entered. He had small black eyes, yellowed teeth, and a pock-marked face. "What are you doing here?"

Tyson barely blinked. "I told you already. I'm on vacation."

"Why do you insist on lying to us? Do you know what jails are like here?"

"I've done nothing wrong." *Not yet anyway.* And he did know what the jails were like here.

"We know who you are."

"Good, then you know I am here on vacation."

The man swore and walked out. Tyson swallowed slowly. It was obvious they wanted him to break from the thought of possibly going to a foreign prison. It was also apparent that the pock-faced man wanted to hit him.

After the man left, Tyson heard a motor start and knew that they turned up the heat even higher. He'd survived worse than this. He didn't think they would resort to actual torture for a while at least; it seemed they wanted him to give in.

Another hour passed before that ugly man returned. "Do you really want to continue this? Just tell us what we want to know."

"I am here on vacation," the SEAL insisted.

The man slapped his hands down on the lone desk in the room. "No one with your history comes here alone."

"I never said I was alone." Tyson paused, hoping he wasn't about to get Jayde in trouble; but for now, she seemed to be his only chance out of this. "I just said I was here on vacation." He didn't even acknowledge what they said about his history.

For the first time, the man looked panicked, as if maybe he had the wrong guy. But then he recovered. "Who are you here with?"

"My wife," Tyson said.

"Our records don't show you having a wife."

"How is that my fault?" His gaze held the other man's without fear.

"Who is she?"

"How do I know you won't hurt her?" Tyson asked. *Just so you know, I will kill you if you harm one hair on her head.* He had to forcibly relax his body so he didn't give himself away.

"We won't. Tell us who she is."

"I will go with you to see her. I won't send you alone." *I'm not that stupid.*

"Deal. Then when she says she isn't your wife, you go to prison." The man seemed positively gleeful.

Tyson nodded as they took him back outside where his hot body eagerly absorbed the cool rain that still fell. They put him back in the vehicle and headed to the hotel where Jayde was staying. Tyson hoped he was right to put his faith in her.

Tyson and three others left the car. On the fifth floor, they got out and Tyson led the way to door 5627 where one of the men knocked, as the others kept Tyson away from the opening. He hoped this wouldn't be a mistake.



Jayde had just gotten out of the shower. The clock read five till one. She was exhausted, just wanting to climb into bed, but her mind wouldn't slow down. As she wandered around the suite in the thick robe provided by the hotel, she heard a knock on her door. She froze with fear, then her body flushed hot as she realized it could be Tyson.

The knock came again. "Who is it?" she asked as she walked closer.

"*Policía*," a grating voice said.

Police? Her black brows furrowed in thought. "Just a second." She opened the door a crack, the chain still latched. "Is something wrong, sir?"

"Sí. Can you open the door, please?"

"Do you have some identification?" Jayde waited until he showed her a badge. "What is this about?"

"Please," he said. "Open the door. It is about your husband."

My husband? “Just a second.” She shut the door, took a deep breath, then removed the chain and swung the door open to admit three strangers and Tyson.

Tyson looked exhausted. He still looked wonderful, but he looked dog-tired. Then she noticed the blood that they had tried to wipe away. Her dark eyes narrowed, “What is going on here, officer?”

“It’s *Capitán*, *Capitán* Alvarez.”

“Fine,” she snapped. “What’s going on, Captain?”

“Hey, honey,” Tyson interjected wearily.

Jayde gave him a small, tense smile as she gripped her robe tighter about her body to try and conceal the trembling. “Captain?”

“This man,” he pointed to Tyson, “claims that you are married. We believe he is a spy. Do you have anything to say? And please, don’t worry, we can protect you.”

Jayde couldn’t help it, she choked. “A spy?”

“Yes.”

“Can I ask why or how you came to that conclusion?” Her eyes narrowed as she witnessed the look of sick perversion on his face.

“His history.”

Jayde looked at Tyson, who hadn’t taken his eyes off her since he’d been shoved into the room. In his eyes she read the same thing she’d seen earlier, ‘I will protect you.’ So she did the only thing she knew she could do. Lie. “He is telling the truth. He is my husband.” She was proud that her words were delivered in a clear, strong voice.

The captain narrowed his eyes at her declaration. “Please, we can protect you. Tell the truth.”

“I am. This man is my husband.” Jayde walked over to stand next to Tyson placing her smaller body in front of his as if to protect him.

“Forgive me but why then are you in separate hotels?” He seemed smug.

Jayde didn’t miss a beat. “Well, that’s easy. We are recreating our first meeting. It was so romantic.” She sighed dreamily before continuing. “I was sitting at a table along the beach and then right there before my eyes he stood. I got up to leave and ran right into him. I guess you could say it was love at first sight. I mean it wasn’t here, but I like to travel. It’s just a little harmless role-playing. We check into hotels under separate names; I use my maiden name; and then we meet all over again. Keeps the spark alive.”

Tyson was amazed. Not knowing what to expect, he hadn't begun to hope for this kind of help from her. Despite the seriousness of the whole situation, he found himself smiling at her gumption.

The captain scowled even more. "Then why didn't he just say that three and a half hours ago?" he ground out in his grating voice.

Tyson could feel her body tense even though he couldn't see her eyes. "I'm sorry," she drawled. "Are you saying y'all have had him in your custody for over three hours? Did you arrest him? Did you read him his rights?" Not even waiting for the man to answer, she launched into a tirade.

"So, you violated his rights?! Do you know how much trouble you are in?! You don't get to do that to an American on a hunch — much less without letting him call his lawyer!" Jayde even took a step toward him.

"And I suppose that is you?" The captain asked.

"No, *my father* has his own law firm. He would be the one to deal with international law. He is very good at his job. And don't think I didn't notice the blood on his head, if y'all injured him..."

The captain blanched. "I am still not sure all is as you say it is."

"And?" she tossed at him, her curvaceous body trembling with anger at their treatment of the man behind her.

"We will leave you alone, after one thing." Tyson knew the one thing the captain didn't want was snooping lawyers. Nosy Americans were not good for business; his bosses wouldn't like that.

"That would be?" Tyson asked.

"You renew your vows here, with one of our priests, and then just sign another certificate and we will leave you alone." Tyson guessed Captain Alvarez expected Jayde to refuse to get married. All they knew Tyson was he worked alone; so if he really were married, they were making a big mistake.

"You want us to renew our vows?" Jayde questioned, Tyson hearing the slight panic in her voice.

"Of course, it will just be a little thing." With a wave, Captain Alvarez sent one of the men off. "I think it will just ease my mind a bit." He smiled evilly. "Consider it our way of saying we are sorry for the *misunderstanding*."

"Sure. When?"

"Now," the captain said with a frown, clearly not liking how easily she agreed.

Tyson heard Jayde inhale sharply. He touched her back in silent support. "Honey, we don't have to do this if you don't want to." He

offered her a chance to back out, knowing full well that the certificate would be proof they were legally married. "I know renewing our vows under these conditions was not what you had in mind."

With a gentle, yet forced smile, she turned to face the man she'd known for less than twenty-four hours. "What difference does it make what the situation is? We are just renewing what has already been said."

"Good!" the captain exclaimed. "The priest will be here momentarily."

"Just a minute!" Jayde screeched. "I am not, I repeat, *not* doing this in my robe! So you have to leave so I can change." At his hesitation, she glared at them.

The captain took Tyson with them, "so you can't make plans," he said. As he was shutting the door Jayde yelled, "Flowers! I want flowers also!"

Twenty minutes later, Tyson stood next to Jayde in front of a Catholic priest reciting her vows in her hotel room, holding a bouquet of mixed flowers the captain had brought for her. Tyson looked down at the woman who'd just saved his bacon. She wore a knee-length fuchsia skirt and black silk blouse, no shoes, and her hair still damp around her shoulders. Her brown skin was makeup free and he smelled the faint scent of baby powder. She'd removed her earrings but the necklace was still in place. He heard her muttering under her breath the word "rose."

The priest asked for her full name and the captain interrupted, saying he wanted to hear it from the groom. So Tyson answered, "Jayde Rose Porter." She smiled widely in return. *Oh, she was good.* The captain was looking on her identification card and frowned as he saw Tyson was correct.

When it was Jayde's turn to supply his name, Tyson panicked. How would she possibly know? But without missing a beat she said, "Tyson Randolph Kincade."

Too soon it was time for the rings. Tyson produced two from his pocket, the simple bands made of titanium. He slid the ring over her ring finger on her left hand as he said his vows.

"I, Tyson Randolph Kincade, take thee, Jayde Rose Porter to be my lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or worse..." he began with a wry smile, "for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, honor, and cherish. Forsaking all others till parted by death. This is my solemn vow to you." By the time he

finished talking, the ring was sitting snugly on her finger. The sango-ma's words echoed in his ears again as the ring fit her perfectly.

Jayde repeated the same thing as she slipped the ring on his finger. She was shaking, so Tyson laced their fingers together and gave her some of his silent strength. Somehow it was enough for he felt her relaxing.

When the priest smiled and said they were now husband and wife, Tyson noticed his new wife was still in a state of shock, and he kissed her sweetly, cheering when she eagerly leaned into him, taking all of what he gave her.

When Tyson pulled away, both of them were breathing hard. The priest shoved the certificate at them and took one copy for himself after they signed it. Then everyone else left the newlyweds alone.

The door shut and the room was silent as Jayde and Tyson stared at each other.

Tyson saw the rant forming on her lips and stopped her with a finger across his mouth and a silent head shake. Warily, she stayed silent, for about five seconds.

"Well, honey," she started. "Not exactly how I anticipated our vow renewal to go. But I suppose another year, another surprise." She arched a brow at him, crossed her arms, and tapped her bare foot on the floor, bringing his eyes to her lapis blue toenails.

"I'm sorry," he said. "This isn't exactly what I had planned, either." He turned on the stereo system to find some romantic music and adjusted the volume to cover their voices. Taking a hold of her arm he steered her gently towards the bed and sat beside her as she turned angry eyes on him.

"Start talking," she seethed. Her face was flushed with anger, her eyes sparkled, and Tyson realized again just how truly beautiful she was. "I would almost think you had this planned; where did you get the rings?"

"Look, I am so sorry about this whole thing. I didn't mean to get you involved." He paused at her look of disbelief but then continued. "I am currently — or was — working for a counterterrorism unit for our government. Those men are drug runners who supply, buy, and sell information to terrorists. When I got injured, they put me on leave and I ended up down here. I noticed two of those guys at dinner watching me. After I got back to my hotel room, they showed up with two other men and took me with them. To be questioned." Tyson watched as she narrowed her eyes further.

"I know it was wrong of me to bring you into this, but it seemed to be my only option." He paused again. "The rings belong to me. I wish I could tell you more but I can't. Please trust me. I am not a spy; they didn't want you to trust me. Just for a little longer, trust me. I am one of the good guys." He didn't want to tell her the rings sealed their fate together, for all eternity – that might just freak her out.

Jayde just shook her head. Tyson hoped she knew he wouldn't have put her in this situation unless absolutely necessary. "Okay, Tyson, I will go along with this for a while. For some reason I do trust you; not sure why, but I do." She reached out and touched his arm and desire filled him. "So, where does this leave us?"

Tyson released a huge breath that he didn't realize he'd been holding. She was going to go along with him on this. She trusted him. A proud smile grew on his face. "Well, I have to place some calls to some people in the States and then I think I owe you more explanations."

She nodded as she stood. "I think you do too."

"Thank you for trusting me." His eyes were gentle as they looked upon her dark beauty. *Damn, I have never seen a woman like her before in my life.* Although a world traveler, he'd never known a woman to affect him this way.

"Well," she said with a forced lightheartedness, "if a wife can't trust her husband, then who can she trust?" Then she turned and walked into the bathroom, shutting herself off from him.

Jayde just needed some time. She changed her clothes quickly as she put on her originally intended clothing from her shower before things had gotten crazy: a pair of men's pajama bottoms and a cutoff sweatshirt.

She leaned on the marbled bathroom countertop and looked in the mirror at her reflection. Running the cold water, she splashed some on her face and used the thick absorbent towel to dry it off. She stared. What had she done? What was her family going to say? Would she even tell them? Doubtful.

Standing there she noticed something about her reflection she'd never seen before. Her hands still held the towel in front of her face, but now she detected something different. The glittering of silver on her left hand. Her wedding ring.

She put down the towel and held up her hand, palm towards her face, and looked. The ring shone brilliantly against her dark skin. Like it belonged there.

"Well, my family was always after me to do something. I guess getting married is something. Besides, it won't hold up once we get back to the States," she spoke to her reflection. "I could always put it as helping my country." She smiled and saw she appeared almost happy. She was glowing.

Jayde walked back out into the main part of her suite and found Tyson on the phone. He looked up as she entered and sent her a soft smile along with a gesture she took to mean "just a few minutes." She nodded and took a seat on the chaise lounge in the room, closing her eyes as she listened to the comforting rumble of his deep voice mixed with the seductive music that played in the room and the pounding of the rain against the windows.

Tyson watched as his new *wife* settled herself on the lounge; she looked so delectable lying there with her eyes closed. He understood she must be exhausted, nothing like this was ever easy and she was holding herself together admirably.

The voice in his ear had faded into a faint hum so he had to shake his head and fully concentrate on what his boss was saying to him. Even as Tyson talked his eyes never left Jayde, and he knew the exact moment she fell asleep. Her chest rose and fell in a steady rhythmic pattern, one arm held a pillow at her side with the other arm lying between her breasts.

Finally all his calls had been made. He shut the phone and walked over to where she lay slumbering. Pulling up a straight back chair, Tyson sat down beside her body that was dead to the world. "Thank you, thank you, my little rose," he whispered, brushing her hair back from her face. "Thank you for trusting me."

For a few moments he stayed beside her watching her sleep. Then he became restless. There was so much he wanted to do with her and to her, but he had to find a way to keep her safe. Those men were dangerous and now she was his responsibility. It was his fault she was possibly in danger. He snorted with disdain as he amended his thought; she *was* in danger.

He strode to the window and looked out on the town below. The rain still came down in torrential sheets. Maybe he could convince her to go with him to another place, really act like a married couple. He knew for a fact they would be watched for the remainder of their time here.

Eyes that had hardened with menace at the thought of someone hurting Jayde softened as he turned away to view the woman he'd promised to protect. Tyson went to her and picked her up, realizing she felt light in his arms. In fact, she felt damn near perfect. She wasn't a petite woman, she was ideal. And for the time being, she was all his.

He placed her reluctantly on the bed and covered her with a blanket. Tyson gave her a quick kiss on the forehead and groaned, struck with just how much he would love to explore every nook and cranny of her luscious body. "Damn, I must be some kind of saint," he said as he shook his head in disbelief. He took a blanket over to the lounge so that he could sleep between her and the door. Tyson knew he was in for a restless night, but he didn't survive sleep deprivation training for nothing. So he cleaned up the remaining traces of blood on his head and went to bed.



Jayde woke up to the sunlight hitting her eyes. She opened them slowly against the glare. Her movements were slow as she organized her body to get moving. "That was one messed up dream," she said to the room she believed was empty.

"I don't think it was a dream."

Jayde screamed at the deep voice ringing in the room and bolted up out of bed. Her legs became tangled in the blankets and she pitched backwards towards the corner of the wrought-iron nightstand. She found herself in a pair of strong arms that held her immobile just shy of her banging her head, staring into a pair of hazel eyes that seemed remarkably familiar to her.

"Easy there." He set her on her feet and still had a hold on her shoulders as he asked, "Okay now?"

"Fine. I'm fine," she answered with an undeniably shaky voice. "Thanks for...that." She gestured over her shoulder. Jayde sat down on the edge of the bed. "It wasn't a dream was it?"

"No. Are you disappointed?"

"Well, I don't really know you. But since we aren't even in America, I don't think there will be any lasting damage done." She smiled briefly. "How about breakfast?" Every time she got nervous she ate, which was why she wasn't pencil thin.

"It's on its way up. I ordered a bit of everything since I don't really know what you like." He stroked the side of her face before walking away from her.

Jayde tried to calm her rapid heartbeat. She didn't know this man and now she was helping him out of some kind of mess. What kind, she didn't know, and apparently wouldn't have time to ask since there was someone knocking at the door. She stayed by the bed as Tyson answered it, admitting room service.

The man who brought in the cart made Jayde feel self-conscious and so she instinctively moved closer to Tyson. She noticed his understanding look as his arm settled protectively around her shoulder, tucking her close to his side. Aware of the man's gaze on her she laid her head against Tyson and tried to look in love. It was an attempt she had pulled off better than she would have ever imagined.

Tyson tipped the man and walked to the door with Jayde still beside him and shut it behind the hotel employee, leaving them alone again. "Well, I hope you're hungry," he said in a light voice.

"Starved." And she was. Jayde sat down at the table and stared in shock as Tyson began to fix her a plate. No one had ever done that for her before. He pointed and she nodded or shook her head; once the dish was filled, he placed it in front of her and fixed his own.

"So," he asked later in between bites of scrambled eggs, "what do you want to do today?"

"Go to the jaguar preserve. You remember, right, Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary & Jaguar Preserve? That was going to be today's venture." She took a long drink of her juice and waited. She wasn't about to give up going to the one place she'd actually come down here to see and was willing to fight for the chance.

"Whatever my little rose wants, she gets."

"Well, since the whole jig is up, I suppose you should go and get your things to move in here, since I like my room better," Jayde said. *And I have no idea where your room is.*

He coughed harshly, clearly surprised by her suggestion. "I suppose so..." He stared at her but she avoided his gaze. "I will do that right now," he said, almost as a question.

Jayde still wouldn't look at him. "Yes. And I will get ready for our day." She slid her chair back from the table and walked towards the bathroom, her body quivering more and more with every step she took. The door didn't get a chance to close before his hand was there pushing it back open.

"Jayde," he said as he forced his way into the bathroom. Although his hands have killed, he was extremely gentle as he turned her towards him and brought her chin up to meet his gaze. A lone tear ran down her smooth face. "Oh, Jayde," he moaned. "What have I done?" He gathered her into her chest and held her against him.

"I'll be fine," she sniffed. "I think I am just a bit overwhelmed. Even if we are just acting for these people, I don't usually have men in my room."

Tyson didn't have the heart or balls to tell her it wasn't an act. They were truly and legally wed; that was a real document she signed and that man had been a real Catholic priest. "I can keep my room at the other hotel."

"No, I don't want them hauling you off to jail. You will stay here." Jayde pulled back from his chest and looked up at him. "Besides, it might be nice to have a *husband* while I'm here. That way people will leave me alone."

Tyson frowned. "What do you mean?"

Jayde shrugged, waving a nonchalant hand over her shoulder. "A few of the hotel staff have been hitting on me and it's getting old. I'm not a huge fan of the attention."

Damn straight they will you alone. "Glad I won't be too much of an inconvenience to you."

All she did was smile softly. "Well, you should get going." She wiped the last remnants of the tear off her cheek. "I'll be waiting."

"I hope so." Tyson couldn't stop his next movement anymore than he could stop the blood that flowed through his veins. He cupped her face and lowered his mouth to hers.

At the first touch of his lips he felt her sag. Her hands already around his waist moved up to his neck. One of them moaned as their tongues met and danced.

Tyson's hands moved lower and back up again, this time under her cutoff sweatshirt. The feel of her satin skin beneath his hands made him tighten his hold on her body. Her curves enticed him in ways he had never dreamed.

Jayde trembled. All through her body she trembled. In all his life he'd never met a woman whose reaction was this genuinely lustful, this impassioned. She gave herself over to the feelings completely, causing him to do the same. It was like she was a different person clamoring to get into his skin. A small voice in the back of his mind told him not to

do this, not to take advantage of the situation, but that voice was muffled by the desire coursing through his body.

Her shirt was removed, baring her full chest to his gaze. His eyes darkened with warm heat as he licked his lips, "You are a work of art," he whispered. Tyson's shirt soon followed and he closed his eyes as her hands touched his bare chest.

"You are so strong," she breathed as her fingers traced his defined abdominal muscles, all eight of them. There was a puckered scar across the lower part of his ribcage that she touched gently. "Where did you get this?"

"At work." He reached in and kissed her again, effectively silencing her except for the purr that grew from the back of her throat.

Tyson drew her back against the warmth of his body before scooping her up, his hands under her butt and walking forward until she was sitting on the edge of the sink. He kept her legs spread around his lean hips, allowing her to feel just how much he desired her.

He felt the wetness between her legs as she tightened her grip around his waist. It was a wonderful feeling. Everywhere she touched him he felt a burning. Although he knew she wanted to go through that metaphoric gate, she still hesitated.

But it wasn't meant to be anyway, at least not right now. The sound of a cell phone broke through their heated state.

Both of them drew back and looked at each other with smoldering eyes. Tyson winced as he heard the sound again but leaned down and placed a long lingering kiss on her swollen lips.

"This will be continued," he vowed as he backed slowly out of the room before turning and answering his phone.

Chapter Four

Jayde shut the door behind him and climbed into the shower, still breathing hard and wanting something that seemed out of reach for her. She stayed in there for a good half-hour until her skin began to prune.

Getting out, she immediately began to apply baby oil. After that was done, she slid into her robe and walked out into the main part of the room. Sitting there on her bed, freshly shaved and with a faint smell of Aqua Velva, was Tyson. Immediately all those intense feelings returned and wreaked havoc in her lower body.

His bags were by the dresser; she noticed he only had two, so he either traveled light or hadn't planned on staying down here very long. He'd changed into fresh jeans and a clean shirt. His eyes were clear and possessive as he looked at her.

"Hello," he greeted.

"Hey. Just give me a minute to get some clothes." Jayde was a little unsure of how to act.

"Don't hurry on my account; I am thoroughly enjoying the view." Tyson smiled and she blushed. "I got the tickets for the ride to the sanctuary. So we are all set for that."

Jayde nodded and returned to the bathroom, dressing quickly in hiking clothes. For so long she'd wanted to go to this preserve and look at the wildlife. She tossed up her hair into a ponytail and then she walked out to meet Tyson with a huge smile on her face. "Ready."

"Let's do it, then." He waited as she tied on her hiking boots. The glint off her ring made him smile. His SEAL team would never believe that he'd gotten married, especially considering the way his ex had treated him. He glanced down at his finger and felt comfort in seeing the metal band.

Together they gathered their things and headed down to the lobby where they boarded a tour bus that took them to the sanctuary. Tyson had taken her hand in his and entwined their fingers. She'd given him an encouraging squeeze in return.

She sat by the window totally absorbed by the lush greens of the landscape. Jayde loved Tyson's frequent touches and kisses, but for once, she was totally sucked in by the terrain, her artist's mind was

working overtime. When he finally stopped trying to compete with the scenery for her attention and lightly caressed her hand, she looked away from the window and smiled softly at him.

Jayde had been so excited she hadn't noticed the man who'd boarded after them, watching intently. Tyson had, but acted otherwise. He'd pretended as if it were just a trip between husband and wife. Every now and then he would brush his hand along her face or kiss her ring hand. Now, hours later, Tyson sat in awe of the woman sleeping in the crook of his shoulder as the bus drove them back to the hotel. They'd hiked for over eight hours at the preserve, climbing over terrain that would've given trouble to a lot of men he knew. She'd moved like a pro over the rocks, navigating her way as if she'd grown up there. The day had been amazing.

While they hadn't seen any of the elusive jaguars, the time had been full of beauty and wonder. Jayde had been impressed by everything she'd seen. Her recently acquired *husband* had willingly followed her lead as she went off the beaten path. Tyson had only given her one warning and that was about the bushmaster.

"Just watch where you step; I don't want to have to tell your family that I married and lost their daughter within the space of a single day. That snake is deadly," he'd said.

"I know. I'll be fine. Now quit worrying and let's go," she'd said right before she'd taken off, leaving him to follow in her wake, not even acknowledging his mention of marriage or her family.

His new wife had moves that would make his SEAL team proud. She was very sure-footed; but for now, she rested against his body snoring softly. He smiled as he slid strands of her hair through his fingers, so soft, so silky. Her light citrus smell combined with baby powder made him peaceful. Unable to resist, he kissed the top of her head, loving the way she nestled closer to him.

As the bus began a slow stop in front of the hotel he decided not to wake her. She was so serene sleeping there, so he scooped her up in his arms and carried her off the bus.

As he walked into the hotel lobby, many gazes met him. When Jayde looked up at him, he smiled as she blinked a few times and snuggled back into his chest. The couple received envious glances from other men's wives and even from some of the men themselves. The staff was awed and astonished as they hurried to open the elevator for

him. He adjusted Jayde's relaxed body in the elevator as it headed up to the fifth floor.

He got off and went to the room, sliding the card key in the door and entering. Tyson set her on the bed and began to undress her. After her hiking boots had been removed, the phone rang in the room, grabbing her attention immediately.

Jayde sat up with a start. "Don't," she protested as she moved off the bed towards the phone. "My feet must stink..." Her head dropped back as she sat down on the chair. "Hello?" There was a brief pause. "Hello, Father."

Tyson watched her entire posture changed. He didn't like the instant submissiveness she projected. Now he understood what she'd meant by her family being overbearing. He walked up behind her and started to rub her neck.

"I was out of cell phone range today," Jayde said, unconsciously melting into Tyson. He smiled. "I went to the preserve. I was not in any danger. Father, I was very well protected. No, I never went off on my own; there was always at least one person with me. I was very safe. I have to go now, Father, I need to eat dinner. Give my love to—" Jayde sighed and set the phone down.

"Everything okay?" Tyson's concerned voice asked.

"He just hung up on me. They are never going to be proud of me. Today, it was that I was stupid for going off to a preserve. I have been away from home long enough and I need to get back to the States and begin my career." She leaned back further into his touch, eagerly accepting his silent support. "I must be such a disappointment to them."

Tyson felt a blinding anger at her family. How could they treat her like this? Like her opinion about her own life didn't matter? "I'm sure they are just worried about their baby. I know if my youngest child was out of the country, alone, I would be concerned."

Jayde tensed. "You have children?"

He caressed the back of her neck. "None that I'm aware of. And I have always been *very* aware of my activities." His breath teased the hairs at her nape.

She stood and turned to look at him with a semi-humorous glint in her eyes. "And I suppose you have had a lot of activities to keep track of?"

"In my younger days, I had my fair share. Not so much as of late." His eyes ran up and down her body in a blatant, red-blooded, masculine perusal. "But now that I am married, we will have to see."

"You're not that old; and if you are, then you are in awesome shape. Who are you kidding? We both know this whole marriage thing is a sham." Jayde smiled as she bent to peel off her socks.

"Jayde," he began. "About that..." The phone rang; this time it was his cell phone.

She waved him off. "I am going to order some dinner. I'll get you some as well."

He just smiled and answered his phone. Going over to the window, he began his conversation keeping, one eye on his wife. Someday he was really going to have to tell her they were legally married.

Dinner was delicious. Jayde had ordered him the surf-n-turf. The steak was perfect, done medium rare, just the way he liked it.

"I want to ask you something," he said as he dipped his lobster into the melted butter.

"Shoot," she said easily as she ate her grilled salmon with baby asparagus.

"How did you know my middle name? You know, when the priest asked for it at the ceremony?"

Jayde nodded. "When you opened your wallet. That first night...listen to me, as if it were so long ago...I saw your identification."

"What made you decide to go along with me? I mean, like you said, we have only now known each other for little more than a full day."

She put down her utensils and met his gaze. "I trusted you, and I still do."

He smiled as he began to eat again. "That phone call I just got..."

"Yes. What about it?"

"I've been cleared to return to work."

"Congratulations!" She raised her glass in a toast. "I bet that makes you very happy."

"Well, I'd be happier if I knew I was also cleared to go back to my original position, but this is a start." But at the same time, he was sickened by the thought of leaving her.

"Well, then, let's celebrate. Let's go dancing," she said with a grin.

"I'm not much of a dancer," he protested.

"You did fine last night; what's changed since then?"

"Nothing, it's just that..."

"Well, good. If this is our last night, I want to go dancing," Jayde insisted.

"I can think of something else I would like to do." His eyes darkened with memories of her body pressed against his.

She teased him with that adorable blush again. "I want to dance, but I don't want you to feel uncomfortable. So will you take me for a walk on the beach?"

"Of course. I will even take you dancing if you want." How could he not? She fit so perfectly in his arms, and to hold her was akin to holding perfection.

A thought occurred to her. "When do you leave?" she wondered.

"I go back to the States in two days. When is your vacation over?" Tyson didn't want to leave her.

"Same. I am nearing the end of my 'freedom'," Jayde said with a roll of her eyes.

"Good, then I will see you home." He stood and held his hand out to her. "Let's go woman," he teased. "I want to walk on the beach."

His smile was infectious. She took his hand and walked over to where her sandals sat by the door. Sliding them on her feet, she looked back at her cell phone and hesitated.

Tyson saw where she was looking and shook his head. "No, not tonight. Tonight is for us." He guided her out the door, pulling it shut just as the intrusive ringing of her phone began.

"They are going to kill me for this," she said.

"They will have to get through me, and I promise they won't." He gave her hand an encouraging squeeze and they continued down the hall.

"You don't know my family. Or what they are capable of."

And you don't know all that I am capable of. "I'm sure I could hold my own." Tyson managed to put in the right amount of offense in his voice as they boarded the elevator.

Immediately contrite she said, "I'm sure you could."

He smiled as she attempted to make him feel better. The elevator reached the lobby and the doors opened. They walked out of the hotel and back towards where they first met, hand in hand, like they'd been doing this for a long time.

They strolled on the boardwalk along with the other couples. Tyson's hand, once again on the small of her back, guided her to the safest spots for her to walk. He staked his claim to all around who might dare to look twice at his woman.

Jayde leaned along the railing of the boardwalk and looked over the darkening ocean. The wind had picked up and she shivered slightly. A warm feeling of security and contentment filled her as Tyson stood behind her, offering his body heat to her. At that moment, Jayde knew she'd fallen in love.

This man whom she'd known for less than forty-eight hours made her feel things she hadn't ever felt before. She would love for it to feel like this forever, but she knew it wasn't possible. He was an enigma to her.

Since her father worked with international law, many of her father's clients were ex-military men. They carried themselves with the same quiet dignity and strength she saw in Tyson. Yet as much as she wanted to know more about him, she wasn't going to ask. That was something else her family had taught her.

Her body got tight and tense. Sensing her distress, Tyson put one arm around her chest and pulled her tighter against his body. "Calm down, my little rose, calm down," he said as he put his chin on the top of her head. His other hand ran up and down her free arm.

"I know we don't have much time left together, but I would really like to thank you for making my trip one I will never forget. I mean, I stood up to the local cops; I married a man I really don't know to help him out of a jam. I don't think I will ever have this much excitement in my life ever again. So thanks," Jayde spoke quietly and turned her head around to meet his gaze.

"You are one hell of a woman Jayde Kincade, one hell of a woman." Then he kissed her.

And I'm all yours. Jayde repositioned her body to face his as the kiss intensified. Hearing his name after hers brought about feelings she hadn't even realized existed in the world. She knew there would never be another man for her after this one.

The kiss continued until they were both hot and breathing heavily with desire. "It's time to go back," Tyson said in a gravelly voice.

"I agree," she panted. They both knew what was going to happen once they returned to the hotel room.

Grabbing her hand, Tyson set off at a fast pace. Stopping at the hotel entrance, Tyson grabbed her back into his arms and kissed her again. He sucked her soul into his body and put some of his back into hers, tying them together. Forever.

Flushed, hot and horny, they got in the elevator with one other young couple, an older couple, and a grandfather with a young boy who sent them amused and knowing glances as Tyson kissed her the whole ride up. As they got off on the fifth floor, Tyson swept her up in his arms and carried her to the door, unlocked it, and maneuvered them inside, kicking the door shut behind him.

He set her down on the floor and held her head between his hands, making sure she saw the sincerity in his eyes. "I want you. I want to make love to you. Right here. Right now." His voice was so seductive.

"Yes," she said. "Yes." *Make love to you, not just a roll in the sack.* She wanted him so badly.

Tyson let go of her with one hand only to lock the door behind him and fasten the safety chain. Then those hands of his were back on her body. "I have wanted to do this ever since I saw you sitting under that umbrella sipping your drink. You are perfection." He slipped his hands up under her shirt, creating waves in her belly as his touch roamed higher and higher.

Her hands mimicked his movements. Soon she had his shirt off and was tracing those muscles again. "I think I am having a case of déjà vu."

"I want one as well," he said as her shirt was removed quickly followed by her bra. "Yes, I remember this." One hand cupped her breast, kneading it and teasing the nipple that had hardened beneath his touch. Tyson dropped his hands to her full hips and unfastened the button on her jeans, sliding them down her muscular legs.

Jayde kicked off her shoes and stepped out of her jeans. Her head fell back as his thumbs slipped under the elastic of her underwear. Soon they were pooled on the floor and she stood totally naked in front of him.

"Dear God, you're beautiful." Tyson picked her up and laid her on the bed. He was clothed just in his jeans and there was a definite ridge against her hip as he lay next to her. His mouth found hers as his hand traced its way from her shoulder to her hip and back again.

Jayde wrapped her arms around his neck, deepening the kiss as his touch created flames wherever it went. She moved her hands down his back, enjoying the rippling muscles she felt, and cupped his firm, jean-clad butt, garnering a groan from him.

She arched against him and he got the message. His jeans and boxers were gone in a flash, and all she felt was cool satin bedspread

beneath her and hot hard naked man above her. Jayde bit his lip as he slid two fingers inside her wet body.

His fingers found a tempo they liked and his tongue matched it within the warmth of her mouth. His hardened length pressed into her belly as she arched up off the bed in an explosive orgasm.

"I can't wait any longer," he whispered in her ear.

"Please...please...please." Jayde sounded like a broken record.

"I'm sorry it's not slower." He sucked her earlobe into his mouth, making love to her ear as he settled his weight between her spread legs.

"Now, Tyson, please!" Jayde begged, lifting her hips to help him gain entrance.

Groaning and removing his fingers from her wet core, Tyson slid the head of his throbbing erection into her. Inch by slow inch he filled her to capacity, allowing her to get used to the size. Her body was so tight.

All the way buried inside her, Tyson groaned again with pleasure as he nipped her shoulder before finding her mouth. "You feel so good..."

"Oh, God!" she mewled. It was heaven having this man deep within her. Just his touch was enough for her to have an orgasm; she'd had to work at it with George, and then most of the time it had been faked. She couldn't pretend it with Tyson if she tried.

He withdrew and slid back in, wresting another cry from her. As her internal muscles clenched about him, he began to move faster.

Jayde's moans quickly grew to pants, and then onto screams, as he drove into her lush body. Faster and faster. Deeper and deeper. Harder and harder.

A sheen of sweat covered them both and finally Jayde shouted as her nails raked down his back, drawing blood. He came right after her with a yell.

Tyson collapsed on her, his arms no longer able to hold him. He was shaking, as if his release had been powerful and intense. Jayde was feeling the same. Her body practically melted into the mattress. She didn't want to move; she *couldn't* move. Her arms flung out to her sides, she just breathed in the smell of sweat, sex, and Tyson. It was a very nice combination.

All too soon, he rolled off her body, taking with it the warmth and comfort she craved. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Never better. You?"

"Never better." He drew her body closer to his and kissed her, long and drawn out. She felt his flaccid member stir to life against her belly.

Jayde put one arm around his back and drew it away when she felt something wet that didn't feel like sweat. In the dim light of the room she saw red on her fingertips. She shot to a sitting position.

"Oh, my God! I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to do this." She jumped off the bed and hurried to the bathroom, coming out wearing the robe and carrying a warm washcloth.

"Do what?" Tyson asked as he began to turn over.

"No, don't turn around. Just lie there." As he complied, she pressed the warm cloth on his back.

"Drew some blood, huh?" he teased. "Glad I was good enough to get that reaction from you."

Smack! Jayde hit him in the shoulder. "Tyson!"

Faster than she could blink, Jayde found herself pinned under his body, his face millimeters away from hers. "Don't worry about it; I will wear them with pride."

"I should clean them," she said concernedly.

"You should kiss your husband," he uttered seductively.

Jayde dropped the washcloth on the bed as she eagerly put her mouth on his. "I suppose you get that reaction from all the women you take to bed, huh?" she mumbled against his lips.

"None who have meant anything to me. Until you."

"What does that mean?" Jayde demanded.

"Stop talking and kiss me." He took the decision from her and kissed her passionately.

The room phone began to trill. Tyson pulled back from her tempting mouth and looked at her. "Your phone is a menace. Who keeps calling you?"

"Probably another family member, wanting me to hear her problems or something like that. Checking up on me, making sure I don't have some man in my room with me..."

"Oh, yeah, wouldn't want a man in here with you, shackin' up or worse." He smacked her on the butt as she scrambled out from under him to answer the phone.

"Don't answer that," she hissed as she tried to get to it first.

"Hello?" He spoke into the phone. "Who is this? Wrong number." Then he hung up and dialed the front desk. "Don't transfer any more calls up here tonight. I want to sleep."

He hung up the phone to come face to face with an unnerved Jayde. "I can't believe you did that! I have to call home!" She moved towards her cell phone that had begun to ring.

She didn't get there. "No," Tyson interjected. "It's time for your family to let you have a life. They can call you during daylight." He took a hold of her hands and tugged her back to his body. "You aren't their slave, personal servant, or anything like that. Don't let them treat you as such."

As she looked into the eyes of the man who'd made fantastic love to her she realized he was right. Her family ran her life. All of them did. It felt like she had been taking care of them since she was old enough to cook. "Okay," she said, for once feeling strong enough to stand firm against them, as long as Tyson was with her.

"Now, where were we?" he growled as he pinned her on her back. "I think you are overdressed for what I have in mind." His hands untied the robe and opened it, revealing her hidden treasures to his lecherous gaze. "This is more like it."

Jayde and Tyson spent the rest of the night making love, sometimes gently and sometimes not so gently. They learned each other's bodies very well and finally succumbed to sleep as sunlight crested over the ocean.

Chapter Five

Tyson was in the shower when Jayde heard his phone ringing. It was the fifth time it had rang, so she answered it. "Hello?"

"Who is this?" a man demanded. "Where is Tyson?"

"In the shower. Do you want to hold on for a moment?"

"Young lady, who are you?"

"No one of consequence," she evaded.

"I disagree." Jayde turned and saw Tyson standing there with a towel tied around his waist.

Jayde smiled. "I didn't mean to cause problems, but it kept ringing." She handed him his phone.

"No problems." He took a kiss along with the phone. "Yeah?" he said as Jayde walked into the bathroom and took a shower to give him some privacy.

Some minutes later the door opened. "Tyson? Is that you?" she asked over the noise of the showerhead.

"Who else would it be?" he answered. He sounded so distracted to her.

"Not sure." She stuck her head out and peered at him. "What are you doing in here?"

"We need to talk."

He looked so serious for a moment that she became scared. "I'll be done in a moment," she promised, pulling her head back inside the shower. Jayde finished in record time. Tyson had handed her a towel and robe the moment she stepped out of the tub.

She followed him out into the bedroom. "What is it? What's happened?"

He turned those eyes on her and she just about cried. There was so much pain in them it hurt her. It scared her.

"Get dressed." He threw some jeans and a tee shirt at her. "Hurry."

Gone was the man who had loved her so thoroughly through the night, leaving behind someone she didn't recognize. "Excuse me?" Jayde asked in total confusion.

"We are leaving. Today. Get dressed." He walked to the window and peeked out behind the drawn drapery, frowning at something he saw down on the street.

Jayde moved her clothes to the side and sat down on a chair. "My vacation isn't over till tomorrow."

Hard eyes turned to her. "It's over now." His voice brooked no room for argument.

"Tyson, you're scaring me."

"Dammit, woman, get dressed!" he snapped. "We are going back to the preserve. You need to hurry."

Silently, she did as told. As she tied on her boots, she noticed him with her cell phone. "What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Is there anything you want from your stuff to take with you?"

"Yes, all of it. What are you doing with my phone?" Jayde asked again.

"You can get another one, once you are back in the States. Let's go." He grabbed a bag with her souvenirs in it. The phone was tossed on the bed in two pieces.

"I'm not leaving my phone or my stuff. Will you just talk to me?" She moved towards the bed and her phone. *Who was this man?*

"Leave it there." Tyson grabbed her hand and dragged her to the door.

Jayde began to struggle, a futile effort since he was so much stronger than she. Panic surfaced and a scream began to emerge from her throat. Tyson kissed her, covering the sound of her scream. His touch just as potent as it had been all through the night.

When he moved back from her mouth, he spoke very clearly in a low voice. "Listen to me. We have to go, now. You are in danger staying here; fighting me is only making it harder for me to save you." The disbelief must have shown in her eyes, for he touched her chin gently. "It's my fault you are in danger, but now it's also up to me to protect you. I won't let anything happen to you, but you have to trust me," Tyson spoke sincerely.

"Why am I in danger?" Dawning slowly came to her. "Does this have to do with the police that brought you here?"

"Yes, and I'm so sorry I dragged you into this. But let me get you out of it. You have to get back to the States. But we have to go immediately."

"I'm not going," she protested automatically, irrationally.

A look entered Tyson's eyes that told her she was wrong. "Don't make me force you. You are leaving right now; I'd just hoped it would be of your own volition. I will carry you out if I have to," he promised.

She knew every word he spoke was the truth. Jayde withdrew into her shell. "Fine." She opened the door and began to walk out before him.

"Let me go first," he muttered, shouldering past her. He also had a bag.

Their bags in one hand, Tyson used his other strong hand to grip her arm and lead her down the hallway to the back stairs. Jayde didn't know this version of Tyson Kincade; and yet she still felt safe with his touch, regardless of what was currently happening between them.

He blended them in a crowd of people going down the stairs and walked with them outside as if they were a part of the group. Once everyone was on the bus, it left for the preserve. Jayde felt him look over to her but she refused to meet his gaze.



Upon reaching the preserve, Tyson and Jayde got off in the middle of the crowd and immediately went towards one of the preserve's trails. Soon it was just the two of them in the rainforest walking, in silence, rapidly along the trails.

They continued walking at that fast pace for about four hours until Jayde ran into his back when he'd abruptly stopped walking at the edge of the clearing and looked over the meadow.

"We wait." Was all he said as he moved them off the trail and into the jungle, erasing all proof of their existence.

Jayde was confused but she knew from his expression he didn't want her to talk. He seemed in tune with the sounds that surrounded them. She was scared. Her bag was close to her chest as she tried to breathe slowly. She sensed him watching her intently, and she tried to put up a brave front. However, her husband must have recognized her distress, for he leaned against a tree and gestured for her to come to him.

She did as ordered. Way out of her element here, all she could think of were the poisonous snakes and spiders. Snakes weren't so bad, but she had a severe case of arachnophobia. Even fake spiders scared her to the point of hyperventilation.

He settled her between his legs, her back resting against his chest. Tyson wrapped his arms around her and absorbed some of her shaking. They sat like that for hours more. Jayde lost track of time as the skies became dark. The rain began to fall, causing her to shiver from the cold, even though covered with the poncho that Tyson had produced. Not only that, she had to pee, but she remained quiet. Jayde had her eyes closed so she couldn't see the creatures that she believed were closing in on her.

Something about her behavior must have concerned Tyson. He lowered his head, water running from his hair to hers, and whispered into her ear, "It's going to be all right." He glanced at his watch and added, "Not much longer now."

Her body was stiff. She was cold, frightened, drenched, and had a full bladder. Jayde began to rock her body from side to side when he stiffened behind her. She cringed with fear, her body just about giving out on her. Blood mixed with the rain as she bit her lip so hard to make sure she didn't make a sound.

"Come on," he said as she felt herself being pulled up. "That's going to be our ride." He took her bag from her nerveless fingers and carried it. She still wore the poncho, for all the good it was doing her.

Ride? She didn't hear anything. Still she forced her eyes open and squinted against the torrential downpour that had turned the ground into nothing but mud, mud that seemed to suck at more than just her boots, taking with it some of her innocence. Barely making out Tyson's tall form in front of her, she followed him back onto the trail and out into the open meadow where he began to run.

Jayde saw a helicopter sitting there in the middle of the tall grass. Five figures holding guns were illuminated with every flash of lightning. Trepidation froze her feet to the ground; she couldn't move.

Tyson turned back around to see her stopped in her tracks. She heard the yells over the chopper and rain clearly enough and saw him look at the other end of the meadow where headlights from a Jeep were speeding towards their location. He swore as he yelled, "Jayde, come to me!"

His voice seemed to penetrate her haze. She wiped her eyes and saw his shadow. She began to run, her boots slipping in the mire, the large poncho entangling about her legs, but she never stopped. She continued to run straight to the man with whom she felt safe. As she reached him, Jayde would have sworn she saw pride in his gaze as he locked eyes with her and gestured her on towards the chopper.

This time he paced himself with her, seeming to understand that she needed him there. "Keep your head low," he shouted as they got up to the vehicle. Jayde barely had time to look at the men or their weapons before a strong arm reached out and lifted her up into the chopper, Tyson jumping in right after her as the shots broke out. The men outside returned fire on the Jeep as they climbed back into the chopper.

Jayde saw flashes of light coming from the muzzles of the guns before she was sandwiched in between Tyson and another person she didn't know. She felt the helicopter moving and soon they were flying.

There were nine other men in the interior and all of them were looking at her with blatant curiosity. She shrank against Tyson's wet yet safe body, not noticing the knowing smiles that passed among the crew as his strong arms lifted her to a sitting position, removed her drenched poncho, and maneuvered her back between his legs before covering them both with a dry blanket, effectively hiding her curvaceous body from their gazes. The chopper flew for some time; and as the warmth penetrated her body, pushing the remnants of the adrenaline out, she felt herself beginning to dose off. The last she remembered was a set of lips brushing a gentle kiss on the top of her head.

Jayde awoke slowly. Her whole body ached with a stiffness she didn't understand. She knew she was in a bed, but where, she didn't know. Her brown eyes opened slowly and took in her surroundings.

The room was small, just the bed and a chair in it. There were no windows and a dim overhead light bulb allowed her to see. She sat up in bed and realized she wore no clothes. Gripping the sheet around her nude body, she edged towards the one open door that led to the bathroom. As she passed the chair, she saw some clothes on it, so Jayde grabbed them and took them with her.

Finally relieving her full bladder, she decided to take a shower and loosen up her tight muscles. Jayde locked the bathroom door and even brought the chair in and wedged it under the doorknob before she felt remotely safe enough.

She washed quickly and dried off before picking up the clothes she'd snagged. The bra and panties were her size and looked new. The shirt was a little large but it would work. Jayde eyed the pants; they were ugly olive green khakis, but they fit. She put on the black socks and tied off the pants around her ankles.

Looking at her reflection in the mirror, Jayde curled her lip over her hair; then she looked down and saw a brush and scrunchie along with

an unopened toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste. There was also a stick of deodorant and a jar of baby powder, both of which she used. She brushed her teeth and combed her hair, putting it up in a ponytail with the scrunchie.

Just before she unwedged the chair from the door, she noticed the ring on her finger. Its silvery glow halted her for a moment. Nevertheless, she finished moving the chair. For some reason, she couldn't bring herself to take off the band.

She walked back into the small room, armed with the chair. Tyson stood in the doorway and behind him were about four other male heads trying to look around him and see into the room.

Tyson smiled briefly. "Morning Jayde," he said.

"Where am I?" she queried, stopping and watching him warily.

"At a remote safe house. We will get you back to the States soon."

Safe house? Back to the States soon? "I used the toothbrush and stuff in there."

Tyson moved towards her, yet she kept the chair between them. "I got it all for you. Glad the clothes fit."

"Right. Where are *my* clothes?"

"I had them washed."

Jayde's head tilted to the side as she peered around him into the faces of leering strangers. "I see." She didn't really. Silently dismissing the men behind Tyson, she turned her attention back to her husband. He seemed well rested. Tall and imposing, he stood watching her with those damn eyes of his that seemed to have gold flecks in them today. For some reason, the more she looked at this man, the more defined his muscles became, for he appeared to be larger than she remembered.

She could smell his aftershave. His black shirt was indecently tight, pulled tautly across his muscular chest and shoulders, and tucked into a pair of pants like hers. Yet on him, they looked amazing. He also wore black combat boots on his feet; every inch of him looking dangerously hot.

His hair still wasn't trimmed and it fell about his head like he'd been running his fingers through it, as if worried about something. Jayde felt her body grow damp with desire as she looked upon him. She just couldn't shake the images of him poised above her, sliding into her, taking her to ecstasy. Over and over again.

Her eyes darkened with desire and her breathing changed. She hoped the others couldn't see her reaction.

"Are you hungry?" he asked, stepping closer to her.

"Yes," she said as her gaze moved up and down his body unashamedly.

"Good. Breakfast is out here." Tyson reached out his left hand and she saw the flash of his ring before she placed her hand in his.

Jayde couldn't explain how comforting it was to see that ring on his finger. She felt secure and easily walked towards him, stepping from behind the chair. Oblivious to everyone else there, he kissed her before leading her out to the main room. It was brief, but it was enough to convey his feelings to Jayde.

She saw five guys lounging around the living area. They were all dressed similarly to Tyson, but to her, none looked as good. Each of them looked at her inquisitively. Tyson went to the kitchen island and began fixing her a plate; the few who weren't watching her observed him with amazement. Jayde wondered why.

A tall, dark, handsome man stood and walked toward her. He flowed like water. "Well, well, well..." he began. "Aren't you going to introduce us, Cade?"

Cade? She thought his name was Tyson! Jayde looked over at him and saw a scowl on his face. "Leave her alone, Maverick."

The tall man ignored him. "Hello, there--"

"Maverick!" Tyson had a threat in his voice. "Leave her alone."

Again the directive was dismissed. "What's your name?" Maverick kept looking at her. He was very suave.

"Your plate is ready," Tyson interrupted them and looking directly at Jayde. "Come eat."

She glanced back at Tyson then stuck out her hand at the man who was in front of her. "Jayde. My name is Jayde."

"Mine is Maverick, my dear. But if you call, I will answer to anything." He winked at her as he shook her hand.

Jayde thought Tyson might say something about their sham of a marriage but he kept his mouth shut and glared, giving her a small stab of disappointment. With a small smile, she took her hand back and went to Tyson who held out her chair for her, before he had to take a phone call.

The rest of the men came over and introduced themselves. All but one flirted with her, putting her at ease. The blond man named Scott just watched her. Jayde noticed that the more flirting they did, the more pissed off Tyson appeared to become. Maverick was the worst of the lot; straddling a chair next to her, he kept up a steady conversation.

The second his dark hand reached for a piece of fruit on Jayde's plate, Tyson reacted. His hand closed over Maverick's wrist, halting his movement. "Enough. Leave her alone, Maverick," he growled. "In fact, all of you leave her alone."

Maverick stood and met Tyson glare for glare. "Why should I?"

"Aside from the fact I said so? Because she is *my wife!*" Tyson snapped.

The room fell so quiet it was as if breathing had ceased. Each of the five men tried to close their open mouths but couldn't seem to do so. Maverick raised an eyebrow but backed off silently.

"What did you say?" Scott asked. Jayde couldn't tell if there was disgust in his voice or just plain surprise.

"I said," Tyson ground out. "Jayde is my wife. Respect her, protect her; just remember she is not up for grabs."

"Well, damn," another voice piped in, "I didn't expect you to get married especially after the whole fiasco with..." it fell silent after the man gained five glares. But it was too late; Jayde had caught on.

One of the others, Dimitri, stood and walked over with a half grin on his face. "Well, hell, congratulations! Welcome to the family, Jayde." He placed a quick kiss on her cheek and shook Tyson's hand. The others offered congratulatory speeches for Tyson as well.

Jayde felt uncomfortable with the looks she was receiving from everyone so she tucked her head and dug into her food. She vaguely remembered hearing a phone ring and someone tell Tyson it was for him.

After she finished with her food, she sat a while longer. Tyson was still on the phone and the other men were standing in groups talking to one another. Finally she slipped away into the small room, shutting and locking the door behind her before climbing into the bed and succumbing to tears.

He obviously had someone else in his life. Why did that make her so sad? When was she going to get home? The events of the past few days were just too much and she fell apart.

Tyson got off the phone with his supervisor in the counterterrorism unit. They'd been briefed and understood his need to keep Jayde protected since he'd claimed her as his own. They would set her up with an apartment wherever she wanted to go and a joint bank account into which part of his checks would be deposited.

Now, all he had to do was explain to Jayde they were really married, and he didn't plan on divorcing her. Then he'd tell her about the apartment and the joint account. That should go over *real* well. Finally, he would tell her he was a Navy SEAL who'd just been cleared to go back on duty, so he'd be leaving for indefinite periods of time to destinations he couldn't disclose. Yep, should be a piece of cake...which was exactly why he was still sitting by the phone.

If he were honest with himself, he would admit he was scared shitless. He was scared she'd demand a divorce, say she never wanted to see him again, and tell him she hated him. A woman had never meant more to him, and he'd known her less than ninety-six hours, but he knew her mark was upon him forever.

When Tyson came back to the present he didn't see her at the table and stood immediately. His friends had knowing looks on their faces as they gestured to the bedroom. His heart slowly began to beat normally. Tyson went to the bedroom door and tried the knob. Locked.

He knocked again and when he didn't receive an answer, he unlocked the door with the key. A soft smile crossed his face as he saw her curled up in a small ball on the bed, the pillow clutched to her chest.

"Jayde," he said quietly. "Jayde, I have to talk to you." He shut the door behind him so it was just the two of them.

"Go away," she mumbled, gathering the pillow closer to her face.

"Not until we talk." He sat down on the bed and frowned as she scooted away from him. "Look at me," he ordered.

"Go away."

"No," he said.

"We have nothing to say to one another until you get me back to someplace I recognize." The pillow muffled her voice.

"Would you stop talking to the pillow and look at me?"

"No!" Jayde had responded so fast it seemed his words hadn't even faded from the air before she'd refused his request.

"No?"

"No." If anything, her grip on the pillow tightened.

"Don't make me take it from you," Tyson whispered.

"Just leave me alone whoever you are!"

That time he heard the tears. "I'm your husband, Tyson Randolph Kincade. Come on, Jayde look at me," he coaxed.

That got a response. She sat up in bed and threw the pillow at him before presenting him with her back again. "No, you aren't my husband! Who the hell is Cade?" she snapped.

"Fine," he growled, pissed solely because she said he wasn't her husband. He forced her onto her back and straddled her body. Tyson smiled when he saw her eyes closed tightly, a smile that faltered as he saw the tear stains on her cheeks. "Cade is my nickname, what the men call me. Look at me."

She wordlessly shook her head, then she began to struggle. It was nothing for him to subdue her, but he didn't want to. Nevertheless, he gathered both her wrists in one of his hands and slid his other one behind her head to bring her mouth to meet his.

Tyson caught the moan he knew she didn't want him to hear. As her bucking body began to rub against him, he let go of her wrists and raised her shirt.

Jayde fumbled with the buttons on his pants. Her eyes opened and found his direct gaze on her. He read the barefaced need in her eyes and stripped them both of their clothes in record time, his mouth covering hers as he slid deep within her welcoming heat.

Her fingers dug into his back, her legs clenched around his waist, Tyson made love to his wife of two and a half days like a man possessed with a portion of his SEAL team out in the living room of a house in the middle of the Belizean rainforest. His mouth captured every one of her moans and whimpers. He knew she wanted it faster, but he refused.

For what seemed liked forever, Tyson kept her on edge as he just slid in and out of her with smooth, deliberate strokes. Fresh tears fell from her eyes and his thumbs wiped them away as he moved within her.

With the two of them like this, the outside world didn't exist. There was no family, no jobs, no problems – no anything. Just them. Him and her. Together as one. How it was supposed to be.

It got to be too much and his pace quickened, sending them both over the edge. The squeaking of the bed frame did not register to either one of them, though it was easily heard by the rest of the men in the house who just smiled. Once again, Jayde drew blood while Tyson screamed a release into her mouth. Kissing her again, he slid out of her body and covered them both with blankets, spooning their bodies.

"I love you, Jayde," he whispered as he too fell under the lure of the sandman.

Chapter Six

A deep voice intruded on their slumber. "Wake up you two, the plane is ready to go."

Jayde and Tyson woke up. They were lying on their right sides. Tyson had his left hand resting with hers, showing their identical rings to the man who had awoken them.

Jayde still hurt. Having only made love a few times before she met him, he'd worn out every one of her muscles. The sex she'd had pre-Tyson was nothing like it was now; he made her totally involved as opposed to being merely "there." The hiking they had done earlier had helped to fatigue her, but it was the intensity of their lovemaking that had really done her in. As she looked over her shoulder, she noticed what seemed to be all of the men standing around the bed grinning at them. She gasped and shrank closer to Tyson with embarrassment, pulling the blanket up over her face. She hoped they would all just disappear. How would she ever face them again?

"Get out, guys," Tyson grumbled. He looked down at Jayde's darker body next to his tan one and the glare he'd been sporting turned softer and gentler.

"Well come on now, Cade, we were concerned that she might have killed you when you came in and didn't leave for a few hours. Then again, I think we can see that you would've died a happy man." A round of male laughter filled the room.

"Out!" Tyson yelled.

"Okay, only since we see your clothes all over the room. The plane is ready to go." The last sentence was a bit more sober. But they all filed out of the room, shutting the door behind them.

"Come on, let's get dressed," Tyson said as he climbed out of bed, seemingly totally at ease with his nudity. Jayde inched to the edge, holding the blanket around her like a shield. Tyson arched an eyebrow at her action. "What are you doing?"

"Going to the bathroom," she said as she picked up her scattered clothing. Jayde wouldn't look at him as he stood there putting on his boxers and then his pants.

"And the blanket is...what...part of your outfit?" he asked.

"Something like that." She backed into the chair and stumbled, barely managing to recover the blanket before it dropped to the floor.

"You do realize that I have seen you naked already?" Tyson reminded her as he strode towards her in nothing but his pants.

"That was different," she protested as she tried not to become aroused by the way his pants hugged his lean hips — tried and failed.

Tyson stepped on the edge of the blanket and crossed his arms over his chiseled chest as he shook his head. "Don't think so."

Jayde kept backing up but couldn't get to the bathroom since he was on the corner of the blanket. "Do you mind?" She nodded in the direction of his foot.

"Not at all." He just looked at her and blinked his hazel eyes. "Go on and get dressed. I'll wait here."

"Can you get off the blanket?"

"I could but I don't want to. Why are you so embarrassed?" Tyson wondered.

"I don't know, I just am. Will you close your eyes?"

Tyson knew it would take longer than a few days to understand his woman, but he decided to grant her a brief reprieve. "Sure." He shut them almost all the way and it took all of his willpower not to grin as he watched her drop the blanket and bolt for the sanctuary of the bathroom. God, his wife was a beauty. His wife, he didn't think he would ever get tired of saying that.

"Are you ready in there?" A voice came through the door.

"Almost, she's just in the bathroom," Tyson answered as he tugged his shirt on over his head. "Come on in if you need to." He sat on the bed and put on his socks and boots as his best friend on the team entered.

Scott "Harrier" Leighton was tall and extremely muscular with blond hair and blue eyes. With a quick glance at the bathroom door he turned back to his friend. "I have to say, Cade, we were very surprised with the news of your marriage." He pulled the chair up beside the bed and straddled it, facing his friend.

"It was quick," Tyson admitted.

"How long have you known her?"

Two and a half days. Blinking away his thought Tyson answered, "Long enough Harrier, why the questions?"

"Because I was the one who picked up the pieces with you after Carrie. You do remember your words to me, right? 'I will never be that

involved with a woman again.' And she was only a fiancée. You married this one. Carrie was only four months ago; sure you aren't just on the rebound?"

"Jayde saved me down here in Belize. And it was over long before it ended with Carrie, you know that. Hell, man, I hadn't even slept with her in a little more than a year."

"So you married Jayde out of gratitude?" Harrier's eyes glanced towards the door, content that the shower was still running.

"No, that was how we, well I, made it out. We had to renew our vows or I was going to be back in interrogation and this time it wouldn't have been just the uncomfortable shackles and high heat that they hit me with."

"And once you're back in the States? Don't take this the wrong way, but there is the color difference."

"So?" Tyson's voice grew dangerous. "What about it?"

"I'm just saying. What do you really know about her? Her family?"

"I will do whatever is necessary to protect her," Tyson said. He should have known Harrier didn't mean anything bad about color. His friend was in love with a stunning black woman himself, just hadn't managed to convince her they were meant to be yet.

"Meaning, you are going to help her get set up somewhere in the States?" Harrier paused. "Does she know what you do?"

"She knows about the counterterrorism unit. That's it." Tyson looked at the bathroom door.

"You know what is best for you, so if you are happy, then so am I. All I am going to say is this: Carrie has been hanging back around. She told all of us how much she misses you and realizes what a mistake she made. Apparently, that guy she was with has started to hit her."

"Is she all right? Has she left him?" Tyson was a staunch defender of women. Regardless of his past with Carrie, he would still protect her against a man who beat her.

"She says she is waiting for you to come back home..." Harrier paused again. "Then she will leave him."

"I have to get her away from him."

Harrier nodded solemnly, then a grin crossed his handsome face as he put up one booted foot on the bed frame. "Sounded like you were having fun in here," he quipped as he shoved his foot, bringing the loud squeak the metal frame made to Tyson's attention.

Tyson smiled and nodded. He hadn't realized the others had heard them. "Don't tell Jayde; she would be so embarrassed."

"Not my place to say anything. But I can't vouch for the rest of the men," Harrier said with a grin, and Tyson knew full well he'd already ordered the men to keep their mouths shut about it.

"Oh! I didn't know anyone was out here!" Jayde exclaimed as moved towards her boots. She hoped she came off as surprised, yet nonchalant, although she was anything but. They'd heard the bed squeaking; her face flamed with embarrassment. But it was what *she'd* heard while drying off in the bathroom that knocked the wind out of her sails... the little she had left.

"Just came in to see if you were ready to go, ma'am," Scott said politely, standing.

"Ready to go home? Definitely." She smiled and nodded at them both as she picked up her bag of "souvenirs", though admittedly there wasn't much since Tyson had made her hightail it out her hotel. Jayde was determined not to show Tyson or Scott how much was she hurt and mortified.

Tyson put his hand on the small of her back and guided her out of the house to an awaiting Jeep. With a nod to Scott and the rest of the men, he and Jayde got in the back and drove off into the darkness.

"Jayde, I have to talk to you," he said as they bounced along on a dirt road.

"What?" *Why does my voice sound so broken?*

"We have contacted your parents and told them you would come home late."

"You what?" she screeched.

"Don't worry. My boss told them you were imperative to our operation here in Belize, and that he loved working with you and has offered you a job," Tyson continued calmly.

Jayde was astonished. "Why?"

"So you can decide where you want to move. An apartment will be reserved for you and you can paint. Go wherever you want in the States. He said he would tell your parents you are working in an office there," Tyson said as he looked across the dark Jeep at her profile.

"I don't need you to do that," she protested as she remembered the love he had in his voice for the woman named Carrie. She'd heard it when he and Scott had been talking earlier; she'd unwittingly caught the tail end of that conversation as she'd finished her shower. Besides, being indebted to him was not what she wanted.

You want him, her mind screamed.

"Trust me; they are grateful for the help you gave us. As am I. Those men I encountered are part of a cell that we have been after. This is the least my employers could do."

She had a chance to go wherever she wanted. "Where do you live Tyson?" *What is this "cell" you are after, this whole terrorist thing?*

"I have an apartment in Washington, D.C. Why?" Tyson asked.

"Just wondering. I want to go to Washington...state." She nodded and reaffirmed her decision. "The Seattle area."

"Okay, do you want to go home and see your parents first?"

Jayde tried to not to cry; he didn't sound the least bit sad she'd chosen a place clear across the country from him. "No. I should go get my things from New York, though."

"Don't worry about it. They will be moved for you. A two bedroom good enough for you?"

"Perfect." Jayde smiled. She had some money set aside and she'd just have to dig into that. "Just make sure it doesn't cost an outrageous amount to rent."

"Right." He leaned over and whispered something to the man in the front passenger's seat, who immediately got on a phone. "We will send you to Seattle, then."

"Okay." Part of her didn't want to accept, but the part that had suffered the fear in the jungle did.

"I just want to tell you that I am very proud of you, for the way you handled yourself from the second we met."

Jayde avoided his eyes, her smile turning tremulous. "Well, it certainly has been an adventure. Thanks for taking care of me." Tyson pulled a card out of his wallet. There were some numbers on it. Jayde looked at it closely in the dark and back at him. "What is this for?"

"If you need to get in contact with me and I am not close by."

"I'm sure I'll be fine. Besides, you will be too busy saving the country to have time for me." Jayde said, proud her voice didn't waver.

"We are going to D.C. first," he said as the Jeep stopped. They walked to the waiting plane.

"Okay." She buckled herself in as the plane taxied off down the packed dirt strip. It didn't even look like an airport, but Jayde didn't feel like asking questions. All she knew was she was going home.

Tyson watched as his wife settled into a seat and closed her eyes. He still didn't know how he was going to let her go. The place in Seattle would be taken care of by him. He tried to listen to what Harrier

was saying to him, but all he could focus on was the woman sleeping across the plane from him. Carrie was nothing but a distant memory, and if he wanted to be completely honest with himself, had been for a while before he kicked her out.

He ran his hand over his face and swore. Jayde had become his heart and he didn't want to lose her: the way her face sparkled as she climbed over rocks and jumped streams. How she loved the outdoors. Her strength. Her beauty. Her love. Maybe she would consent to move to Washington D.C. and stay at his place.

As he sat here he realized how little he actually knew about her. Tyson knew she loved to paint, but he didn't know what she painted, or with what. And he still wanted to know what she'd been thinking the day he'd met her when she'd licked her lips with that heated look in her eyes. That amount of passion in a woman deserved to be released by a man who would appreciate it to the fullest extent...like him.

Tyson laced his fingers and studied her sleeping form. Her dark skin was smooth and blemish free. Her full lips felt perfect against his. The roundness of her body hid the muscles that made her such a joy to watch outside. And she possessed perfect ass.

But her eyes...dear Lord...her eyes were a weapon. Those dark-brown orbs dragged a man into them and didn't let him go.

He wanted to be the one who helped her find whatever she was looking for. He wanted to protect her from her overbearing family. *Who would keep the men away from her when he was not around?* Tyson growled low as he thought of her, his wife, going out with other men.

All of a sudden there was a loud explosion, jolting the plane with a terrific force. Jayde bolted awake with panic all over her face. She immediately looked for Tyson. He was heading for the cockpit. The entire plane was shaking; it felt like it was going to fall apart at the seams.

Jayde saw black smoke billowing across the window. She couldn't tell where it was coming from. All she knew was that she was petrified.

"Jayde!" Tyson's strong voice caught her attention.

"What is going on, Tyson? What's happening?" Her dark eyes were wide with fear as she looked into the remarkably calm ones of Tyson Kincade.

"We've been hit. The plane is going down; we have to bail." He was strapping on a pack while telling her this.

Jayde shook her head in fervent denial. *Bail? Hell no.* She wasn't jumping out of a plane! "What about the pilot, can't he just make an emergency landing or something?" Hysterical tears had begun forming in her eyes.

"The pilot's dead." Tyson staggered back out of her line of sight for a moment until he heard her scream. He knelt down in front of her, holding onto the arms of her chair. "Listen to me. I need you to stand up and put this on." He gestured to a pack that was beside him.

"I can't jump from a plane! I can't do it!" She shook her head to emphasize her words.

He stroked her cheek as the plane dropped again, sending her stomach up into her throat, "Yes, you can. I will be holding onto you the whole way. We don't have much time. Let's get you ready." Tyson unbuckled her seatbelt and made her stand.

Even though Jayde began putting on the pack on, she stopped as Tyson kicked out the door. *She was going to die and he was so damn calm.* He struggled against the turbulence back over to her and helped her secure the pack. "I want you to keep as still as you can. Wrap your arms and legs around me and don't let go," he yelled over the noise.

You are going to have to pry me off with a crowbar! She nodded her understanding. There were flames from the cockpit making their way back to the main cabin. Thick smoke choked her, especially with her breaths coming so short anyway. Tyson anchored her body to his so they were chest to chest and snapped a few belts around them. It was awkward for her to walk with him like that; but soon, too soon for Jayde, they were at the door.

The cold air sucked at her clothes, making her shiver even more. "Hold onto me. Don't let go," Tyson repeated as he backed up to the open door.

Jayde gripped his neck and his waist like a leech. Tyson made doubly sure she wouldn't be in the way of the chute when it opened and looked in her dark eyes one more time. "Ready?"

Jayde looked away and nodded into his neck even as she croaked out the word, "No."

Tyson fell out of the plane. Jayde's arms tightened around his neck as they hurtled to the earth. "Hold on! we are going to jerk!" he yelled so she could hear. Then he pulled the chute.

Jayde barely moved, her grip was so tight. Both heard the whistle of a missile before it hit the plane. They could feel the heat from the blast

as the night sky was momentarily lit up as bright as day. Jayde was beyond shocked. She trembled even more, but her grip never wavered.

The rest of the trip down was silent except for Jayde's quiet sobs. "We are about to land, get ready." Tyson told her. They landed in a tree, the branches smacking them both; Jayde hid her face in his chest to keep it safe until they lurched to a stop.

For a moment they hung from the tree. They were both breathing hard. The branch cracked and then broke. They plummeted down into the dark jungle terrain.

Jayde slowly opened her eyes. Every bone in her body felt broken. With careful motions, she moved each of her limbs at a snail's pace to see if anything was broken. She knew how to do that; she'd been taught when she learned how to rock climb. By her assessment nothing was, she was just badly bruised. She sat up and looked around in the dark; it smelled of rain, humidity and death.

"Tyson," she croaked out in a whisper. "Tyson, can you hear me?" Nothing but the chirping of the night creatures answered her. She waited as her eyes became a bit more adjusted; it looked like she had fallen down into a ravine. Her head was killing her and her gaze was fuzzy, so she could be totally off on that observation.

A small distance away from her she saw a dark shape. Immediate panic set in before she recalled that she'd worn a pack when she jumped. That foreign object was the right size and shape. She got it and then backed herself back up to a tree... snakes and spiders lived in trees.

Spiders! Oh, dear God! She was beginning to hyperventilate. Jayde opened the pack and found a small flashlight, which she didn't want to use for fear of actually seeing a spider, blankets, knives, and what felt like two guns at the bottom.

Jayde took one of the blankets, wrapped herself up tightly in a cocoon, and leaned against the tree. The bag was in front of her and a knife was in her hand. Rocking herself as she did when she grew scared, Jayde settled down for the night, her blanketed body terrified under the canopy of the jungle and her mouth muttering a litany that was on a never-ending loop: "He'll come for me, he'll find me...."



Tyson struggled to surface, not believing he would die in the water. Then he realized it was just the cool nylon material of the parachute that buried him. Ripping it off, he sat up. *Jayde!* Where was she?

"Jayde?" he whispered. "Jayde?!" he yelled to the jungle, only getting squawks from the birds and screeches from the monkeys as a response. Tyson swore; this was all his fault. After making sure he didn't suffer any broken bones he stood, automatically checking his weapon and gathering the chute.

Touching his head, he felt warm stickiness and knew he was bleeding...or Jayde had bled onto him. He had to find her. For a moment he began to panic until he realized he would find her faster if he were calm. "She's smart, Cade; she'll stay where she is until you find her," he told himself.

Wincing, he slowly began walking, glancing his watch and seeing he'd been unconscious for a few hours. Tyson stopped, hearing something. Water, rushing water. It was below him, sounding like there was a ravine or gulley to his right. It was too dangerous for him to go off right now. He was still a bit disoriented and it would start to get light in less than an hour.

"Hang on, baby. I'm coming," he said as he cleaned up his few cuts and scrapes with the small med kit he had in one of his pants pockets.

The second he could see past his fingertips he was ready to go. He remembered the branch breaking, and she'd been in his arms then. So if he landed here than that meant...his gaze took him to the edge of the ravine. That meant Jayde had probably gone over.

With a prayer to a god he didn't worship anymore, Tyson scanned the ground for signs of travel. A broken branch caught his attention and he began going down cautiously. He found one of the belts he'd used around her waist to tie them together.

"Jayde!" he shouted. "Honey, answer me if you can hear me!" Nothing. He muttered as he climbed down further, "Come on, little rose, give me a hint of where you are." He didn't wish to yell anymore in case he would be overheard by one of the men searching for them.

His sharp ears caught the faint sound of a noise that didn't belong in the jungle. He followed it. Moving silently, he couldn't understand what it was. Tyson came to an area that had three large trees blocking a sharp drop-off to the water; against one of them, he saw a huddled figure totally covered by a blanket.

It was Jayde. He knew it. He almost fainted from the relief he felt, not realizing he'd been that tense. The pack was in front of her, and she

was rocking back and forth, mumbling to herself. This time he made out what she was saying. "He'll come for me, he'll find me...."

"You're damn right I'll come for you. Jayde, honey, it's me," Tyson said as he jumped down the rest of the way.

Chapter Seven

Jayde felt the tears come in waves as she heard and saw Tyson appear in front of her. He had some blood on him; but it didn't matter, none of it mattered. He'd found her. She believed she'd heard him, but she hadn't been sure enough to yell back.

She dropped the knife and blanket and launched herself straight into his arms. He was so strong and safe. There'd been no doubt in her mind that he would catch her. "Tyson," she cried. "I didn't think I would see you again! I was so scared!" Her breaths came sharp as she attempted to get them under control. Her entire body shook as she tried to crawl into his skin.

"Oh, little rose, I was so scared I lost you." When he tried to pull back and look at her, she wouldn't let him, clutching him tighter. "Are you hurt anywhere?"

"No," she said. At least not physically. Jayde began to sob uncontrollably. She buried face into his chest, soaking his shirt with wave after wave of salty tears.

She felt his head lower next to hers and heard him whisper, "It's all right now. I'm here." He rubbed her back. As they stood there, Jayde realized his heart had been beating outrageously fast. He'd been worried for her. Tyson pulled away from her and forced her chin up so she could meet his gaze. "We have to move. They will be coming to search for us."

"How?"

"The fireball the plane made when it exploded would have illuminated the chute, so they could have an idea of where to begin their search."

Jayde didn't want to hear that from him. She moved back from the sanctuary of his arms and picked up the blanket that had protected her all night. She wrapped it around her body before sitting back down beside the tree. In the early daylight, the jungle was beautiful. The man across from her, on the other hand, looked deadly. He had a gun on him that she hadn't noticed before.

Tyson moved to the pack to give her a minute to compose herself. He pulled out two guns. The first was a Glock 21 that he checked before putting in a magazine and slipping it in the waistband of his pants. The second one was a Browning High Power Mk2 that he also checked and loaded, and then he cast his hazel gaze on Jayde.

"Can you shoot?" he asked, his eyes never wavering.

She hesitated with her answer. "Yes. Father made sure I could."

"Good, take this one." He handed her the lighter gun, the Glock. "Be careful with that."

Oblivious to his watchful gaze, she made sure the safety was on before she copied Tyson's movement and shoved it in the waistband of her pants so it rested against the small of her back. "What is that?" She nodded at the one he had around his chest.

"This is a Spectre H4 sub-machine gun, fully automatic," Tyson said even as he tossed her another magazine clip for her gun. "That's all the ammo we have so don't waste it."

Jayde slipped the extra clip into one of the pockets on her pants. "Right." Her hands were shaking and she wrapped the blanket back around her tightly. "Where are we, Tyson?"

He answered quickly and somberly. "I don't know."

"Those people, the ones who blew up the plane...what do they want?" Her guileless dark eyes were on him, peering into his soul as she questioned him. Asking for a way out.

"To kill us." Tyson cursed himself. Why was he saying this to her? Why was he being so blunt? As he watched his wife nod, he realized why he was...she expected nothing less than the whole unrestrained truth from him.

"Are we going to make it?"

Tyson met her eyes and walked over to her, crouching down on his haunches so they were eye level. He took her hands in his strong lean ones. "Jayde, I am going to do my damndest to get you home. I swear it."

Jayde nodded. "Okay, I believe you." A very shaky smile appeared on her face as she stood and looked down at him with a half teasing look in her eyes. "But if this is your idea of a honeymoon, we are going to have to have a serious talk. Or, I want a divorce."

The tension flowed away from his body as he chuckled and shook his head. This woman—his woman—was amazing. "You can pick the place for the honeymoon. No divorce." He rose to his feet and gave her a quick, encouraging kiss.

Jayde glanced at the man beside her. She noticed how he calculatingly scoped the terrain. He looked just short of comfortable with the situation. There was a spark in his eyes and an arrogant tilt to his head that seemed like a challenge—a challenge to those who followed them.

"You seem mighty comfortable out here...for a man who works in D.C., you know...for a counterterrorism unit," she observed.

"I am. I'm a SEAL, Jayde. That was...is...my first job." Tyson knelt down beside his wife's leg and tied on a sheath for the knife, then mimicked the motion on his own leg.

Of course you are. "Right. My ass is dropped in the damn jungle with a city boy who turns out to be part of one of the most elite military groups in our country. Well, lucky me," she snapped. Then she moved away from him and began to reroll the blanket before shoving it back into the pack. Jayde knew she should be happy—hell, she should be relieved!—but for some strange reason, she was hurt he hadn't told her who he really was.

"Believe me, I wanted to tell you. I just never found the right time," he tried as he took the pack she shoved at him.

"And why would you, I mean...we meet and by one the next morning we are 'renewing' our flippin' vows in front of a priest! Then we have to leave unexpectedly and you drag me with you. I completely understand that you didn't have time in all that to say, 'well, I'm a Navy SEAL!'" Jayde's voice had risen as she paced back and forth. "It's not like I didn't ask you at *dinner* that first night what you did. But maybe that was a bit of information you were saving for the *fifth* day that we knew each other."

"You're right." His calm response filled the air. Jayde stopped pacing and stared warily at him as he put the pack on his back, making sure the gun was not hindered. "I should have told you. I just wanted to know if someone would like me for me and not because I am a Navy SEAL. I didn't want you to be another groupie. I'm sorry." Tyson stood in front of her. "Forgive me?" he coaxed as his eyes leisurely moved over her body.

Denying him was impossible. She was about to melt into a puddle with his heated gaze on her. She noticed the stubble growing on his face made him look even more dangerous. "Whatever," Jayde said trying to sound upset. *SEALs have groupies?*

"Good," Tyson said as his lips met hers again, just briefly. "We have to get going."

Jayde put her hand on his arm, halting him. "Do you really not know where we are?"

"I have some idea, but no, I don't know where we are exactly." As he met her gaze he added, "I believe we are in Guatemala. If we are still in Belize, then I think we're in the Maya Mountains. But I am not quite sure where the border is. Come on, let's get going."

Scared shitless, and not knowing what else to do, Jayde Porter, now Jayde Kincade, followed her new husband down the steep ravine closer to the river, taking care to step where he stepped.

It had taken them over two hours to make it safely down to the river. They decided to stop. The water moved fast and didn't look all that safe to Jayde, but she kept her mouth shut since he seemed to be concentrating on where to go. A flash of color caught her gaze and she turned to focus on what it was. A bird sat on a branch looking at her.

It was beautiful. The head and wings were a brilliant emerald green while its breast and belly were a vibrant red. It stared at her with big dark eyes.

"Oh, Tyson, look," she breathed dreamily. Only in a zoo had she seen one of these. It was beyond her wildest dream to encounter one in their natural habitat. Her amazement briefly overrode her fear.

Tyson glanced at Jayde and followed her line of vision. His spunky wife found the bird beautiful, but he found his wife so much more so. Jayde was covered in a light sheen of sweat that made her toasted-brown skin shine.

She had her hair back in a ponytail save the few wisps that curved about her face, sticking to the sweaty skin. The black shirt she wore was tucked into the olive pants that never looked better on anyone as they cupped her ass in a way that shouldn't be allowed by law. Even the image of the pistol stuck in the waist of her pants and the knife strapped to her leg couldn't take away from her femininity. Tyson was having thoughts that belonged in a place where men weren't trying to kill them...but he wanted his wife, and he didn't believe there would ever come a time he didn't react this way just from looking at her. *Jesus, man, focus on what needs to be done, not what you want to do!*

"Do you see it?" her whisper reached him.

"Yes. Nice bird," he said, although his eyes barely left her olive-colored ass.

"It's not just a bird," she corrected. "That's the national bird of Guatemala, the Quetzal. Part of the *Trogon* family. They are rare to see in their natural habitat."

Tyson was amazed. "You know this for sure?"

"Absolutely!" Her tone told him just how sure she was. "I love to study things like this. Besides, when I do have time to paint, I use wildlife subjects, so I try to be able to recognize the real thing if I see it." As she spoke, the bird took to the sky, leaving them to their discussion as if they weren't interesting anymore. "He was a real beauty."

He gestured to the river. "Let's go."

"What do you mean let's go?"

He heard the panic in her voice, but he had to insist. "I mean we need to cross and get away from here; they will assume we would follow the river to find a town." He paused. "We will follow it, just not right along the banks."

Jayde started shaking her head. "I think I will just wait here."

"Move!"

"What about things in there that could hurt me?" she protested.

"What about the people back there who want to kill you?"

"They wouldn't want to kill me if it weren't for you!" she hissed. Jayde wasn't looking at him and so missed the look of shame that crossed his face.

"Let's go," he said gruffly once again.

"Is it safe?"

He did even bother answering that. "I'll go first; stick close to my six." That said, he moved out.

His "six"? Who did he think she was, one of his men? I have something for his "six" all right! Did they even have piranha's here? She didn't believe so but for some reason her mind wouldn't move off of it. It was as if she could see them lined up just waiting for her to enter the water so they could feast on her well-built body with their rows of shredding teeth. The water was cold, very cold, but Jayde kept her eyes and attention on the man in front of her. It was the same way she'd made it through the night, by ignoring what could possibly be around her, just focusing on one thing. After what seemed like hours, they slogged out of the water to stand on the banks at the other side. Jayde was wet up to her crotch but she was alive. Tyson didn't even check to see if she were okay, just continued onward. This time, though, they were going up the other side of the ravine.

The motion wasn't exactly the same as rock climbing, but it had some similarities, so Jayde passed the time by watching the arm muscles under his tight shirt move. They flowed with strength, a strength that didn't seem to diminish even while carrying that pack. And then there was his ass—lord-a-mercy that man had an fine one on him. "I could climb all day with a view like that in front of me," she whispered to herself.

Tyson stopped halfway up the side of the ravine maneuvering to sit on a smooth surface. "You doing okay back there?" he asked, clearly pleased she hadn't faded yet.

"Fine." She smiled at the impressed look on his face. "It's not all that different than rock climbing. You find a good hold and pull yourself up." Her body ached, though; it had been three hours of hard climbing, and she'd slipped a number of times, but hadn't called out for help. She loved this kind of burn.

"Rock climbing?" He smiled and laughed a little. "You're just full of surprises, aren't you? Take off your boots and wring out the excess water from your socks."

"Okay." She immediately began unlacing her boots.

"Rock climbing?" he asked again, encouraging an answer.

"Yes, another one of my quirks, or so Father says." She frowned with the memory. "'No decent brother is going to want a woman who prefers to climb rocks than cook him a good meal,'" she said in a deep tone.

"I find it awesome," Tyson said.

"Thanks, but you aren't exactly 'the brother' that I should be out attracting." She wrinkled her nose. "Hell, you ain't even a brotha!" She wrung out her socks until no moisture fell from them and laid them over a boulder. Her hands began to rub her feet until they were almost dry as well, examining them for blisters.

"No, I'm your husband, so you don't need to be attracting any brothers."

She laughed softly. "I hardly think our farce in the hotel matters anymore."

"What farce are you talking about?"

His voice had grown dangerous, but it thrilled, not scared her. "We both know it wasn't real. I only did it to help you out. Once—notice my optimism here—you get us back to the States, it will be nothing more than a memory." Jayde gave him a smile to hide her pain. As much as she loved him, Jayde wasn't about to keep a man who wanted

to be with someone else; he obviously still had feelings for this Carrie woman.

Tyson glowered into the distance. "Humph. We need to get some sleep. Protected here we can catch a few hours. Once night comes, it will be a different story." A light rain began to fall.

Jayde looked down and realized they had climbed much farther than she'd believed; it was a dreadfully deep ravine. She also had to look around the thick trees to see below them. They *were* very well protected. "Okay, I didn't get much sleep last night," she admitted.

Tyson was already beginning to dose. He took a blanket out of the pack, not the one she'd used last night, but one that shone silver. "Put your socks and shoes on just in case we have to leave quickly and then come over here." It was an order from him although gently spoken.

Jayde didn't argue, just shook her socks forcefully and slid her boots on after a thorough inspection of the insides. Once she was dressed again, she moved over towards his warm strong body.

Tyson had the pack beside his head, a poncho under his body, and the blanket and another poncho over it, hiding the silver color. He lifted a corner for Jayde to slip under, positioning her head on his shoulder as she curled up against him. His grip tightened on the gun as his other arm circled her. His body fell into a light but restful sleep as Jayde's hand settled over his heart. The rain pattered down around them, but they ignored it.

Three hours later, a much better-rested Tyson awoke to the rumble of thunder. His body instantly awake, he noticed that he was alone. "Jayde?" he said to the increasing rain.

"I'm here," her soft voice reached him before she came into his sight.

"Where were you?" he snapped as he grabbed her arm, instantly relieved she was all right and furious that she'd gone off somewhere without telling him.

Jayde took her arm back. "Don't yell at me! I went to the bathroom if you must know."

"Look, just let me know before you go off." He met and held her gaze. "Okay?"

She nodded as her stomach began to rumble. "Okay."

Unable to help himself, Tyson kissed her until the hunger pains had totally disappeared and another yearning had settled in the pit of their stomachs.

Jayde was the one that pulled away, her full mouth swollen from the intensity of his kisses. "As much as I would love to keep going, I have this innate fear of this place. So could we find some civilization, please?"

Tyson nodded as he tenderly touched his knuckles to her cheek. "We should be able to make it to the top of the ravine in another two hours. That should give us some time to get ready for the night."

He hoisted the pack onto his back and turned at her light touch. "Do you have any idea how long before we get out of here? Just a ballpark guess."

"By now they would have word of the plane going down. So anywhere from two to five days since we have to move at least until we can find a safe place to hunker down and wait for the rescue," Tyson said as his eyes held hers.

"I am not eating raw meat," she spoke quickly and with more than a bit of attitude.

"There are some MREs, meals ready to eat, in the pack, and I will also catch food if it comes to that. Don't worry, I will cook it for you." Shaking his head, he turned around and got ready to climb. "Stay..."

"I know, I know. Stick to your six," Jayde said. "I'm not a SEAL, you know."

Tyson faced her, the climb forgotten for the moment. "I know you're not a SEAL, but you need to follow my orders. If I tell you to go, go. I am in *my* element, so let me do my job. It's what I do; I rescue people."

Jayde glared at him. "Listen to me." She poked him in the chest. "I'm just a civilian. I question things. I get *scared*; in fact, I am scared shitless right now. I will do my best to follow your orders, but when I hesitate, remember I am not a machine, I am nothing more than a very scared *city* woman stuck in the jungle."

The expression on his face softened. His eyes sparkled with emotion. "You are so much more. Don't forget...you are *my* wife." He winked, turned, and began the arduous climb towards the top.

"Yeah, right," she mumbled as she began to clamber after him. Seconds later she yelled up to his climbing body, "I never said anything about 'obeying' you in my vows!"

His teasing words fell back to her. "We were just renewing!" You swore your blind obedience the first time around!"

"You wish," she snapped, and he could feel her piercing glare at his back.

He laughed low and deeply. The woman behind him had so much spunk, although she hadn't discovered it yet. She was his. And he couldn't be prouder.

Chapter Eight

Tired, hungry, and wet, they finally reached the top of the climb. Jayde had her hands on her knees and tried to catch her breath. This was much harder than rock-climbing. The rain didn't make it any easier, either. Tyson barely seemed winded, and Jayde hated him for that.

"Stay here for a moment. I'm going to look around," he commanded as he set the pack down beside her. Before she could form a response he slipped away, blending into the landscape as if he were part of it.

Jayde tipped her head back—after checking above her head for spiders—letting the rain wash the sweat away. "Jesus, I stink. I want a shower," she told the jungle and received no answer for her honest admission.

Not sure where Tyson went or how long he would be gone, Jayde turned and looked down the mountain side they just climbed. It was hard to imagine that someone was out there after them. It looked like she was the only person in the world. She smiled as she gazed all around. It was amazing how nature could make a person feel so small and insignificant. The feeling was almost surreal, and if it weren't for the plane blowing up in midair, she wouldn't have believed it.

A sound of someone or something in the brush brought her to her feet. Her stomach full of knots, she felt the need to puke. Just before her hand was on the gun, the sweetest male voice in the world reached her. "Jayde, it's me."

Tyson walked back to where he'd left her. "Come on, I found a dry place we can hole up for a while. We should be safe for the night."

"Should?" she asked.

"Will. We *will* be safe for the night," he responded.

Dutifully, Jayde picked up the pack, ignoring his hand out for it, and put it on her own back, waiting for him to lead the way. Tyson circled around and melted away in the thick foliage.

I am safe from snakes and spiders, she hoped as she trailed Tyson. He moved swiftly but not as fast as the approaching night. It was almost pitch black when he stopped in front of her.

"We will stay here." He gestured to a shape that looked ominous to Jayde in the rapidly fading light.

"*That* looks like a den," Jayde insisted.

"It is," Tyson said pointedly.

Her heart stopped and she turned away as if she were going to walk off. "I am *not* sleeping where some pissed-off momma is going to come back and eat me for being too close to her babies!"

"The den has been abandoned. There are no large animals," he assured her. His strong grip brought her back to his side.

"What about snakes? Spiders?"

"Turn around." His voice sounded almost amused.

Jayde did, although she was most defiantly *not amused*, and felt him digging in the pack. Soon, he flicked on a flashlight that shone mutedly into the small den. It was more of a hollow in the base of a tree and hillside. However, no creatures caught her attention.

"Let's go. We need to eat something, and I have to figure out where we are," Tyson said in that damnable commanding voice of his.

Jayde crawled in, praying the whole way, and watched Tyson follow her. He placed several big plant leaves in front of the hole. Camouflage and protection, she guessed. The den wasn't that big and it was going to be a tight fit. But at least it was dry.

Tyson settled beside her. With the pack in front of them, he used the light to search for the MREs and handed her one. "Here."

Jayde took the food with her shaking hands. All she could see were big spiders coming to bite her and snakes to help.

"Jayde, you need to eat," his voice cut through her fear.

She ate a little bit even as she noticed how fast he went through his. He must be starving. The half left in her pack she offered to him.

"No, you eat it," he said.

"I can't. My stomach is feeling queasy," Jayde responded. Finally he took it and finished it off.

The rain and wind picked up outside and Jayde scooted closer to Tyson for warmth and comfort. Accepting a quick drink of the water, Jayde closed her eyes and tried to picture herself in New York. She began to rock back and forth, a habit for her.

Tyson took the ponchos and blankets out of the pack. He put a poncho on the ground and sat Jayde on it. Doing the same with the other one, he settled himself back beside her. A blanket for each of them and they were ready for the night. He gave her the fire blanket; she figured he could handle the elements better.

"How much do you know about Central America, Jayde?" Tyson asked after a while.

The rocking stopped, the question distracting her from her nerves. "Not much. Why?"

"Well, you knew that bird; I was wondering if you knew more about these countries," he answered.

"Not really." Her eyes stayed tightly closed as her body remained tense.

"I am guessing we are in the upper part of Guatemala. Based on our flight plan and the amount of time we had been in the air before they shot us down, it makes sense."

"So are we safe then? Being in Guatemala instead of Belize?" Jayde asked hopefully.

"I wish, but no. Not up here in the jungle. Boundaries tend to be blurred down here," he responded honestly.

"Of course they would be," she moaned. The rocking began again. Tyson changed the subject. "Why did you come to Belize?"

Out of everything he could have asked, Jayde didn't expect that. She thought he'd continue on about how to get out of here. Nevertheless, she answered. "I wanted to go to the preserve."

"Well, why didn't you just stay at one of the hotels there?" Tyson asked curiously.

"I wanted to be able to do other things. Not that I wouldn't have been able to if I'd stayed there, but that was where father wanted me to stay. I guess it was an act of defiance on my part. I don't know. Something just told me to stay where I did," she commented, unaware her rocking had stopped.

"Why did you come alone? I can't believe you didn't have a man back in New York who wouldn't have joined you down here."

"I do...did...do...did. Did. I did have a man," she stumbled over her words, not entirely sure how she wanted to say it.

"What happened?"

"Well, I have...had been dating George for almost eight months." For some reason she didn't feel bad talking about this with Tyson. She needed to tell someone, and it wasn't like he was going anywhere. The rain increased in strength outside the cave, making her even happier that she was dry and warm.

"And?" he prompted.

"Well, for the first few months it was fine. Then it changed...well, he changed. We work in the same place so maybe that was part of it.

But he started calling me at all hours of the night and expected me to be there...God help me if I wasn't. On the days we didn't see each other at work, he would call me no less than five times a day," she said with disgust. "He would be angry if I missed his calls. He got obsessed with my personal life and tried to tell me who I could and couldn't befriend. But I didn't stop dating him because Father liked him. So I just put up with it." Jayde leaned against Tyson's body, an action that seemed so natural for her to do.

"About the time I realized I was really coming down to Belize, I became conscious of the fact I didn't want him with me. He would—I knew—ruin my vacation by barking orders at me and telling me what to eat, when to eat it, and how much of it to eat, 'cause apparently I was getting fatter and fatter. Not a good image for him to be seen with, you know, so I broke up with him." She eagerly accepted Tyson's comforting touch.

"I still think George believes I am just being 'adolescent' because Father still brings him up to me, so I know he is still in contact with my family. They love him," her voice cracked with pain. "He is on his way up in the world. A brother with ideals and potential." Her next sentence came out in a hiss of anger. "*They* should marry him, then."

Tyson listened incredulously. *How her family could be so blind to the pain they were causing her?* He couldn't wait for the day he walked up to her parents' front door and said, "Hello. I'm your daughter's husband." Not to mention that idiot George—where did he get off telling Jayde she was fat? Tyson sure as hell didn't agree with that assessment; Jayde was curvaceous and muscular. Fat was definitely not a word he would think of when looking at her. All in all she was rockin'. "Well, I for one am glad you came alone," he said in a deep voice beside her ear.

"Me too."

Her fast response made him grin despite their current situation. "Our renewal of our vows would have been really awkward with your boyfriend there," Tyson teased.

"They probably wouldn't have believed us. Not that they really did, anyway, which is why I don't understand why he wanted a renewal."

Because they knew it would be real afterward and thought we weren't serious. "Tell me more about your family," he suggested instead.

"What do you want to know?"

"More about your father."

"Oh." He would have to be deaf not to hear the reluctance in her tone. "My father. Let's see.... He is a lawyer who specializes in international law. Has his own firm and believes he is a great role model," Jayde said as if reading from a script.

"I take it you disagree?"

"No, he is, to everyone but me, it seems. He was always so giving with his time to others, but wouldn't even help me with my homework. He would say 'figure it out. I'm busy.' I always call him 'Father' or 'sir', while the rest of my siblings call him 'Papa'. I am the disappointment and he never lets me forget it," she spoke harshly.

"It was and still is 'so-and-so had accomplished such-and-such by the time he was your age. Quit pretending that painting is a career and get a real job.' And so on. No matter what I did, it was never going to be good enough. And never will be." Tyson could hear the tears in her husky voice. "I remember the last time I was shown affection by one of them. I was ten and had just broken my arm. My eldest brother gave me a hug until he saw Father's disapproving glare. I get patted on the head, like a dog, on the rare occasion. But normally I am ignored," Jayde stated blandly.

Tyson couldn't believe this. "What about holidays and birthdays?"

"I was always in the kitchen cooking for everyone or cleaning up afterwards."

"But you're the youngest." He was furious on her behalf.

"Yep, so I have the most energy. Nineteen years without affection except from my grandparents; it's amazing I know what it is," came her sardonic response.

"What about at the funeral for your cousin?" Tyson's anger at her family continued to grow.

"Then it was, 'Well, Jayde was supposed to be handling the responsibility of her care.'" She began to cry. "I loved my cousin; she was nothing but wonderful to me."

Tyson gathered her close to his strong body. "I think you know a lot more about affection than they ever will. Look at what you did for me. And I'm sorry. For the way they treat you and use you." *They wouldn't do so again*, he vowed.

She laughed a short, harsh sound. "Don't be; it's not your fault. But thanks, anyway." Jayde began to rock more.

"Tell me about George," he ordered. Tyson knew that if she were occupied, whatever frightening her would fade into the background.

"Why?"

"Humor me." Tyson knew she wasn't being defiant, it more like she was trying to figure out why he gave a tinker's damn about her ex.

"George," she began like it was the start of an epic. "He is the ideal man, according to my family. Ideal for me, anyway, or the best they believe I can ever get." The rocking slowed. "He is tall, not as tall as you, but maybe six-one or so." She paused for a short time as if recalling his face to her memory. "Dark skin, he keeps his head shaved, and sports a goatee. Very fit, he spends a lot of time working out at the gym. He is extremely concerned about his appearance. He has a fierce temper, a surprise considering his job." Her breathing calmed down as she continued.

"He is thirty-three. Good at his job, excellent really. He loves customer service and is a supervisor, not mine, or we wouldn't have been dating, but in the same place. Anyway, he is very old school in that he believes men and women have their place. I was not staying in mine very well. I was too ambitious and wanted more. More money to be exact. Even after he knew it was because of my cousin that I needed to work more for the extra income, it didn't really change. But maybe it was just me he had the problem with, since I was one of three women of color working there." Jayde paused and they listened to the sound of rain hitting the thick foliage.

"So he slinked his way into the good graces of my family, telling my father all about his big plans of keeping me at home to take care of the house and kids. Since I didn't have a career, Father thought it was a wonderful idea. Mother also." She took a deep breath. "When I broke it off with him he was furious. I mean *furious*, scary mad. I even got transferred to a different floor at work so I wouldn't have to see him. However, he kept in touch with my family, who always sing his praises to me when they called. It was the one nice thing they would say; pity it wasn't about me," her voice was laden with scorn. Tyson noticed she'd pulled away from him; he didn't like it, but he didn't force her to return to his side.

"I didn't want to go back to Georgia, so when they came up for the funeral, I told them I was going to stay on and see if George was 'the one'. That was the only reason they didn't haul my ass back down south with them. After they left, I told George I didn't want to see him, talk to him, or hear about him again, and then I came down here. I'd still hear about him when they would call me at the hotel." Jayde fell silent.

Tyson knew she'd omitted some things from her story, but he respected her privacy enough to let it go. For now. He was furious over the treatment her family gave her — not to mention this man, George. If he ever saw him, Tyson believed he would actually do the guy bodily harm, just for scaring Jayde. She was deserving of so much more than what they'd led her to believe. "What about your mother?"

"My mother? Well, she believes Father knows best and would never *dare* go against his word. It is law, after all." She inhaled deeply. "She is the perfect trophy wife: beautiful, fit, and entirely doting on Father. She looks awesome on his arm at any of the functions they go to. But she was...is...a lousy mother," Jayde scoffed.

"I can't remember her cooking for us, baking with us, or anything like that. It might ruin her figure. But I suppose it just wasn't for her. The only reason she had kids was because Father thought it would make him look better to the partners of the firm he was at then. I was an accident and she never lets me forget it. I wasn't wanted then and I'm not wanted now," Jayde's voice dropped to a low whisper full of agony.

Tyson didn't know what he could say to offer comfort. Although his family didn't always see eye to eye, they hadn't been that spiteful to one another. Instead, he gave Jayde silent reassurance and support, his arm settling familiarly around her shoulders and tucking her close to his body.

"Tyson, will you do something for me?" her exhausted tone reached him.

"Yes, little rose? What do you want?" He would find a way to move mountains if she wanted him to.

"Keep me safe."

"Always." And he meant it. The only way he would allow her to be hurt was if he were dead. And he didn't plan on dying any time soon. He had a lifetime to look forward to with her beside him.

"From the spiders," her voice faded as she slumped against him, her body still tense.

Tyson kissed her head. "I'll protect you from them. Don't worry." Never had he met someone so terrified of spiders; he knew people that didn't care for them, but Jayde was way beyond that. However, a sense of masculine pride filled him as he felt her body relax against his. She trusted him; even though she didn't say so aloud, her actions did. She trusted he would protect her from the creatures that roamed the night.



"I hurt like hell," Jayde complained as she moved her stiff body. Correction, her stiff *and* stank body. She was the sole occupant of the den; there was no sign of Tyson. The protective leaves were off the opening and light filtered through the thick foliage.

The pack sat propped up along the spot Tyson had occupied throughout the night. She had both blankets covering her and a poncho bunched up as a pillow. Moving slowly, she crawled out of the hole and stood. Jayde stretched and touched her hair with a grimace. It felt brittle and dirty; of course slogging through mud and rain, and sleeping in dirt probably didn't help.

With a disgusted motion, she reassembled her ponytail. "I don't even want to know what my feet smell like," she mumbled to the air.

"Probably the same as mine." Tyson's deep timbre was like a sexual jolt to her system. His large body materialized before her. "Morning, Jayde," he said with a grin. "Got something for you, come on."

Tyson swiftly stored their gear and shouldered the pack as she took care of her morning toiletries. "Let's go," he said as he moved them back into the jungle.

"Morning to you too," she mumbled before she followed him. "Should've stayed in the damn cave and slept until this nightmare was over."

Tyson didn't respond. They walked for almost a mile and just when Jayde was ready to protest about everything, he stopped and held back a branch for her. "Go on," he coaxed.

She stepped through and stopped dead in her tracks. It had to be a vision. Jayde blinked a few times to make sure it wasn't. A small clearing dominated by a crystal pool of water sat in front of her. At one end was a cascading waterfall that sent rainbows into the morning air.

"I found it this morning while looking for some food," Tyson said as he moved to stand next to her.

"Oh, my God! Look at this place! It is like something out of a travel brochure! It's beautiful!" she gushed. The lush green grass waved gently in the sweet breezes that blew around them. Jayde moved slowly into the center of the clearing.

She turned quickly and looked at him. "Can I swim in it?"

"Of course, I figured you would want to clean up a bit. It may be our last time before we get out of here."

Even though it was still relatively early in the morning, the sun had warmed the area. Jayde picked out a big rock near the waterfall that she knew would work for drying clothes. Propelled forward, she moved away from Tyson and around the water to her destination.

Undaunted by the fact that there was no soap, no shampoo, or even a towel, Jayde sat on the rock and unlaced her boots. She peeled off her putrid socks and piled them next to her, wrinkling her nose at the smell. Oblivious to Tyson standing across the clearing, she stood and unfastened her pants, sliding them down her legs. The gun she set next to her boots and the knife.

She pulled her shirt off over her head and dropped into the pile of dirty clothes. Jayde took down her ponytail, allowing her dirty hair to fall free. Standing on the rock in her bra and underwear, she did a swan dive into the pool only to rise out of the water like an ebony water nymph. She slicked back her black hair as she exhaled deeply.

"God, this feels wonderful," Jayde breathed. Her brown body glistened with the water and sun. She gave herself over to the feeling of the water flowing over her body, scrubbing it the best she could and washing out her clothes before laying them on the rock to dry.

When she noticed her skin had begun to prune, she emerged from the water. A glance around told her she was alone, so she walked unashamed to the pack he had left to pull a blanket out and use it as a towel.

Tyson had watched a true Aphrodite emerging from the water when Jayde had dived in and had prayed low in his throat. He hadn't imagined it would be this difficult to keep away from her. He'd dropped the backpack by the edge of the water and with only one more glance at her before disappeared into the trees. He'd needed a moment to collect himself, or else he would have tackled her in the pool and tried to recreate Adam and Eve in Eden.

In the interim he sourced some food. When he thought he was okay, Tyson returned, stood just out of sight, and watched her. He was unable to move as he spied upon her near-naked body. She frolicked in the water like a little kid, pausing to scrub her body and hair and clean her clothes, and then went back to playing. She swam down and then shot up as fast as she could, as if trying to see how far out of the water she could get.

Her happiness mesmerized him. She looked at ease swimming. He almost collapsed from desire when he saw her throw her bra and

underwear upon the rock as well. Knowing she was totally nude in that water set the blood in his veins on fire. It only intensified as she maneuvered her wet, naked body out of the pool and toward the pack.

She was walking toward him but did not notice his stare. Tyson's whole body was on alert as he watched her full breasts move with each step she took. His greedy gaze moved down her body to the thatch of black hair between her legs and he groaned out loud.

Jayde was wringing the excess water out of her hair as she walked and the second she covered herself with the blanket Tyson realized he'd smashed one of the fruits he'd collected for breakfast in his hand. Its juice ran off his fingers and onto the ground.

He dropped the damaged food and took a series of deep breaths. A minute or so after she covered herself, he emerged from the tree line with the fruit in his hand. "I got some fruit for breakfast," he announced as she turned to glance at him.

"Wonderful," she said. "I'm starving."

"Me too." He sat the food, mostly guava, down next to her and placed himself on the other side of it.

"What's that all over your hand?" Jayde asked.

"Fruit." He wiped his hand off in the thick grass they sat upon.

"What happened?"

"I gripped it too tightly," Tyson muttered evasively. He wasn't about to tell her he did it while drooling over her naked body like a love-struck schoolboy.

"Oh," she responded. She sighed in pleasure as she bit into the succulent flesh. "This is wonderful," Jayde responded around a mouthful of food.

Tyson ate silently. She had tucked the blanket under her arms like a towel, and he wanted to remove it and take them both to a plane where their troubles didn't exist. But until he got them back to safety, all he could do was fantasize. So he did.

He dreamed about her legs around his waist, about him plunging deep into her warm, willing body. Every possible thing he could do to Jayde sexually came to his mind as he looked at her. But it was the second he pictured her growing big with his child that he shook himself. At that precise second, sitting close to the top of a mountain deep within Central America with drug lords on their tail, Tyson realized he'd fallen in love. He had fallen in love with the woman he sat next to as they ate fruit. Through everything they've been through, her beauty,

her strength, and her unshakeable determination to survive had latched onto his heart with an indomitable grip. Tyson loved her.

The fact he hadn't known her for more than a few days didn't matter. There was something about her, and he learned more and more every moment he spent with her. Jayde Rose Porter Kincade was a very special woman. A woman he had fallen for, head over heels. It scared the hell out of him.

Tyson jumped up, causing Jayde to look at him in surprise and a healthy bit of fear. "What's wrong? Did you hear something?"

Immediately ashamed for scaring her, he answered, "No. I just need to go take a look around. I won't be far." And for the first time in his life, Tyson ran from a woman.

Chapter Nine

Jayde finished eating and walked over to the waterfall. Sticking her hands under the cool clear liquid, she washed the remains of the sticky juice off her skin before she splashed more on her face to clean off her mouth. Glancing around the clearing, she noticed Tyson was still gone; with a heavy sigh, she walked back over to the rock that had her clothes laying out on it.

They weren't completely dry, but it was enough. Jayde slipped on her clothes with remarkable speed, not feeling at all comfortable being alone and naked now that she wasn't swimming. As she was sitting on the rock strapping on the knife, she saw Tyson emerge from the jungle.

He was carrying more fruit in his shirt, which he'd removed, showing off his hardened chest muscles and corded arms. Under the pretense of tying on the sheath, she watched him walk towards her. The man was just gorgeous, tanned all over to perfection; he was eye candy and she was a candyholic.

He moved like a predator and she could see the potential for danger flowing off him. This man was completely different from the stranger she met on the boardwalk. His whole body was alert for prospective trouble, but there was no fear on his face, just a calm acceptance.

She stared at him through the hair that loosely covered her eyes. The closer he got the more intense the burning hunger grew inside her. He was her absolute definition of sex. He didn't strut. It wasn't his way. There wasn't even an arrogant swagger in his walk; it was just he and his fluid movement. Tyson screamed confidence, and she knew if she managed to meet another with a walk like his, she would think of him—Tyson Randolph Kincade, her assumed husband.

Tyson could feel her eyes on him as he approached. While he was glad she'd put on her clothes, it did nothing to quell his desire for her. Regardless, he tried ignoring it. He stopped at the bag next to her and knelt down to pack it, putting the fruit inside with the rest of their things. He kept his gaze down as her shadow fell over him.

"I can do that," she offered.

Tyson looked up and saw she'd refolded the blanket she'd been wearing. He breathed in her scent as she knelt down beside him. "I got it," he said a little brusquely.

"No, you got the food; at least let me do this." Jayde flashed him a slow smile as if she understood what his problem was. "Consider it me doing a wifely duty." She winked.

You are my wife and I will not let you go. Tyson gave in and handed her the pack. "Maybe I will just clean up a bit then." He took the blanket she'd used and brought it to his bared chest. "I'll use this one."

Tyson smiled as he saw her flush. He stood and walked off towards the water, chuckling at her obvious positioning her back to where he would be.

He stripped down to his boxers and dove in the water. "God, this *does* feel good!" he shouted to her rigid back as he surfaced. "You were right!"

"Glad to hear it!" she yelled back without turning around, pouring extra concentration into packing the bag than necessary.

Tyson just laughed and scrubbed his head. While swimming, he popped up and drawled, "Can you bring me my shirt? I want to wash it out." He chuckled as he noticed her less than subtle shiver.

"Sure," Jayde responded. She picked it up and Tyson would have sworn she sniffed it. "Here you are." She tossed it in his general direction.

"Thanks." When she started to turn away, he stopped her with a word. "Stay."

Tyson moved easily through the water as he watched her pause briefly then climb on the rock and sit cross-legged upon the sun-warmed surface. Every one of her motions was elegant. She tipped her dark face up to the sun and allowed its warm rays to grace her skin. A willpower he didn't know he possessed reared its head, preventing him from taking her against the rock like a couple of primitive animals.

Jayde swallowed hard; watching him wash his hard body was not going to be good for her waning sanity. She trembled from the tips of her hair to the end of her toes. This man had way too much raw sexuality. But the silent challenge in his eyes had made the decision for her since she wasn't a quitter.

She allowed herself a brief moment of insane dreaming as she felt the sun on her face. This would be the perfect setup if they weren't alone on a mountain with murderous people after them. She knew

without a doubt if Tyson made a move towards her, she wouldn't be able to resist him. His pull on her grew by the minute.

"When do we have to move on?" Jayde asked, not entirely sure she wanted to know.

Her gaze began to swelter as she watched his muscles effortlessly pull himself out the water and up onto the rock next to her. Rivulets ran down his body and over his defined muscles, making her mouth as dry as cotton. *Dear Jesus, look at the muscles on this man!*

His hair was slicked back from his head and his tan seemed even darker as the sun shone on it. His boxers were plastered tight to his pelvic area, and it was with great difficulty that Jayde looked away.

"Just as soon as I get dressed." He moved in close. "Care to help me?"

Her brown eyes flew open to see his smiling face looking at her as he finished drying himself with the blanket she'd used earlier. Jayde was eyelevel with his crotch and saw him twitch in his boxers. Then she blushed and he smiled all over again. "I think I will make sure the bag is packed," She mumbled, scrambling off the rock and back over to the pack.

He shrugged nonchalantly. "If you're sure...."

Jayde made a big production of organizing it. "Damn him for making me want him so much," she muttered. "I have more important things to focus on, like getting the hell out of this damn jungle alive, *not* fantasizing about how good Tyson Kincade looks in nothing but a pair of wet boxers! Or how flippin' fine he looks fully dressed! Not to mention how he is in bed!"

"If it's any consolation, little rose, I feel the same way about you," his deep voice sounded right in her ear, making her jump and squeal. Tyson's strong grip steadied her so she wouldn't fall.

Jayde felt the blush race up her cheeks. "You heard me?" She hadn't heard a thing that would indicate he had been coming close to her.

"Oh, yeah," he purred in her ear. His breath teased the back of her neck. "Every word that came out of your luscious mouth. And as much as I would love to thank you proper like, we do need to get moving."

She began trembling at the image. Jayde turned in his arms and slid her brown arms around his neck, pressing her body up against his still-damp one. Unsure of where this boldness came from she just went with

it. "And I would love you to do so." Her eyes were dark with passion as she put her lips upon his.

Tyson groaned as she sucked his lower lip into her full mouth. Jayde kissed him until she felt him hardening against her belly.

She pulled away, her chest rising and falling with every breath she inhaled. There was unrestrained lust in her eyes and she let Tyson see it. "Let's get going, then," she said.

Tyson shook his head. He was glad one of them could focus. "Right." He shouldered the pack and adjusted the straps while she checked her gun and returned it into the back of her waistband. "We are going to stay up here and go in this direction." He pointed off into the distance.

"How will you know if we are still following the river or not?" she asked while into the thick foliage.

"I will be guessing. I want to remain on higher ground; it will give us the advantage. And since this is their terrain, we need every one we can get," Tyson responded and checked his own gun.

"But the goal is still to find a town?" Jayde watched him carefully.

"Yes, if we can find one, I will go and see if anyone has some form of modern communication. If people do, then I will send a message off and we will just have to wait for them to get us. The problem with sending a message is that whoever is after us will be monitoring the airwaves and could pinpoint where the call came from."

"Meaning?"

"They will also send someone, and since they are closer, we will have to play cat and mouse until our ride gets here," he told her.

"Okay."

"Okay?" Tyson asked. "That's it? Nothing else to say?"

"What good would it do me to get angry? It won't change the situation any. Besides, I know you wouldn't put me through this unless absolutely necessary," Jayde said with a small shrug of her shoulders.

And the surprises kept on coming. Tyson grunted his approval as they maneuvered through the jungle. She fell behind him, walking where he did and staying silent. He held the gun close and listened to each noise the jungle shared with him...and listened for the ones it didn't.

Jayde was in good shape and so they made decent time even with the rugged terrain they crossed. It was when they approached an area with canopy-to-ground spider webs that Jayde froze.

Tyson easily picked upon Jayde's sharp intake of breath. He stopped and looked back at her. Her dark skin seemed unnaturally pale and sweat ran down her face. Her eyes ensnared them; there was stark and abundant terror in them. Her head moved from side to side as she began to back away from the direction they were going, heading instead back the way they had come.

"Come on, Jayde," he tried.

"No." She barely managed to get that one word out, she was shaking so badly.

"We have to keep moving," he demanded.

"I can't." Her chin began to tremble.

"We have to go." Tyson's tone turned more forceful.

"No, Tyson. I can't go in there!" Jayde insisted.

Tyson reached out to touch her, the gun sliding down to rest on his side. Her skin was clammy and he realized just how deep her fear went. This wasn't a ploy. It was real. But the fact remained he had to get them through there.

He looked at the intricate webbing and back to Jayde. "We have to go. I don't know how long it stretches, so we can't take the time to try and find a way around. We have to go through

"I can't!" Her voice was barely discernable.

Tyson faced her and gripped her chin with gentle force. "Look at me, Jayde. Do you trust me?"

Her eyes poured tears of fear down her pale cheeks. "Yes," she managed to mutter.

"Then trust me to get you through this," his words coaxed.

"I can't go in there! Don't you understand? They are out to get me! Spiders attack me; they chase me! They want to hurt me!" Her breathing became shorter and shorter, more labored. "I just can't!"

"Trust me," he said. "I won't let them hurt you. I promise. But you have to trust me."

Jayde's legs gave out and she crumpled to the ground, gagging and wheezing. She waved off his hand. "Leave me here; I can't go in there!"

Tyson lifted her bodily back onto her unsteady feet. He gripped her chin between his fingers again and held her immobile as he spoke. "I'm so sorry you are scared. I will not let them hurt you, but you *are* going in there. There is no discussion about this, not anymore. We are going." His voice was oddly tender considering how uncompromising it was.

Before his words had time to sink in, Tyson grabbed her hand and dragged her into the spider-infested section of jungle. He moved them forward slowly but at a continuous pace.

He brushed away cobwebs and made sure none of the large, hairy spiders got close to her. Tyson looked over his shoulder and saw she was genuinely and totally panicked. Tears streamed down her face; she bit her lip to keep from screaming out loud; and her eyes were shut so tightly he believed it would take the jaws-of-life to get them open again. Some webbing had fallen into her hair and clothes and he knew she could feel it on her.

As he maneuvered them through the patch, he did notice how the spiders seemed to run at her instead of him. They were large, tarantula sized, and hairy. The hand he held began to shake more and more and Tyson increased his speed, knowing full well she was close to breaking down. It was harder and harder to hold onto the wet palm, it felt like her hand was made entirely of water.

Soon, although for Jayde he was sure it was an eternity, they exited the other side of the spiders' area. Tyson kept moving until they were well away from the web-filled trees before he stopped.

Jayde stood there and shook as Tyson made sure there were no spiders on her body and removed all the silk from her hair and clothes. "You're fine. There are none on you," he said, just as he saw a scurrying motion on the ground headed straight for her.

At the moment Tyson killed the two spiders heading directly for her, she lost it. As the second one died with a sickening crunch beneath his boot, Jayde fell to the ground and lost the contents of her stomach.

She continued to puke well after it turned to dry heaves. Her nauseated body jerked away from his as he tried to offer her comfort. "Don't!" she screeched. Crawling on her hands and knees further from him she began heaving again.

Tyson ran his hands over his face; he felt like such a bastard for doing that to her. He had to get her farther away from the spiders. "Let's go," he commanded, sure he was being an ass but she seemed to respond to the ordering.

Standing slowly, Jayde wiped her mouth and followed without a word. When Tyson brushed against her to take point, her body recoiled as if struck, a reaction that sent him to a darker corner of his own private hell for putting her through hers.

He kept them moving for another two hours. It was early evening when they stopped. Tyson looked around and nodded. "We'll camp here. Get something to eat and some sleep."

Jayde remained silent. As Tyson looked at her he noticed the dried blood on her face; it was from her lip when she bit it. He walked up to her and took her chin in his hand, tightening his grip when she tried to pull away. His other hand was extremely gentle as it cleaned off the dried blood. Her dark eyes were full of betrayal and pain, but she still didn't say a word.

Tyson met and held her gaze. The second he relaxed his grip on her she moved away from him. Her body was still pale and shaky; he didn't like that. He opened the bag and took out an MRE, handing it to her.

She took the silver pack in silence and ate slowly. Her back slumped with exhaustion. He realized how much it took out of her to get through that and couldn't be more proud of her. At that moment, he would have sold his soul just to hear her say anything to him — even hurtful words.

She didn't, however, finishing her food in silence. She stood to put the wrapper back in the bag before reclaiming her seat far away from him. She accepted the blanket he handed her with quiet dignity, but her eyes were just empty now, not even supporting her earlier anger anymore.

Tyson knew he'd have to ask her a direct question to get her talking. Swallowing his pride, he walked over and settled himself next to her rigid body braced against a tree.

"I'm so sorry I made you go through that," he tried. She only became more rigid. "Jayde, please talk to me."

"I have nothing to say to you," she mumbled. She actually turned away from him.

The knife twisted in deep. Tyson swallowed. "I have something to say to you." He lifted her up and placed her against his chest before wrapping his blanket around her as well, cocooning them together. "Just listen."

He sighed. "I know you're pissed I made you go through that, but it was the fastest way to get more distance between us and the men following. I did it because it was the best decision I could make at the time. I am so sorry you are scared of spiders." He felt her shiver at that one word. "I wish I'd never brought you into this. But for what it's

worth, I am so damn proud of you. So proud." Tyson kissed the top of her head and wrapped his arms tighter around him.

Jayde shook her head. "I'm not mad at you; I was, but I'm not now. I'm mad at myself more than anything, embarrassed you saw me like that, but I understand you were just doing what you do best. Weakness is not something allowed in my family, and that has been drilled into me from the very beginning," she admitted in a shamed voice.

"My whole family knows just how scared I am of spiders. They thought it was amusing, so they always tried to 'help me' overcome my fear by putting them in my path—real or fake, it didn't matter." She shuddered and took a deep breath. "The theme in my room at my parents' house was spiders; they wouldn't let me have anything else. If I wanted a pet, all they were willing to give into was an arachnid." Her body shook with unsavory memories.

"The fact that you had to see my weakness is beyond reproach. I apologize and hope you can forgive my less than adult attitude. I don't know how you could be proud of me; because of my childish behavior, we could have been in even more danger," Jayde said scornfully.

Tyson couldn't believe what he was hearing. Knowing her family put her fear in her face every chance they could pissed him off to no end. She was special; she deserved to be pampered and loved.

"Oh, my little rose," he whispered in her ear. "Don't ever apologize for being afraid. You were scared, but you still went; that is so admirable. And I *am* proud of you."

"But you saw me throwing up. I'm so embarrassed!"

"Little rose," he said as his hands began to rub across her stomach. "Don't be embarrassed. You humble me." He felt her body begin to relax, and the next words out of his mouth were so natural for him to say. "I love you, Jayde."

"I love you, too, Tyson," Jayde said with her last bit of strength as she leaned into him and nodded off. Clearly the emotional toil was too much for her to ignore any longer.

Those five words made Tyson feel like he was an Olympian god. "I can never let you go, you know that, don't you, my little rose? Never." He loved her more than he had ever believed possible for a man to love a woman. He didn't expect or receive an answer because she was already asleep, finally safe in her dreams.

Tyson allowed them to doze for a few hours before he woke up Jayde.

"We need to get moving," he said quietly against her forehead.

"Okay." She immediately rose from his lap and began folding the blankets. She didn't make one mention about what they'd said to one another before she fell asleep. That worried Tyson. What if she hadn't meant to say that and it had just been a reaction for her since he'd said it first? Why was he even worrying about this now? He had to find a way to get her back to safety, and *then* he could concentrate on proving his love.

She went into the bushes to take care of her personal needs. When she reappeared, he handed her a piece of fruit. "Ready?"

"I guess so. Am I allowed to ask why we are traveling at night?" She bit into the tender flesh of the guava.

"Little rose, you are allowed to ask me anything; don't ever think you can't ask me a question," he told her.

"Okay, now will you answer it for me?" Jayde finished the rest of her fruit.

"Of course. We need to get through this meadow that is coming up. Night is the best time to do that, especially since the moon hasn't risen yet, so we will still be under some cloak of darkness." Tyson couldn't help but grin at the woman he married; she never failed to make him smile.

"I see."

"Any more questions?" He shouldered the pack.

"No. Ready to follow and stick to your six," she snapped sharply. He smiled in the dark. "Good. Let's go."

"What is your rank?" she asked as they started.

"I'm a lieutenant. Why do you ask?"

"Just wanted to know a bit more about you, I guess. I mean, you know about my family, my ex, and my huge fear. I don't really know anything about you," Jayde admitted.

She told the truth; he hadn't spoken much about his life since their dinner. "Okay, my little rose. Ask your questions," Tyson encouraged.

"All right. Why do you call me, 'little rose'?"

"'Cause I want to." He hesitated and chose another direction. "Next question." They'd zigzag through the meadow; it should delay those following them a bit more.

"How long have you been a SEAL?" Jayde asked.

"Going on ten years now. I transferred from Texas to go to OCS at Annapolis. When I graduated from there I began BUD/S. The rest, you

can say, is history," Tyson said as he continued to scope out the terrain keeping them moving in a zigzag pattern.

"Oh." Jayde fell silent as they finished maneuvering across the open field and disappeared back into the jungle.

"What else my, little rose? I know you have many more things roaming around in that pretty little head of yours," he teased.

"Tell me what your life is like in Washington," she said.

"Anything in particular you want to know?" Tyson asked.

"Whatever you want to share with me," Jayde said easily.

"Well, I don't spend too much time at my place; I like being out in nature more than in town. I have a studio apartment in Georgetown—" He stopped abruptly.

Jayde remained silent as well; he was glad she was learning to read his body language, and right now, he needed to concentrate on something that was coming up. The moon had risen, bathing them in a muted glow as it found its way into the thick jungle.

He hit the ground and she followed suit immediately. "Someone's coming," he hissed.

Chapter Ten

On the path two men strolled into view. They weren't dressed in anything that would make Tyson think they were military-trained men, but he wasn't about to risk Jayde's life over it.

They were talking to themselves in hushed English and Spanish as they walked along, no weapons visible on their person. "Did you hear about the plane that went down on the other side of the mountain? I don't know if everyone survived or not."

The other said something in Spanish and Tyson started to intercept them, but stopped when he Jayde touched his arm. He looked at her and frowned as he saw her shaking her head no. Tyson moved to pull away, but she shook her head harder and tightened her grip on his arm. Her meaning was clear; she didn't want him approaching them in any way, shape, or form. She brought the knife out of its sheath and slithered up beside Tyson.

Her grip stayed tight on his arm until the men went out of sight. Even so, Tyson and Jayde remained silent for a while afterwards.

"What did you do that for?" Tyson hissed. "I was going to see if they would help us; they were locals. Damn it, woman, we could have had a way out of here sooner!"

"You don't speak Spanish do you?" she questioned him.

"No. Why?"

"Because when they were talking in Spanish, they mentioned how much money they would get from Señor Alvarez if they were the ones to bring in the *gringos*. I am guessing he is the same man we know as Captain Alvarez." She removed her hand from his strong arm and began to stand, but Tyson jerked her body down atop his muscled one.

"I'm sorry," he ground out, his mouth millimeters away from her full one. "You didn't tell me you spoke Spanish."

"You never asked," she breathed into his mouth.

Tyson moved his hands up to capture her face. "Thank you for saving us."

"Well, I figured I should keep my husband around for *at least* another week."

"What other secrets are you keeping me in the dark about, Mrs. Kincade?" he asked as his lips brushed lightly against hers.

"I didn't know I was keeping secrets from you, Mr. Kincade," she murmured against his mouth. He was fighting the temptation to slip his tongue inside her mouth to mate with hers.

He loved how it sounded, she calling him Mr. Kincade, for it was the first time she'd done so. It was almost as if she'd admitted they were married. "Oh, but you are. I will have loads of fun getting them out of you, too, but later. Right now, we need to find the town or base where those two came from and maybe we can get our hands on a radio."

Reluctantly, she slid off his body and regained her feet. He followed suit. "Are we going the way they were coming from or where they were going?" she asked.

"Where they came from. But not a sound, just in case they come back," Tyson responded in a hushed voice. He touched her arm and when she met his gaze in the subdued light, he gestured with his hands. Jayde nodded her understanding: he was going first; she was to stay behind him and alert.

Once again they began the trek forward through the jungle. Eventually he stopped and fell on his stomach, Jayde following suit. He silently reached into the bag and pulled out his binoculars.

"Shit," he swore and put them down, moving back so he could whisper into her ear without trouble.

"What's wrong?"

"It's a goddamn rebel camp. About ten clicks away!"

"What the hell's a click?" Jayde asked.

"It's about a kilometer." Tyson fell silent as he decided what he was going to do.

"So ten kilometers...that would be about...well a little more than six miles away. About six and a quarter."

Tyson was impressed; most Americans didn't see the importance of converting metric and US customary measurements. "Right you are. Listen to me, I am going to leave you here and go ahead on my own—"

"No," she said quickly. "I don't want to be left alone."

"Look, Jayde, it's easier and faster if I move alone. I will get what I need and come back for you, but I need to know you are safe; otherwise I will not be able to concentrate properly." Tyson turned to the woman stretched out next to him on the ground. He searched for her face in the hushed light.

"You are just going to leave me here!" she accused.

"I will find you again. I promise. Now, come on, I have to find a safe place to put you." Tyson wanted to comfort her, but time was of the essence. There were only a few hours of darkness left, and he wanted to get in and out and put down some extra distance between them and the rebels before it was light.

Jayde nodded silently and followed on Tyson's heels as they weaved in and out of the trees. Tyson found a small area behind a single waterfall and checked it for animals. Finding none, he led his quiet charge inside the dark area. "I want you to stay here. Don't come out for anything. Okay?"

Tears began to fall from her expressive eyes as she nodded, the drops hitting his hand. His callused thumbs wiped them away, "Don't cry, little rose. I *will* be back for you. I will find you again, no matter what. The pack stays with you. You have your gun."

Tyson did an automatic check of his weapons and took a deep breath. It was time to go. He felt Jayde withdraw even farther into the cave and he pursued her. It was as black as pitch in the cave and yet Tyson knew exactly where she was.

He cupped her face gently, tracing her beauty in the dark, as if committing it to memory. Then before either of them could say anything, he smashed his lips against hers. The kiss was hard, fast, and short. "Never forget I will come back for you. I love you." Then he was gone.

Tyson moved with the stealth and speed that made him one of the best at his job. He focused on his target, trying not to think about his wife sitting alone in the dark, wet cave beneath a waterfall. As his strong legs ate up the ground, he found himself more and more focused on the task at hand.

It took him about an hour to reach the outskirts of the camp. It was makeshift and shoddy, but hopefully equipped with a phone or radio.

He sneaked into the first hut. In a fast assessment of what he faced, he saw there was a young woman sleeping tied to the bed. Well, he knew what she was here for; and although he wanted to help her, he couldn't risk her screaming and alerting the rest of the camp. Jayde's safety came first. Reluctantly, he left her there after determining there was no phone anywhere.

The next three huts were the same. They all had a woman tied to a bed and not much else. Unsure of how he was going to get into the center of the camp unnoticed, Tyson spotted a hut way off to the side that was bigger than the others.

Fading back into the shadows, he inched his way around to it. There were grunts and other muffled noises coming from there. Peeking in the open window, Tyson took stock of what was inside.

A wiry dark-skinned man was on the bed raping a sobbing woman on a small army cot. Tyson also spied a table with a radio in the center of it.

A dog's bark dropped him down and he withdrew the survival knife he had on his leg. A camp member yelled sharply at the dog, which immediately fell silent. Tyson headed for the hut's entrance. The man's increasing grunts told Tyson he was just about done. The woman had fallen into hushed whimpers as the man above her found his own pleasure at the cost of her pain.

Slipping into the darkened shelter, Tyson edged closer to the man on the bed. The girl barely had time to acknowledge Tyson standing over them before the man on her was dead. The scream seemed to stop in her throat as she looked into hazel eyes of her savior.

The metallic scent of blood rent the air, courtesy of the rapist's slit throat. Tyson dragged him off the girl who just looked at him with wide eyes. He put his finger to his lips, signaling her continued silence; and as she nodded, he moved to the table that held the radio.

Two seconds after he picked it up the woman screamed. He turned to see another man standing in the doorway, frozen with surprise. Before that man could do anything, Tyson threw his knife to land deep within the man's neck.

As the second man crumpled to the ground Tyson grabbed a machete and the map along with the radio, nodded to the girl, and ran, knowing her scream would bring others. He was right. Four men were running towards the hut and opened fire as they saw him fleeing.

Grateful this hut was along the edge, Tyson quickly disappeared into the woods after returning fire on the men, emptying the Spectre he carried and leaving him with only the Glock and the stolen machete. Three men dropped from his bullets but more were coming.

The searing pain of a bullet lodging into his shoulder nearly took him to his knees, but he kept running. He covered the distance as he was trained to do. Soon those men were left behind. He knew they would be on his trail soon and with the dogs, so his small lead didn't make him feel that relieved.

Tyson took many twists and turns before he headed back to the waterfall. He didn't want to return there but he didn't have a choice; he needed Jayde's help again, this time to remove a bullet.

Four and a half hours after he'd left Jayde alone, he found himself cautiously approaching, hand over the wound on his shoulder to help stop the flow of blood and hoping no one was right on his heels witnessing his entrance in the pre-morning glow.

Maneuvering around the cascading water, he slipped into the damp cave. "Jayde," he croaked out. Nothing. He tried again, keeping his voice at a whisper since sound traveled well in the cave.

"Tyson, you're back!" He heard her say. "I'm over here; the cave goes back quite a ways."

"Turn on the light." His words were slurred.

The muted light from the flashlight shone way off to his left and he followed it. Bathed by the soft glow, Jayde stood looking at him with a mixture of worry, relief, and love. His body totally exhausted from the combined blood loss and running, he stumbled over to her and smiled gently. "I got it."

Chapter Eleven

Jayde wanted nothing more than to throw herself into his arms and let him hold her and make her feel safe, but there was a tightness she noticed about the corners of his beautiful golden-green eyes. She looked swiftly over his body and smelled blood, but she couldn't see where he was hurt.

"What happened?" she asked as she moved closer to him.

"I got shot," Tyson slurred.

Panic immediately set in as Jayde pictured the worst. "Where?" she asked, scared of what his answer would be.

"The shoulder. I'm going to need you to remove the bullet." He faltered and dropped the radio he held.

Jayde picked it up and turned around. "Hold onto me. I have a pallet set up back here." She flicked off the light and slowly marched into the back of the cave. All was silent save for Tyson's labored breathing that mixed with the usual cave sounds.

Not a moment too soon, Jayde helped Tyson lie down on the rock that she'd used during the night. It was wide and protruded from the wall, plenty big enough for Tyson. The pallet she'd made was of one poncho and both blankets, the second poncho used as a pillow. He fell forward on his belly with a grunt as his body gave out. Setting the radio on the pack, Jayde felt his face in the dark and noticed that he was sweating.

"What do I have to do?" she asked, forcing herself to focus on the task at hand: removing a bullet. *Now is not the time to be squeamish, Jayde. He is your ticket out of here; and if he's injured, your chances of survival are severely diminished.*

"Get my shirt off me," he said in obvious pain. It seemed like a struggle just for him to turn his head so he could breathe and still talk to her.

"Do you want me to cut it off totally or just by the wound?" Jayde asked, totally confused about what to do. She helped him move his legs onto the pallet as well.

"Cut it off; you will need the extra material to bandage it later."

"Okay hold still." Jayde turned on the flashlight, laying it on his back so she could see as she carefully cut the sweaty shirt off of his firm body with the knife. She couldn't withhold her horrified gasp once she saw the hole in his right shoulder. "Now?" She paused. "What do I do?"

"Clean it out the best you can to get out all the dirt. When you are ready, take your knife and heat the blade using the lighter in the pack. It'll be hot after about thirty...forty seconds, then let it cool a little and use it to dig out the bullet. You will have to make the hole bigger to do that. Loosen it with the blade, and if you have to, pull the bullet out with your fingers; just make sure they are as clean as they can be," Tyson said in a weakened voice.

He fell silent. She shook him just before his eyes could fully close, and when they locked on hers, they were full of trust, searing directly into her soul.

"Once you get it out, rinse the wound again. Then pack it with strips of the shirt. Wrap the remaining cloth around it to anchor everything in place." Tyson shut his eyes again before adding, "You can do this Jayde. I believe in you." He sighed deeply. "Ready when you are, Doc."

Jayde looked around the cave, frantically blinking away tears. Dear God, she didn't think she could do it. "Okay," Jayde said, although whether to him or herself she wasn't sure.

Mrs. Jayde Kincade quickly made strips out of his shirt. "Here we go," she mumbled while she poured some water over them, washing away the sweat and dirt.

Tyson hissed in pain and arched his back off the rock. "Sorry," Jayde whispered as she picked up the flashlight and looked down into the wound. He had been right; she would have to open it up some more.

Taking the lighter, she pulled out her knife and held it over the small flame, evenly heating the blade. She then set down the lighter and picked up the flashlight, putting the sterilized blade into the wound.

Whack! Jayde flew through the air courtesy of the reflex of one Tyson Kincade, Navy SEAL. The knife clattered to the dirt and the water in the bottle spilled onto the cave floor. Dazed, it took Jayde a moment to regain her feet. She located the light and searched for the knife.

Tyson was barely conscious so Jayde got some more water from the small pool at the entrance, noticing it was light out, and then headed back into the darkness. She bathed his head and cleaned off the knife.

"How the hell am I supposed to do this?" she asked, not receiving an answer. For a moment she just looked at the man lying there on his stomach and then she figured it out. Jayde got everything set up a second time and climbed on top of his prone body, her body holding him still...well more still.

She put the light in her mouth so it could be held directly on the wound, leaving her with two free hands. Drooling around the flashlight crammed in her mouth, she heated the knife for a second time. Before she put the metal to his skin this time, Jayde wedged one knee on his opposite shoulder so he couldn't hit her again.

With strength she didn't know she had, Jayde managed to restrict his flailing movements; and after several minutes of digging and prodding, she proudly held the bullet in her bloodied fingers. Quickly, she rinsed the wound out again and as she was getting ready to put the strips inside the hole as packing she stopped. She couldn't do it; his shirt was too filthy. Her mind raced with possible options.

Still straddling his torso, she used the knife to rip off one of her pants' pockets, taking the material from the lining and putting it into the wound. Then she used pieces of his shirt to put over that. After that, she ripped out the ties at the bottom of her pant legs and slit her shirt off at the midsection.

Tyson still hadn't made a sound. She wiped off his forehead again and put a few drops of water into his mouth. Her head was killing her, so Jayde covered him with the blankets and moved silently up the cave to get some more water.

She cleaned off her own face and took a healthy swig of the cool liquid. Her body trembled with adrenaline as she wound down from the rush. Not sure what else to do, Jayde crawled in on Tyson's left side. They shared the rock bed and body heat as they both slept the day away.

Jayde awoke first. She slid out of Tyson's warmth in silence and shivered as the cold air from the cave hit her exposed midsection. She crept up to the front and drank some water, then came back to check on Tyson.

He stirred beneath her touch. "Jayde?"

"Who else would it be?" Relieved, she tried to sound lighthearted although he didn't sound very well. "How are you feeling?"

"Like shit," he ground out. "Did you get it?"

"Yep."

"Good job." She heard him struggling. "Can you help me get up?" he asked.

"Of course." She assisted him in sitting upright. "Are you hungry? Thirsty?"

"Not really. Still feeling a bit out of sorts. Give me a second to get my bearings. We should be pressing on." He moved his shoulder and let loose a string of curses.

Jayde grimaced in the dark, he was pissed. "I will be right back. I will get you some fresh water," she said.

She melted into the dimness and slid up the narrow tunnel towards the entrance. At the pool she dipped the canteen in the water and stole a glance outside. It was no longer light out; in fact, it was extremely dark and pouring down rain. "I hope this isn't going to create more of a problem," she said to herself.

After filling up the canteen, she headed back down the darkened walkway, which she had come to know fairly well, with relative ease. As she entered the open area, Jayde saw Tyson had laid out something in his lap and was staring at it, the hushed glow from the flashlight illuminating him. He still looked a little pale.

"What are you looking at?" she asked as she handed him the canteen of fresh cool water.

"A map I took from the hut. We are about here." He pointed with the hand holding the canteen. "And I think that if we call for help and set up a pickup we should be fine." He took a swig of the water and handed it back to her.

"Where would we have to go to send the signal?" Was there more climbing to be done? To be honest Jayde didn't think Tyson would be able to do any, not with his shoulder injured.

Tyson remained bent over the map. "If we could make here, I think it would be a good extraction point. We'd call and say we could make it in two days; I don't know how far away my Team is, though. Regardless, that might throw off the ones on our tail." He rolled his shoulder trying to get mobility in it. "Speaking of, they should be closing in soon; we need to go."

"I don't think anyone will be traveling out there right now. There's one hell of a storm raging. Even the waterfall seems fuller," Jayde said.

"How did you make it up there without the light?" he asked as his finger plotted some points.

"I have figured out how many steps it is for me to walk anywhere in this cave. Except for those three passageways; I am not going in there alone. But from here to the entrance, I could run in the dark if I had to." Jayde took another drink of water before heading for the pack to get some fruit and an MRE for Tyson. "Here," she said and handed him the open MRE. "Eat this."

Tyson looked up at her and smiled. "Thank you. For everything Jayde...I mean it." He reached for the package and frowned.

"What?" Jayde asked.

"Where is your shirt?" He shone the light on her bared belly.

"I used some of it for your bandages." She flushed as her dark arms slid around her midsection, trying to hide it from his gaze.

He chuckled, but then growled when the light hit her face. "What in the hell happened to your cheek?"

"Nothing." Jayde turned her face away from the light. "Nothing happened."

"Jayde," came his warning growl. He dropped the light onto the map and before she could move out of reach, he had her in his iron grip. "Tell me...oh, hell," his voice dropped and filled with shame. "I did this to you, didn't I?" He shook her slightly and repeated his question. "I did this to you, didn't I?"

Jayde pulled away from him and nodded. "Yes. Yes, Tyson, you did it. The first time I put the knife in your wound you spun back and hit me with your elbow."

Tyson shut his eyes and muttered in dismay, then opened them at her gentle touch. She had knelt down so they were eye to eye. "Tyson, listen to me. I'm fine. I am the one who got off easy; I know you didn't mean to do it, so don't worry about it."

"I am supposed to be protecting you," he half-heartedly complained as she kissed his mouth lightly.

"And you are. Look, you got a map as well as the radio. Now eat something." She picked up the light and shone it back on the map as he ate his MRE.

"We have to get out and make the call," he said, eating a bite of his food.

"Tonight?" Jayde was wired. Having the radio made her feel even more positive about getting out alive.

"Yes. There were men on my tail. And while the rain may slow them down, it won't stop them."

"Well, I think one of these passageways leads out of here; I smelled fresh air when I first got back here. So maybe if we went that way, we could get further away from them," Jayde suggested.

"Do you know which tunnel it was?" Tyson asked and began folding up the map with his one good hand.

"No. I wasn't brave enough to venture in them." Jayde took the blankets and started folding as well. She was fast and efficient; soon the ponchos were the only thing left out. The map and radio were safe in the pack when Jayde slid it on her back.

"What are you doing?" he asked, lurching off the rock.

"Getting ready to go." Jayde pulled on a poncho over her body, pack included, and picked up the flashlight.

"I can —"

"Not with your shoulder, you can't. You still have to be in the lead, and I don't know if I can do that," she interrupted.

"Taking point," he corrected. "I will take point."

Here we go with that damn military jargon again. "Fine, you still have to 'take point'. I am fine with the pack; don't worry. Let's just get going." Jayde helped him slide on the poncho and gave him the flashlight.

"Ready?" he asked as he moved to the mouth of each passageway, inhaling deeply until he found the one with the scent of fresh air in it. It was the one on the far right.

"Yes, sir, Lieutenant. Let's do this." Jayde had the gun at her side just in case.

Tyson spun around to face her and shone the light on her battered face, wincing at the sight of her marred beauty. "Don't call me Sir. Or Lieutenant. Tyson or Cade will be just fine." His eyes became incredibly soft as he stared at her. "You are amazing...just an amazing woman, Jayde. Now, let's go home."

He turned and led the way into the dark tunnel. He turned the light on only sporadically, not wanting to have a light to warn anyone they were coming.

"Why do they call you Cade? What does it mean?" Jayde asked as they moved continually deeper into the passageway.

"Just 'cause it is part of my last name. I got it at OCS and it just stuck through BUD/S."

"Oh. What exactly does OCS and BUD/S stand for?"

He grinned as he maneuvered carefully around another corner. "OCS stands for Officer Candidate School and BUD/S is Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL. It's part of SEAL training."

"So you do demolitions?" She watched his body in the low light. "Well, I mean if you can tell me, that is. I don't know what you can tell and what you can't."

"My little rose, I can tell you just about anything. We are married, you know."

She scoffed. "Right."

"I have been known to do demolitions."

"What did you get injured from before? You know, when you said that you had been put on medical leave."

"Oh, I remember," he murmured; his voice was so soothing to her entire body. "I had been working undercover at a stakeout when I was stabbed. They believed I needed some time off since I was apparently not paying good enough attention to my surroundings. I had been distracted."

Distracted. "Isn't that just another word for being with a woman you ought not be with?" Jayde questioned.

"I refuse to answer that on the grounds that I may incriminate myself," he responded with a chuckle.

"I know what that means." And she did, but it wasn't any of her business. Not that she wanted to envision Tyson in bed with another woman.

He stopped and turned back to her, the light between their sweaty bodies. Tyson stepped up close to her as he could and murmured seductively, "Now, now, little rose. Don't be jealous. Since I met you, I couldn't dream of another woman. Nor would I want to. You are all the woman I could ever want or need."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Well, well, well," she drawled. "Are you comin' onto me, Mr. Kincade?"

His firm lips twitched as he snaked his good arm around her, bringing them that much closer together. "Yes, Mrs. Kincade, I sure am. But if you aren't sure I am, then perhaps I need to work on my flirting skills."

"Maybe you should just kiss your wife and get her the hell out of here," she snapped playfully.

"As my little rose commands."

Gently, ever so gently so as not to disturb her face injury, Tyson pressed his lips to hers. Both of them felt the heat flare up between

them again as their tongues began to duel with one another. The kiss lasted a short time, but the passion between them could not be denied.

"Let's go," he muttered in a gravelly voice.

"Right behind you," she answered, her voice not any better than his.

For a while they walked in silence until they began to hear the torrential downpour still occurring outside in the jungle. Slowly, Tyson led them to the entrance of that side of the mountain. After he was confident there was no one there waiting for them he stopped. "Hand me the map."

"Just a second." She swung the bag off her back and grabbed the map. "Here we go." Jayde opened and held it while Tyson shone the light on it and did some calculations.

"Okay. Can you hand me the radio?" He carefully maneuvered his wounded body down to sit along the floor, its dampness indicating just how close they were to the entrance.

Jayde complied and sank to the ground next to him, spreading the map out in front of them. She silently took the flashlight he handed her and kept it on the surface of the topographical map. From lowered lashes she looked at the man next to her.

He had a beard growing and a moustache, which totally changed his appearance. His eyebrows were furrowed in thought as he turned on the radio and searched for a specific channel. He found the one he wanted and pressed the button, saying in his totally seductive voice, "Blue One, Gray Two. Blue One, Gray Two." He released the button and waited. Nothing.

Tyson tried again. "Blue One, Gray Two. Blue One, Gray Two." He waited a second time muttering, "Come on guys, I know you are listening to this channel."

At his side sat Jayde, not saying a word, just holding the light on the map. She pulled out the water and offered it to him. He declined with a shake of his head before repeating his call. "Blue One, Gray Two. Blue One, Gray Two."

This time he got an answer. "Blue One here. Nice to hear from you, Gray Two, we were getting worried." It was a deep voice that sounded like Scott's.

"Thank God," Tyson said before he answered. "I am glad to hear from you too."

"What's your status, Gray Two?"

"We have one injury but other than that we want to go home." He smiled at Jayde. "So come get us."

"Roger that, Gray Two. Give us your coordinates." Relief was apparent in Scott's voice.

"Blue One; we need to maneuver a bit for there's a pack of hounds on our tails. After this we will be running like a fox at a hunt. How soon can you be here?"

"We are ready now; we've been ready, Gray Two, just waitin' on you, man. Just waitin' on you."

As Tyson gave Scott more information, Jayde stood and walked towards the entrance of the cave looking out into the rainy night. Soon, she told herself, all this would be over soon. It was coming to a head. She couldn't see Tyson or hear anything over a low murmur. Soon, she would be in her own place. A new place but at least there would be civilization around. But no Tyson. Gain something, lose something.

A shape materialized beside her. "They are on their way. Just a few more hours." Jayde felt his body move behind her. "We need to get moving so we are at the pickup point on time," Tyson said quietly.

"It's going to be light soon isn't it?" she asked, still facing the driving rain.

"Yes it is." He reached out and touched her shoulder. "You okay?"

"It's kind of surreal don't you think?" Jayde said full of awe. Her hand spread out in front of them. "I mean, look at all this. Look what I accomplished. Part of me still doesn't think it's real. It's kinda like a dream."

Tyson smiled. "Come on," he whispered. "Let's get going."

Jayde inhaled deeply. "Okay, I'll get the stuff. Be right back." She quickly packed it all back. As she stood, she saw light bouncing off the walls and heard the faint hum of Spanish voices.

Chapter Twelve

Tyson had just turned off the radio when he saw Jayde shoving the pack on and covering it with the poncho as she ran back to him. "They're coming, Tyson! I heard Spanish and saw light reflecting off the walls!"

Tyson didn't say a word, just grabbed her hand and led her out into the deluge. *Shit!* He took them down into the jungle, weaving in and out of the wet trees. As he stumbled, Jayde removed her hand from his, allowing him his good arm for balance.

He lengthened his stride and hoped she would say something if their pace was too fast. Knowing she carried the pack, he didn't want to push too hard; but if she'd heard them in the passageway, they were way too close to his woman. With his injury, he didn't like those odds.

For the next hour, they stumbled in the mire and mud, up and down through the woods. "How are you doing back there?" his stage whisper came back on the wind and rain.

"Okay. I'm doing okay," Jayde responded.

"We can stop for about two minutes," he said as he leaned against a tree.

Jayde whipped off the poncho and shoved it in the bottom of the pack after pulling out a piece of fruit for Tyson. "Here, eat this. You look like you could use it." His breathing was hoarse. She shrugged the pack back on her shoulders and readjusted the straps.

"Why did you take off your poncho?" he asked, enjoying a bite of the rich pawpaw that tasted like both mango and banana.

"It is way too big for me. I don't think I will get much wetter, but I can move faster without it," Jayde said without hesitating. "Ready? Let's go."

Tyson threw the remains of his fruit into the jungle and started down the path he'd chosen. The sky had gotten a tiny bit brighter, but the clouds were still an ominous black, full of rain.

At the bottom of one of the hills, Tyson stumbled and swore as he hit his shoulder on the ground. Seconds later, Jayde was kneeling next to him. "Hang on, Tyson. Let me help you sit up. Then I will check the wound."

Struggling, Tyson leaned against the tree. Jayde bent over him and moved his poncho to the side. Tyson stared at the woman in front of him.

Rain had completely drenched her body. Her hair was back in a ponytail except where the strands had escaped to plaster themselves to her forehead. Her shirt was cut off just below her breasts and it had molded itself to her chest.

The olive pants were covered in mud and he smiled as he glimpsed the gun at her back. *Amazing* was the only word he could think to describe her. Just as he started to say something, a large crashing noise erupted in the jungle.

Jayde jumped and spun around just in time to see a wall of mud slide down over the path they had just traveled. As quickly as it started the jungle fell quiet. "Jesus," she panted, her hand over her heart.

Tyson struggled to his feet. "Let's go. That will slow them down or stop them completely." He staggered off, his exhaustion apparent, but he kept pressing on.

For another hour, Jayde followed him in silence as they headed for their destination. The rain picked up. It seemed for every step they took, they slid back five.

Tyson was not faring well. He slipped several times and was barely able to stay on his feet.

"Tyson," she called up. "Can we stop for a bit? Please?"

"Sure." He gratefully slid to the ground and scooted back against a tree for support. "Just a bit though." His skin was pale and drawn from exertion and pain.

Jayde took the pack off and dug through for the last MRE, opening it and handing it to him. "Eat."

"You need to eat. I'm fine," he protested.

"I will eat fruit. You need it." Jayde shoved the MRE into his face. "You are losing your strength. Eat Tyson."

Tyson watched the trail behind them, reluctant to pause for more than necessary.

"I will keep watch," Jayde promised, as if sensing his concern. "I have the binoculars and a gun. Eat."

His sensible little rose. With a nod, he dug into the food with relish.

"How are we doing time wise getting to the extraction point?" she asked as she bit into a banana.

"Good. We are ahead of time. I think when we get there we will just hunker down like we did the first time. It is just over this hill and

on up to the meadow. Then we'll have to do is keep out of sight until the ride gets here." He finished his MRE and eagerly took the banana she offered him, not realizing it was the last one they had.

"Well, let's get there, then. Just let me make sure your bandage is tied on tight." She crawled over to him in the mud and checked that her knots were still holding the material in place. "Looks good." With a muddy hand she wiped her face, leaving a streak across her forehead. Standing, she shrugged the pack on and waited for Tyson to rise.

It took him four tries before he could get his feet under his body and stand, and he was still weaving.

Jayde looked between him and the hill they were about to scale. "You aren't going to make it without help," she said matter-of-factly. Not waiting for an answer, she removed the pack and began to dig in it again, pulling out the non-fire blanket.

She nodded as she withdrew her knife and cut it into strips the length of the blanket. Jayde had about six pieces of material when she was done. Tyson had slipped back down and passed out. Moving fast to get his face out of the mud, Jayde began to cry.

"What am I supposed to do now?!" she yelled. It looked like a mud pit, and given the amount of rain, another slide wasn't far from her mind. "Damn it, can't I get a break here?" She looked around through the tears and the rain. "Think Jayde think. What would Tyson do if he were awake and in your position? Probably throw me over his shoulder and sprint up the mountain!" She chuckled with hysteria, then she snapped her fingers.

"That's it!" Jayde pulled out the fire blanket and rolled Tyson's unconscious body on it, leaving about one quarter of the material above his head empty. "Well, Kincade, your feet will hang out, but considering the circumstances, I don't think you will mind."

Using the long strips she cut earlier, Jayde fashioned an x-pattern harness around his chest, tying it off with square knots so she was sure it wouldn't come undone. Then she attached two of the strips from his harness that would eventually be attached to her waist. "Don't want you slipping away from me here."

Jayde stuffed the radio into a leg pocket and tied on the machete to hang from her waist. The gun Tyson had been carrying was shoved into the front of her pants so she had one in front and one in back. The map was stowed in her back pocket.

With the pack empty, Jayde cut it so the bottom would slid over Tyson's head and keep most of the rain out of his nose and mouth; the rest she slit so it would lay flat and wrapped it around his wounded shoulder to give him the most protection she could. With the last strip of blanket she had, she secured it to his shoulders where the straps were of the x-pattern. Jayde lifted the corners of the blanket and tied the strips onto her. Finally ready, she looked over her shoulder at the man lying there.

Grabbing the corners of the blanket, Jayde began the arduous journey to the top of the hill. "Holy hell, you weigh a lot," she grumbled as she dug into the wet ground and inch by tortuous inch moved them upwards. *Sure as shittin' don't look like he weighs this much!*

Using the blanket to help slide him over the soft ground, as well as having him anchored to her, eventually Jayde had a rhythm going. She ignored the way the straps dug into and cut her skin. Still, the last hill took her over an hour to climb.

As she hauled herself and her heavy load up over the top, she just about wept with relief. There were salty tears mixing with the rain and sweat that poured down her face. The blanket strips had cut into her arms and hands, drawing blood.

Making sure Tyson would not slide down the hill, she knelt down, wheezing and panting. It took her a while before she realized she was sitting out in the open and made a pretty good target in the rainy morning.

Although exhausted, Jayde got to her feet and looked for the meadow. It was off in the distance but she knew there was no way she could pull him anymore. Her hands were torn raw and it hurt to close them. But maybe she could manage to get them in the woods off this path.

Fresh tears fell as she wrapped the strips around her cut hands. She tugged and pulled, crying in pain and frustration as his body seemed to fight her every straining step of the way. It took her another fifteen minutes to move them under some cover. Then she tried her best to erase the tracks they'd left behind.

Trembling with fatigue, Jayde used the streaming rain to wash the blood off her hands and arms, not to mention the sweat pouring off her body. A crackle by her leg caught her attention.

"Gray Two. Gray Two. Answer me!" The pocket of her pants had begun to speak. "What is your status, Gray Two?"

Fumbling slightly, Jayde pulled the radio out and pressed the talk button. "Hello?"

"That you, darlin'?"

"Who else would it be?" she snapped.

"Well, where be Cade? I don't think I want him to beat me for talkin' to his woman o' the hour," the masculine tone said.

Woman of the hour? Jayde knew some of them knew he was married. Perhaps it was a test. "I better not just be the woman o' the hour. I'm his damn wife." She paused for a moment. "Stop playing. How long till we meet up?"

"On the way, baby, about thirty minutes. You be a'ite till then? Where is that lazy man o' yours?"

"Doing what you said. You know how he is. Just lies there and lets me do all the work; you would think he'd want to get some sun to cover up his pale-ass skin, but no. He just wants to lie around, never takes me anywhere." That was the only way Jayde knew to let them know Tyson was the injured one, not she.

A chuckle reached her ears. "He always did like to just watch your six. How is it by the way?" Jayde was pretty sure it was Maverick she was talking to, but she wasn't positive.

"Why you want to know about my six? It just needs to be sitting on my favorite horse, Maverick. Have you seen him lately?" she questioned.

"Yes, darlin', I have. Maverick is here waiting for you. So is Harrier, you know, your man's horse."

She released a huge sigh. "Good. In that case, my six is about to get run over by the pack of hounds. They are getting restless." Jayde picked up the binoculars that were around her neck and peered through them, trying to see if they were still coming. They were. Slowly, but they were coming. "Really restless. Don't be late, baby, or I am callin' it quits between us," she said in as teasing a manner as she could.

"Hang tight, darlin'. I'm comin for ya." Then the voice was gone.

Jayde looked at the man still unconscious at her feet. "Come on, Tyson, wake up. I need you. I can't do this on my own." Not receiving a response, she knelt down beside him and removed the bottom of the bag that protected his head to slap his face. "Wake up!" she hissed. "Damn you, wake up!" Nothing.

"Well, hell. I don't know what to do." She sank to the ground beside him and cut the strips that tied them together. It was funny; she

hadn't expected her last moments on earth to be in a Central American jungle. She closed her eyes. "I guess it is just my time."

"I don't think so, little rose." Tyson's croaking voice was music to her ears.

Her eyes flew open to see him struggling to sit upright. "Tyson!" she exhaled in relief. He was awake and somehow she felt everything would now be all right. "We have to move. They are coming closer." Her silver lining had just shown up.

Tyson ran his eyes over the woman sitting across from him. She was muddy from head to toe. His sharp eyes picked out the blood on her hands and arms, but she was alive. And armed to the teeth. He noticed the guns on her along with the machete and knife on her leg.

It was his job to get her out of here. "Let's go, then. We need to get to the rendezvous point." His body was in the shutting down process; those bullets must have been tipped with poison. Whatever it was, it kicked his ass.

Jayde stood. "They said they would be here in about thirty minutes. That was about fifteen minutes ago."

Tyson stood also. He took in his surroundings and noticed the harness around his bare chest. "You would make one hell of a SEAL, Mrs. Kincade, one hell of a SEAL." His lips brushed against hers as he slid a gun out of her waistband and flipped the safety off, keeping it in his hand. "Let's go."

Tyson took point; they left with what was on their person. Heading out at a slow trot, Tyson moved towards the meadow. His head pounded, the nausea overwhelmed, and his shoulder blazed, but he didn't have a choice.

Keeping an eye on Jayde as they ran right through the thinning trees to the open meadow, he saw the fierce look on her face. She was in pain but not complaining. Suddenly, he stopped at a low lying area in the meadow and dropped to the ground. He smiled as her brown body fell next to his.

"What are we doing?" Jayde whispered.

"Waiting," Tyson said.

"In the open?" her question was incredulous.

"Where do you think they will look first? Besides, the chopper can see us from the sky, but the grass is relatively tall and thick, so the men following us will not be able to," Tyson announced.

Jayde shook her head in dismay. "You are insane."

"Probably." Tyson agreed. "Can't you hear it?"

"Hear what?" Jayde cocked her head to the side.

"The chopper. It's coming," he said, smiling.

"All I hear is rain and thunder," she vocalized with a shrug.

"That is the chopper — the thunder you are hearing," Tyson clarified it for her.

"Oh." Jayde rolled over and watched the direction they came from, gun in hand and ready.

They stayed still and remained silent for a while until Tyson broke the silence with a question. "What is that thing on your necklace?"

Jayde smiled. "It is a karabiner, a locking one to be accurate; I figured it would not be exactly a common thing for people to have on a pendant, yet considering how much I love to rock climb...well...it just fit." It was an oblong metal ring primarily used to attach a freely running rope to a piton, the metal spike used for securing rope when climbing.

"That's true; it isn't a common thing. But it's cool." For a time he fell silent as they listened to the helicopter get closer. "Answer something else for me, Jayde," Tyson said.

Flicking a glance at him, she waited for him to continue. When he didn't she prompted. "What?"

"That first day we met." He looked at her. "What were you thinking about to get that heated look on your face? You were drinking from your glass and you smiled before this passionate expression took over. What were you thinking about?"

Jayde blushed.

"Well?" he pushed.

"I was thinking about someone if you must know." She shut her eyes, steadfastly refusing to look at the man beside her.

"Do tell." He had a hunch of who she meant but wanted confirmation.

"No," she denied with a firm shake of her head.

"Now, now, you aren't supposed to keep secrets from your husband."

"I'm not."

"Was it a man?" Tyson asked.

"Yes."

"Handsome?"

"That man took my breath away. Now will you let it go already?" she begged.

Before he could say anything in response, a huge dark-gray chopper flew into view. "Get ready," he answered, all business once again. Tyson repositioned himself so he was squatting on his haunches and Jayde followed suit just as the first shots rang out.

Five men in green fatigues jumped out of the bird that had the word "NAVY" printed on the tail. They were aiming guns in their general direction as they moved swiftly towards them, eventually falling into a staggered formation and keeping an eye on all their surroundings. Sooner than expected, their painted faces upon Tyson and Jayde. Three of them took up positions to defend while the other two dropped down beside them.

"Long time no see, Cade," one man said with a grin that faded as he took in Tyson's injuries.

"Too long, Baby Boy, too long." Tyson answered him, already succumbing to the exhaustion and security in knowing his Team would see to Jayde's safety.

"Well, let's get you moving. Come on, man, let's go." The man dubbed "Baby Boy" pushed his gun to the side and lifted Tyson like he were a flower being picked, despite the height difference in the men: Tyson was much taller. Another man fell in close and they headed for the chopper, Tyson's legs dragging behind him as if he were a rag doll. His teammates and the rebels were exchanging shots, but the M-60 on the chopper was doing a good job of keeping their foes at bay.

The last thing Tyson saw before he fell back into unconsciousness Maverick lifting Jayde into the chopper and looking too closely at her bared skin. Tyson vowed to himself that he'd kick his ass for that as soon as it didn't hurt to think.

Chapter Thirteen

The second Jayde's feet hit the floor of the helicopter, she scrambled over to where a medic was looking over a now unconscious Tyson. Without making a sound, he reached into the bag beside him and worked silently over his fallen comrade as the chopper began its ascent to the sky.

"Ma'am, you need to back away so I can get in here," the corpsman next to her said.

Jayde speared him with a glare; he hardly looked old enough to shave and she didn't trust him with her life, much less with the life of the man she loved.

"Let's get your injuries checked and then you can come back and sit with him," Harrier said as he materialized beside her.

Jayde knew he was concerned for his friend and teammate as well, so she reluctantly moved away. The second she did, Baby Boy had taken her spot and begun putting an IV into Tyson's arm.

"Jayde," the blond man spoke, jerking her attention away from Tyson.

Her dark eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot from stress and lack of sleep, but she clearly met Scott's blue ones. "Huh?"

"Let me see those wounds you have." He beckoned her with a wave of his hand.

Wordlessly she held out her arms. With a gentleness that she never would have expected from this man, Scott cleaned off the blood and patted them dry before pouring a healthy dose of antiseptic all over her arms and hands. She clenched her jaw and jerked with a hiss.

"You all right?" he asked.

"That shit stings!"

"How'd you get them?" He wiped away the bubbles that had come out of the cuts. "Not to mention that shiner on your face. Even the mud can't hide that one."

"Tyson," she uttered even as her eyes drifted back over to his body. They were still working on him, but one of them had picked up a radio and was talking into it, gesturing about.

"Care to explain that further?" Scott asked as he handed her a toilette for her face.

"Well, I got the shiner — as you put it — when I dug the bullet out of Tyson's shoulder. The second I put the knife in him to open the wound up further, he caught me with his elbow and knocked me back to the floor." She gingerly touched the bruise, wincing at the contact before moving on to the rest of her face. "So having learned that lesson, after I re-sterilized the knife, I straddled him and put my knee on his opposite shoulder and used my body to help hold him in place." Jayde shrugged. "I just hope he will be okay."

"He's a fighter. He is just very dehydrated. What about these?" He nodded at her arms and hands.

"I had to pull him up the last hill, since he lost consciousness. So I tied that harness around him and used the other blanket kind of like a sled. But I guess I hadn't counted on how heavy he really was or how much the slick mud would want to pull him back down. I had to let go of the blanket and wrap the straps around my arms to make it up. With all the pulling and sliding, I guess they just cut into me."

She looked down and flinched in pain as she tried unsuccessfully to make a fist with either hand. Suddenly she stared directly into the eyes of the man across from her, totally ignorant to the fact all the men had heard what she'd done for their teammate. "He will be okay won't he?" Jayde asked, scared.

Scott nodded. "Yes. We will get him to the doctor on the carrier immediately. One of the best doctors. They're waiting for him now."

"Carrier?" Jayde questioned, once again confused.

"The aircraft carrier we are going to. Don't worry; he'll be fine," Harrier explained.

"Good." Jayde tried to smile and failed. "I heard you two in the room. I know Carrie is waiting for him back home." She shook her head when he started to interrupt her. "No. Don't say anything, please. I think I will just sit with him and say my goodbyes now." She reached out and tentatively patted Scott on the arm before moving back over to the SEAL on the floor.

Scott wrapped a warm blanket around her wet body and paused at the tears he saw running down her face. "Jayde. Please let me explain..."

"No. I knew our time together was only temporary. Don't make a big deal over it," she said, embarrassed he witnessed her crying.

"But the things I said —"

"You were just looking out for a friend. A very admirable trait." She looked at him and added, "Thanks for coming to get us." Then she withdrew into the blanket and watched as the lush mountains gave way to the ocean, all the while keeping one hand on the man beside her.

The second the chopper landed, Tyson was whisked away and taken to sickbay. Jayde, still wrapped in the blanket, went into another room where three men in khakis greeted her. The men who escorted her snapped out a salute and then left her alone with them.

"I must say first of all, Mrs. Kincade, it is an honor to meet you. I am Captain March, CO of the carrier." He reached out his hand and shock filled his features as she dropped the blanket and very gingerly shook his hand. "Perhaps you would like a shower and a fresh change of clothes before we continue talking."

"Oh, that would be heavenly. But please call me Ms. Porter or Jayde. Tyson and I...I mean, Lieutenant Kincade, and I aren't really married. That was just to help him out." She smiled through her exhaustion as a female officer came in and led her to an officer's stateroom.

Jayde took a warm shower and washed a week's worth of sweat and mud down the drain. Her body shook with emotion and fatigue, telling her she'd reached the limit of her endurance. After the pain in her arms and hands got to be too much, she left the small shower and saw a towel and a fresh set of clothes for her.

The clothes were a bit big, but since they were clean, Jayde didn't have any complaints. In fact, she simply wore the coveralls over the tank top and pair of shorts that were left for her. She also used the toothbrush, toothpaste, and deodorant provided and felt semi-human again as she dried her hair with the towel before brushing it out. "Damn, I need to get in to the salon for my hair." She raised an eyebrow and smirked at her reflection. "And for my legs. I am so due for another waxing. Maybe I should take a week at the spa." Exiting the bathroom, she found that same female officer waiting for her. "Thank you for the clothes," Jayde said with a tired smile.

"My pleasure, ma'am," the woman said.

Jayde looked at her and took stock. She was short, about five-foot-one with bright red hair and pale skin. On the collar of her shirt there was a gold rectangle. "Please call me Jayde."

"If you would follow me, the captain has some food waiting for you," The small woman said, opening the door and allowing Jayde to walk through first.

"Real food?" Her stomach growled at the thought. "What is your name?" Jayde asked.

"Ensign Miller, ma'am...I mean Jayde."

"Thank you, Ensign Miller." Jayde waited for her to pass and fell into step behind her.

"Watch your step here, ma'am, and mind your head," Ensign Miller warned.

Jayde's sore legs screamed in anguish as they maneuvered back up the four flights to a room with a closed door. The ensign knocked and waited for permission to enter before swinging the door in and smiling at Jayde then leaving her there.

Remaining in the doorway, Jayde looked around the room and realized she was the only woman present. She recognized Scott, Maverick, and the captain. The rest she didn't know.

"Come in, Mrs. Kincaide," Captain March said, "have a seat and help yourself to some food. I only ask that you go to sickbay when you are done here and have your arms and hands checked out by our Doc."

Jayde walked towards the table but hesitated when she got there. She didn't know where to sit. Scott and Maverick gestured to the chair between them and she took it.

One of the men set a bowl of soup down in front of her along with French bread for dipping. A cup of tea was placed near her as well. The men watched her as she ate holding the utensils carefully in her injured hands.

Finally, she spoke. "Captain, I really appreciate this, but I am feeling very awkward here. I am the only one eating and y'all are staring at me. I am getting self-conscious."

"Sorry." He gestured to the others and they began to eat as well.

When she finished, the captain leaned forward in his chair. His peppered hair added an air of distinction to his appearance. "We are going to put you on a transport and fly you our Pensacola base where you will be put on a flight to...Seattle, was it?" He nodded to the guy at his left; he was in a suit, not a uniform, "This is Director Nubo of the CIA."

"Nice to meet you, sir," Jayde said. *CIA? What the hell? Tyson, I'm scared. Am I in trouble?*

The man appeared to be in his mid-sixties. His dark skin was not very wrinkled, but his white hair made him appear more severe. He smiled at her, an action that seemed to take a lot of concentration on his part. "Nice to meet you, young lady. Thank you for helping out our man. Now we just need you to understand you can't say anything about this to anyone."

You have got to be shittin' me! Jayde slid her plate back. The immediate hunger pains were gone and her hands were too sore to eat anymore anyway; she'd barely been able to hold the spoon.

"And just who in the hell would I tell?" she asked.

"Your family," he said. "We can't let this be known to the general public. In fact, it won't go past this room. We have told your family that your ability was enlisted in Belize and for that I offered you a job in Seattle, which you took. So far we have evaded their calls to you, saying you were in meetings or on a business trip." He waved his hand as if it weren't all that important to him. "Bottom line, your new cell phone is waiting for you in Pensacola along with some of your own clothes. I believe your parents are waiting for you at their home. Your secretary told them you would be stopping in on your way back from Pensacola." He looked at her with a serious stare. "Just don't tell them the truth. As far as they know, we deal with paintings. You buy and sell them all over the country for us."

I work for an art dealer. Jayde was having a hard time believing this whole thing. "Don't worry; I won't be telling anyone," she assured him. "It's not exactly believable anyway." *As opposed to the art dealer scam.*

"Good. I am obligated to let you know what will happen if you do tell--"

Jayde slid her chair back standing abruptly. "Excuse me. Captain, if you could shove me in the direction of sickbay, I think I need to have this looked at and then I will get ready to leave. Thank you so much for your hospitality." Pinning the CIA man with a stare that would've made Jayde's father proud of her, she said, "You know what; I am just not in the mood to have any more threats put to my person. I've just been chased through the jungle by people who wanted to kill me. Don't worry; I will keep my mouth shut."

Scott and Maverick had stood and offered to take her to sickbay. So they left the room, Scott leading, Jayde in the middle, and Maverick bringing up the rear. It took them about ten minutes of maneuvering inside the floating city before they arrived at a door that had a gold caduceus on it.

"Here we are," Scott said and opened the door.

It was much bigger than Jayde had been expecting. A voice announced to them, "Be right with you." A black woman moved a privacy screen around a bed before she walked toward them. "You must be Jayde, the lieutenant's wife," she said with a smile, then her eyes moved over the two men with her.

Jayde found herself smiling in return. The woman had a winning personality. "Well, I am Jayde." She stopped as she recalled what the CIA man had said.

"Well, Jayde, I'm HMC Rogets. Why don't you just have a seat over there and we will look over your arms and hands, get you fixed up in no time."

Jayde looked to Scott and Maverick and they nodded, then she did as she was told. As soon as she sat on the exam table, the men disappeared out the door.

Rogets was very thorough but gentle as she cleaned out, sterilized, and dried Jayde's wounds. "I heard the corpsman say what you had done for Lieutenant Kincade. That makes you a hero." She smiled as she turned her tender touch to the swollen cheek. "Sorry," she said as she witnessed Jayde's wince.

"I'm no hero," Jayde said. "Tyson is the hero. He saved us."

There was a noncommittal sound from the woman working on her injuries.

"I did. I would have died long before if not for him." Jayde insisted.

Another mumble.

"Is he...is...Tyson...Lieutenant Kincade...doing all right?" Jayde finally asked after hemming and hawing about it.

HMC Rogets smiled. "I was wondering how long it was going to take you to ask about him. Do you want to see him?"

The door opened and Scott walked back in. He smiled at them both. Jayde looked back at the woman next to her. "Maybe just for a minute. If that's all right."

"Of course it is." HMC Rogets gestured towards the curtain. "He is behind there, still delirious though, so he drifts in and out of consciousness."

Extremely nervous, Jayde slid off the exam table and went to the pale curtain that was drawn around a bed. She could hear monitors beeping and raspy breathing.

A bit unsure Jayde moved the curtain aside slowly. She slipped in and stared down at the man lying there. He hadn't regained much of his color and that scared her. His face was still covered by hair; his eyes, although closed, seemed tense around the edges.

At a snail's pace, Jayde reached out and stroked his hair. It was filthy, and yet it felt so good to her. Just to be able to touch him once again. Her other hand gently traced the side of his face, its fingers moving along his scruffy beard.

"Well, Mr. Kincade," she spoke softly. "This certainly has been an adventure I will never forget. Thank you for getting me through it safely. I will never forget you." Jayde leaned over and kissed his forehead.

"Carrie," his raspy voice said.

Jayde started at that. Was he waking up? Then it dawned on her that he'd asked for Carrie. It was as if her heart had been ripped out of her chest with that one name. Her dark eyes welled up with tears as the curtain moved to admit Scott.

"We need to get going. The COD is ready to leave," Scott said in a gentle voice.

Jayde wiped away tears and nodded. *Like I know what in the hell a COD is!*

"Carrie, please," Tyson mumbled one more time.

Scott looked between the man lying on the bed and Jayde standing next to him. "He is not sure of what he is saying," Scott tried, reaching out a hand to her in comfort.

She dodged him. "Don't Scott. Please. I am sure he knows exactly what he is saying." Jayde struggled to remove the titanium band from her finger. Finally it was off and she placed it on Tyson's pinkie finger. "He is asking for her. Let's just go." A glance down at her finger showed a tan line from the week she'd been a wife. It seemed so naked.

Jayde reached out for Tyson one more time before stopping herself. "Goodbye, Tyson Randolph Kincade," she said before she turned and left.

As she was buckled in for the ride back to the United States, Jayde noticed Scott and the other members of the Megalodon Team standing there on the flight deck. All of them saluted her and she waved as the door was slammed shut and the chopper lifted into the sky.

Chapter Fourteen

Four months later in Seattle, Washington

The damn phone was ringing off the hook. Jayde ran for it, spilling paint all over the tarp she'd placed on the floor. "Shit," she swore as she jumped the last can and jerked the phone up. "Hello?" she yelled over Nelly's music that blared throughout her apartment.

A deep voice came through the receiver and nearly brought her to her knees. "Jayde?" She couldn't respond and so the voice spoke again. "Jayde? Are you there?"

Tyson. After all this time. And he sounded good; in fact, he sounded delicious. "Yes," she croaked only to clear her throat and try again. "Yes, I'm here."

"Do you know who this is?" that sinful voice asked.

"I believe so." Like she could ever forget the raw sexual desire his voice stirred in her. There was loud noise in the background. Music and people shouting back and forth, it sounded almost like he was in a bar. "What do you want, Tyson?"

"To talk. I'm in town. Can you meet me for dinner somewhere? Or I could bring something to your place," Tyson answered.

Please come here and make love to me. "Actually I am really busy today and I have a dinner function this evening. Maybe some other time?" She just wasn't strong enough to face him and hear him tell her about Carrie. *What is he doing in Seattle? There isn't a base here.*



Tyson knew she was deliberately avoiding him. He also knew she hadn't touched the money he'd sent to her account.

When he'd finally regained consciousness, Tyson had been at Bethesda Naval Hospital. He'd been severely dehydrated and mildly poisoned by the bullet in his shoulder. The doctor had told him whoever had taken the bullet out had saved his life.

Yes, she had. Tyson had waited anxiously for Jayde to visit him. That had never happened. Carrie had, his teammates had, but not Jayde, never Jayde. He'd also told the counterterrorism unit's repre-

sentative about the rebel camp he had found and she'd said they would take care of it.

The day he'd checked out the hospital, Scott had taken him back to his studio in Georgetown. Tyson had been packing his things and opened the top drawer. The ring he'd placed on her finger in Belize...lay inside.

"She heard you call for Carrie, you know," Scott had told him as he'd lovingly and painfully put the ring in his duffel bag.

"I don't want, Carrie," Tyson had said without looking up. "I just want my wife back."

"Let's get you home, Cade. Come on."

Once again a full-fledged member of SEAL Team Seventeen, Tyson had returned to missions, and doing what he loved. But the men would notice him staring off into space during down times or looking at the ring he wore around his neck, which matched the one he still wore on his finger when the situation would allow him to wear it.

Now they were docked in Bremerton, WA on one of the submarines stationed there. Tyson took the hour ferry ride to Seattle and called her from a bar along the waterfront, not passing up the opportunity to see her after all these months. He knew exactly where her apartment was but wanted her to invite him. But now that he heard her evasion tactics, he didn't care. He was going to see her. Today.



Jayde stared at the phone in her hand. Her whole body felt like it was on pins and needles just from that short conversation. It took a bit before the pounding beat of Nelly broke through her trance.

An hour later, she was rinsing out the paint roller in her sink. The last wall had been painted, and the place was finally beginning to feel like home. As she set the brushes and rollers in the other sink to dry she heard a knock on the door.

"Coming," she yelled over the music. Jayde stopped to pick up her paint rag and dried her hands as she headed for the door. She didn't look through the peephole because she was expecting a package.

She opened the door widely and froze. Instead of the delivery man, there stood Tyson Randolph Kincade. He leaned nonchalantly on the doorframe and in his hand was a bag with rich aromas coming from it.

He looked awesome. His face was once again clean shaven and his skin was tanned just like she remembered it; only now, his hair was cut

short, highlighting his facial features. Hazel eyes sparkled with amusement and more than a bit of passion. "Hello, Jayde," he murmured seductively as he pushed his way into the apartment. "I brought you some food since you are apparently too busy to eat with me."

Jayde watched him walked over to her kitchen table and set the bag down on it. He wore a pair of blue jeans, hiking boots, and a white T-shirt that accentuated his tanned skin and lean muscles. His clothing highlighted every beautiful inch of his body.

As if oblivious to her shock, he rummaged through her kitchen and found plates and silverware, then transferred the food to the dishes and gestured her over. "Jayde, come eat." He pulled out a chair and waited for her to take it.

Slowly, she walked towards him, stopping to pick up the remote for the stereo and turned down the music so it was just a faint hum. "What are you doing here?" she asked and slid into the chair. *Why am I reacting this way to you? You wanted Carrie!*

"I said we needed to talk." He pushed her chair in.

"And I said I was busy today," she countered, her dark eyes following him around the table to the other side where he sat.

"Well, I am not in town for very long," he said, then winced.

"I see," Jayde responded in an insipid tone. *Either Carrie or another mission.* Jayde was determined not to appear interested.

"How are you doing?" he questioned as he dug into his steak.

"Good. I really like it here. I work with an art dealer in a gallery and have started to sell some of my paintings." She cut her grilled salmon. "Salmon, you remembered what I ate."

"I remember everything about you, my little rose." His eyes darkened possessively for a moment.

Jayde had to swallow a few times before she could speak to him. "You seem to have recovered well. How are you doing?"

"Physically, I am doing well. Healed up. The doc said you did an awesome job of removing the bullet," Tyson said, gratefully.

Physically? What did that mean? "Glad you are doing well," Jayde admitted honestly.

"Why didn't you contact me?" he asked as he ate some asparagus.

"What for? Why would I contact you?" At his raised eyebrows she added, "I wasn't pregnant so there was no reason to." She paused, deliberately ignoring the storm clouds brewing in his eyes. "But since you are here, thanks for getting this place for me. I really love it."

"What the hell do you mean 'no reason to'? Were you even curious about how I was doing?" He stopped eating and waited for her answer.

He was hurt. Jayde saw that now. "Of course I was! Tyson, you had just about lost your life to save mine; why wouldn't I be curious about how you were doing?"

"I never saw you there at the hospital." His eyes challenged her.

"I'll admit I didn't go. But," she said as he leaned back and crossed his strong arms across his chest, "when I last saw you on the carrier, before they put me in the COD...you were calling out for Carrie." Shock and disbelief passed over his face. "I figured if you did want someone there, it would be her."

Tyson shook his head in denial, but she continued on. "I heard you and Scott that day in the safe house...when y'all thought I was in the shower. I was listening at the door. You remember, don't you?"

At first confusion filled his features, then dawning realization. "Yes, I remember. I can explain that—"

"That's the thing, Tyson...you don't owe me any explanations." Jayde cut another piece of salmon. She put the fish in her mouth and chewed slowly so she didn't have to talk. *Dear Lord, why didn't anyone say love was this painful?*

"Yes, I do." Tyson took a drink of the wine they were having with their meal. "We are still married."

Jayde had been in the process of putting another bite in her mouth when he'd said that, causing her to pull it away and set it on the plate. Her eyes were wide as she looked at him. "What are you talking about?" Jayde asked in shock.

"We," he began and moved one lean finger between them, "we are still married."

Her face began to lose its color. "No...no, we can't be married. That was a sham wedding." Tyson stared at her solemnly. "Wasn't it?" Jayde asked, her voice rising an octave.

"No. It was real and legal." He put his left hand across the table and Jayde saw the ring was still on his finger.

"No, it wasn't even in the States!" She was rambling and didn't care because she knew it didn't matter if it was in the United States or not.

"It's real." Tyson reached around his neck and pulled off the chain he wore. Opening the clasp, he removed a band from it and went to where Jayde sat dumbfounded. With the utmost care he picked up her left hand and easily slid the ring back on her finger. "This is where it belongs."

Funny, when he slipped the ring back on her finger, Jayde felt a sense of peace that had been missing ever since she'd taken it off. "Where did you get these rings?" she asked, truly curious.

"From an old sangoma in Africa." Tyson nodded at her look of disbelief. "No, really. We came to his village and saved them from the rebels; afterwards, I was in his hut and he gave them to me and said, 'Keep them with you and the woman you are meant to be with will find you. The rings will save you and bind the two of you together for all eternity.'" Tyson cupped her face in his hand, "And when this ring is on your finger, Jayde, it's right. I know it is. I feel it. We are supposed to be together, for eternity."

"I can't be married," she muttered, unsure of what else to say, for his words affected her more than she thought they would.

Tyson tipped her face up to meet his gaze. "Why not?" His brows furrowed. "Are you seeing someone?" His tone dropped one hundred degrees in a matter of seconds.

Jayde was so shocked by his question that she couldn't answer. Tyson clearly misunderstood her hesitation. "Well, I'm afraid I am going to have to insist you stop seeing him."

She shook her head. "I am not seeing anyone. I just...I just...I...I just need some time." Her hands ran over her face. "This is not Belize, Tyson, my family is...well...they just are. I don't know if I—"

"Have you stopped loving me?"

"No." Jayde surprised herself with the quickness of her answer.

Before Tyson could say anything to that they heard a loud beeping. "Shit," he swore as he looked down to his right side. His pager was going off. He read what it said and his face immediately became serious.

"Look Jayde—"

"I know. You have to go. So go." Jayde didn't want to be this hurt by his sudden appearance and then disappearance.

"We still need to talk about the fact we are married," Tyson said even as he headed to the door.

Jayde followed him. "No, we don't. I will start on the paperwork. I hope I didn't keep you from marrying Carrie. I really just thought it was a ruse." She held the door open and waited for him to leave.

Tyson spun around so fast she stumbled back a step. "No!" His hand grabbed hers with the ring. "I don't want a divorce. I want to give this a chance, Jayde. Please. Just give it...give us a chance. I will come here when we get back."

"Don't you mean 'if' you get back?" Jayde snapped, defiantly.

"No, my little rose, I mean when." He kissed her ringed finger, his eyes never leaving hers. "Don't give up on us when we haven't even had a chance yet." Tyson let go of her hand only to haul her paint-smelling body up to his and plant a kiss on her so intense it made her toes curl and her eyes roll back into her head.

When Tyson removed his mouth from hers, she was putty in his arms. "I love you, Jayde Kincade." One more kiss and he was gone, leaving her alone in her doorway with swollen lips, a wedding ring, and a hell of a lot to think about.

To her combined pleasure and dismay, Jayde spent the next hour daydreaming about really being Mrs. Tyson Kincade. She'd just hit their silver anniversary when her phone rang. On the other end was her eldest brother.

"What do you want, Ron?" For once in her life, Jayde just didn't feel up to playing her family's games. Her mind and body were exhausted from seeing Tyson again.

"You need to come home."

"Why?" Jayde even turned up her music.

"Turn that stuff down!" her brother ordered.

"No. I like it and its mine!" she snapped. "Why do I need to come home?"

"Kinden's ill," Ron said.

"What's wrong with her?" Jayde put the right amount of concern in her voice. Her eldest sister, Kinden Alice Porter-Grant, and she had never gotten along. Their relationship had consisted of Kinden ordering and Jayde doing. Regardless, Jayde did love her sister, just didn't like her. Kinden was a drama queen; if she had the sniffles, she wouldn't go outside for 'fear she'd get worse'. Kinden being ill could mean a migraine.

"She had an accident and now needs in-home care until she gets back on her feet," Ron paused, as if waiting to hear Jayde say she was on the first flight out.

"Okay." Jayde said, immediately sorry for what had happened to her sister, not knowing what kind of accident since her brother seemed disinclined to tell her, "But I don't understand why I have to come home."

He scoffed as if he couldn't believe she was that stupid. "To take care of her."

"What about her husband? Or her children? Or y'all? You live in the same town; I am across the country," Jayde snapped, losing her patience.

"We have jobs. Look, Mama told me to call you and tell you to come home." His voice had become condescending.

Jayde sat down on the chair. "When did you become such an ass, Ron? You know as well as everyone else that I *do* have a job. And while I am sorry for what happened to Kinden, I can't see any reason why I should be the one to quit my job when anyone of the rest of you could easily take shifts and rotate to take care of her. I will come for a visit when I can that would be for Grandma and Grandpa's anniversary, but I am not a nurse. Her husband is rich; hire one. Goodbye, Ron." She quietly set the receiver back down and just began to cry.

For the next two weeks, Jayde painted and sold more of her works. The paintings she'd done of jungle scenes had gone really fast; people said they could feel their wild beat when they looked at them. When she wasn't busy working her mind was on Tyson — where he was and if he were safe.

Her new friends from the gallery had all teased her about her ring, saying it was a good ploy for keeping the men at bay. Jayde just smiled and went about her business.

Friday morning, a friend dropped Jayde off at the SeaTac Airprort so she could catch her flight to Savannah, Georgia. The flight was smooth enough and uneventful.

When the plane landed, Jayde disembarked and headed for the rental car counter. Jayde hadn't told her family she was coming a day early and had booked a nearby hotel room for her stay. So intent she was on getting to the counter on time that she ran into someone.

"Ah, hell," she mumbled as the bag she'd been carrying dropped to the floor.

The resulting grip on her arm that kept her from falling as well was strong and familiar. So was the chuckle she heard. "I believe, little rose, those are the same words you said the day we met."

Jayde couldn't believe it. Tyson stood directly in front of her looking just as handsome as he had the day he walked into her life. "Tyson," she breathed. He was also uninjured. Squealing like a small child, she jumped into his arms. "You're okay!"

"Oh, Jayde, I told you I would be back. I'm fine, better now, but fine." His strong arms secured her body against his. "Glad this is the reception I am getting from you." He kissed her, totally oblivious to the

looks they were receiving—some amused and some downright disgusted.

By the time Jayde touched the floor again, her body quivered like jelly. Then as she realized what she'd just done, she began to blush. "I'm glad you are all right," she said trying to reclaim some dignity.

Tyson leaned in and whispered in her ear as he nipped it. "I'm glad you are still wearing your ring." He picked up her bag and slung it on his shoulder with ease. "Well, let's get going."

Without thinking, Jayde fell into step beside him. It took her a few feet before she stopped and stared at him, contemplating something before she spoke. "Tyson?"

"Yes, Jayde?" His tall body stopped as well and faced her, directly laying those hazel eyes on her.

"What are you doing here? I thought you lived in Georgetown," she said.

One side of his tremendously kissable mouth quirked. "I do. But you are here." He touched the end of her nose gently. "So I came."

"How did you know where I was?" At his incredulous look she just shook her head. "Never mind." Of course he'd know where she was. "But why are you here? I know you said we needed to talk, but why come here?"

"I think it's time I meet my in-laws...don't you?" Tyson asked, holding her gaze.

"No." She began walking again. As she found her rental place and began to approach the counter he stopped her.

"Why don't you think it's time for that?" he demanded.

"Can we discuss this later? I need to get my car." She shook him off and took care of the paperwork, receiving her keys.

As she exited the place, he picked up right where he left off. "Why don't you think it's time?"

Jayde stopped and placed her hand on his arm. "Tyson, this is new to me. All of it. Can we just go somewhere and talk first? I have to deal with my family tomorrow, but tonight, I am all yours."

His eyes grew dark gold at her words. "I'll hold you to that. That's a promise."

Her entire body was on alert as she realized what she'd said and how he'd taken it. God, she had missed everything about this man. Everything. Unable to say a word, Jayde kept walking, trying hard to ignore his arrogant smirk.

As if it were so natural for him to do so, Tyson walked her all the way to the rental car. He nodded at her choice, a two-door green Mercedes convertible. "Nice ride, Jayde." Waiting until she unlocked it, he put her bag in the trunk and took the one she carried and added it also.

"I decided to spoil myself since Lord knows the rest of this is going to be hell," she said smiling as her hands moved over the sleek car.

"Why are you down here?" he asked as he climbed into the passenger side, as if he had every right to do just that.

"My grandparents are celebrating their sixtieth wedding anniversary." She smiled softly thinking about them. "Their anniversaries are a huge thing; we pretty much fill the whole park. Lots of music, games, laughter, and drinking. But the down side is my family is there." With a sideways glance at him, Jayde didn't ask why he was in her car; she just started the engine and drove to her hotel. Even despite his calming presence, the closer they arrived to her hotel, the tenser she became.

"So, how are your grandparents?" Tyson questioned.

She chuckled, relieved for the reprieve he granted her, and looked over to him with a smile in her eyes, "Sometimes I think they are even more energetic than I am! I love them very much and they are the only reason I am coming back down here." Jayde turned her attention back to the road. "My sister had an accident a while ago and my brother called to tell me that I needed to come home and take care of her." Her voice grew heavy with disgust. "Me...the one who lives across the flippin' country...as opposed to the rest of the family who lives here in town. Not to mention they are wealthy and could easily hire in-home care if they so desired." She shook her head and changed lanes with ease.

"If I didn't know how much my grandparents were looking forward to seeing me, I wouldn't have come down. I can't handle the drama. That and I don't even want to be around them. I have finally reached the limit with my family," Jayde declared.

"Good. You deserve so much better. They should treat you like a member of the family as opposed to the hired help."

Jayde heard the threat in his voice. "No, Tyson. I don't need you to save me." She pulled into the hotel parking lot and shut off her car after putting up the top. Her brown eyes turned to him and she reiterated, "I mean it."

He remained silent as he turned away and got out of the car. Her eyes were still direct as she got out and glanced at him over the black top of the car.

"Let's get to our room and we can discuss this more," He finally said.

Our room? Jayde took her bags and entered the hotel after reluctantly relinquishing one of them to Tyson. At the front desk, the woman smiled provocatively at Tyson while she typed in Jayde's information. The woman was a tall brunette with vivid green eyes. "Good afternoon, Mr. Kincade," she said. Her round eyes grew larger as she noticed something on the screen. They briefly narrowed as she looked at Jayde before regaining her professionalism. "Is something wrong with my room?" Jayde asked the woman who seemed to have suddenly obtained a coldly hostile attitude towards her.

"No," she mumbled. "I just didn't realize that he was sharing it with you." Her emerald gaze flickered to Tyson and back to Jayde's brown face.

Sharing my room with me? Jayde snuck a peek at Tyson and saw that same arrogant smirk on his handsome face. "Is there a problem with that?" Jayde suddenly found her own attitude.

"N-no," the woman stammered.

"Good, 'cause last time I checked, a husband and wife were allowed to share a room." Jayde felt Tyson move behind her and slide one tanned arm around her waist. That simple action made Jayde feel like she *could* take on the world. It seemed that with Tyson beside her, nothing was impossible.

The woman slid the key across the mahogany counter without another word. Jayde took it and picked up her bag, heading for the elevator with Tyson right behind her.

Chapter Fifteen

As the elevator's wooden doors slid silently shut, Tyson dropped his bag and grabbed Jayde in his arms. Her own bag fell to the floor and her brown arms slid up around his neck. Their tongues met in an old mating dance. Time ceased to exist as their world shrank to only them. There were no problems, no issues, not one single bad thing. Just them, two halves of the same whole. As it should be.

When the elevator stopped on the tenth floor, Jayde slid her softer body down his hard length. Tyson still took her breath away. His hair was cut short and he wore a red T-shirt that hugged his chest along with his bi- and triceps, blue jeans with a hole in the knee, and white tennis shoes. With his ring settled comfortably on his finger, Jayde knew there wasn't a day on this earth she would grow tired of looking at him. He was a work of art. Red, white, and blue—a true American hero.

Yes! her body screamed. But her ever-practical mind said no. So instead, she picked up her bag and walked down the hall towards her...their room.

She slid the keycard in the door and entered her room. Not too shabby as far as hotel rooms went. Right away her mind found and focused on the king-sized bed that seemed to dominate the room.

Jayde also noticed two bags on the floor beside the closet. Slanting a glare at the man with whom she'd just shared a soul-shattering kiss she demanded, "Why are you in this room?"

Tyson kicked the door shut behind him with his foot. "Why? 'Cause last time I checked, a husband and wife were allowed to share a room." He placed her bag down beside his as he tossed her own words back at her.

"Do I even want to know how you figured out where I was staying?" Jayde asked.

"No," he stated simply.

"Of course not." She placed her smaller bag and purse down beside his things. Then, she stretched and rolled her neck. It had been a long flight, five hours, and she was tired, both physically and emotionally,

especially now that Tyson was here. "So, Tyson, why do you think you should meet my family?"

"Because we are married." She grimaced slightly. "Does being married to me cause you that much distress?"

Jayde shook her head and sighed. "Tyson, it's not that. I am just not really excited about seeing my family. They stress me out so much."

She began to unpack her bags. He moved closer as she went to the dresser. As she put in her bras and underwear he pulled them out, holding the delicate fabric up high.

"You wear these?" he asked stunned. The one he currently held was pale peach silk and slip-like. "It should be a sin."

She snatched it away from him and put it in the drawer with a sharp, "Do you mind?"

"Not at all." He picked up another one, a full-length, deep-necked, rich chocolate color with a slit up one side. The silk ran through his fingers like water, it was so smooth.

"Tyson!" she snapped. "Leave my things alone!"

"How come I never got to see you in things like this?" he asked as he gave, albeit reluctantly, the seductive garment back to her.

Jayde threw the garment in the drawer. "I don't know; shall we re-view our time together?" Her eyes crackled with fire as she glared at him.

Tyson shook his head. "Okay, I get it. How about *do* I get to see you in any of these?" His eyes sparkled with a mixture of seduction and playfulness.

How she didn't manage to hold onto her anger, no matter how slight it was, never ceased to amaze her. Even when they'd been in the jungle, Jayde couldn't stay mad at him. There was just something in his eyes that made her smile despite the situation. And she did so now.

"Maybe. I suppose I could wear one of them for you later." Jayde ran her eyes over his military-honed physique. "But if I do that for you..." She paused and swayed towards him. "What will you do for me?"

Not even two seconds fell between the time Jayde's words crossed her lips and the time she was pressed tightly against Tyson. "What do you want?" His mouth was millimeters away from her full lips.

Unlike the last time he'd asked on the boardwalk in Belize, when she hadn't given her true answer, this time she would. "I want you."

She touched his clean-shaven face. "I want you to make love to me, like you did that night in Belize."

His eyes darkened with passion. "What else do you want, because *that*, my little rose, is not going to be a problem? Do you have something else you wish to ask of me?" Tyson cupped her face as well. "You are so beautiful. I love you, Jayde."

Tears welled up in her eyes and she looked into the soul of the man who would forever be a part of her. Blinking them back, a trembling smile crossed her face. "A date. I want a date."

"A date?" He nodded as his head lowered to capture her full lips with his firm ones.

"Uhh-huhh," she mumbled from beneath his passionate kiss.

He pulled back and looked down at her, taking in her dark beauty and lingering on the simple filigree gold chain and karabiner pendant. All of a sudden the perfect idea came to him. "A date." Tyson nodded and moved away from her picking up the room phone and calling the front desk. Meanwhile Jayde went into the bathroom to freshen up.

After completing his call, Tyson went to get Jayde. "Ready to go?"

Laying the towel on the countertop, she met his stare in the mirror. "Go where?"

"On our date," he said, boldly moving his eyes over her body.

"Shouldn't I change first?" she asked as she looked down at her black shorts and green shirt.

"No, that's just fine. Come on." He reached out a hand and winked at her as she took it.

Heading out of the hotel room, Tyson kept hold of her hand and led her to the car. He took the keys and slid behind the wheel of her rental car.

"You know, I think I should be offended you just assumed you could use my rental car. Don't you have one?"

He tweaked her nose. "Of course I do; how do you think I got to our hotel? But I like yours better." Soon he was driving through the city towards their destination.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"It's a surprise," he said easily.

"What kind of surprise?"

"The kind that if I tell you, it won't be one anymore."

Jayde took the hint and fell silent for about ten seconds. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"What was the one thing that you wished for when we were in the jungle?"

Tyson took a second to answer. "I wished I could always make you as peaceful as you'd looked when you were swimming in that water." He turned the car onto another street.

"What look? You weren't there when I was swimming," she denied.

"Yes, I was. I was watching you the whole time." A smile crossed his face as he said that.

"That means you saw me when..." she trailed off not needing to say it.

"Sure did. And I thought you were never more beautiful." Tyson assured her.

Jayde covered her face with her hands. "I'm mortified!"

"Don't be. What about you? What did you wish for?" Tyson asked.

"A shower. I think that was the one thing I kept wishing for."

"Don't you ever camp?" he wondered.

She nodded. "Well, sure."

"You don't shower everyday out there, do you?"

"No, but at least I have deodorant and not scared or running for my life!"

Tyson swore. "I am so sorry I put that on you."

"No," Jayde said. "Tyson, please don't keep apologizing for something that wasn't your fault."

"It was my fault. I was supposed to protect you and I couldn't." His voice was full of shame and disgust at himself.

"How did you know they were going to blow up the plane, or any of it? And you did protect me. Everything I was able to do was because you were with me." Jayde reached across the small car and put her hand over his. "I would be lying if I said there were times I wasn't scared, but I never, *ever*, lost faith in your ability to protect me."

"And after I got shot? You had to haul me up that last hill." His words were full of pride at her accomplishment.

"You would have done the same for me," Jayde said immediately.

Tyson pulled the car into a parking lot, shut off the engine, and turned to Jayde. "I was...no...I am so proud of you. You did things most wouldn't have been able to do. You were just as tough as the situation warranted you to be."

"That means a lot coming from you." She blushed and looked away from his mesmerizing eyes. A wide grin grew on her face as she saw they were at an outdoor supply store with a huge indoor rock-climbing facility.

Jayde got out of the car, her bottom lip between her teeth. "Come on, let's go."

Tyson followed her inside. Soon they were climbing up side by side on a wall set up for racing. As he glanced over at her, Tyson just about lost his grip. His wife was stunning.

Her sleeves had been rolled up so he could see the muscles moving in her arms as she pulled herself up. That entire body of hers was covered in a faint sheen of sweat as she climbed.

Tyson beat her, but barely. She was good. As she hauled herself up to the top and sat next to him to catch her breath she swore, "Damn, you won." There was a sparkle in her eyes that made him feel awesome.

"Only barely." His own body was beginning to sweat as well. "You are really good at this." He gestured over to the repelling wall. "Do you repel as well?"

"Sure, not the Aussie way, though. I haven't learned how to do that yet," she said with a shrug.

"Would you like to learn?" Tyson offered.

"Will you teach me?" She sounded like a kid at Christmas.

"If you're up to it. We can do it right now." *I will teach you whatever you wish to learn, my little rose, just as long as you never leave me.*

Before the words were fully out his mouth, Jayde was repelling back down to the ground. That time she did beat him. As his feet hit the ground, she was already unbuckling her safety harness and going to the repelling tower.

Tyson strode over to the tower slowly, his eyes on his wife as she spoke to one of the men there. When she laughed and hugged the good-looking man, he quickened his pace.

"Jayde?" Tyson's tone caused her to pull back from the man and smile at him.

"Tyson." She stepped out of the other man's arms and moved back beside him.

Tyson did his best to swallow the intense jealousy he felt. "Who is this?" He nodded in the direction of the tall, muscular black man she'd been hugging.

"Tyson, I would like you to meet Cole Grant. We went to school together." She turned back to the man named Cole. "Cole, I'd like you to meet Tyson Kincade."

"Her husband," Tyson added, shaking the hand of a very surprised Cole.

"Husband?" Cole asked.

"Yep, husband," Tyson reiterated.

"We are here to repel, Cole," Jayde said quickly, giving Tyson a reproachful look.

Cole turned his dark eyes onto his friend. "Cool. Congratulations. I have to ask, though, what do your parents think?" Jayde avoided his gaze. "They don't know yet?" He let loose a loud laugh. "Damn, I don't envy being in your shoes. Well, come on, then, might as well let you get one more bit of fun before you tell them." Cole looked at Tyson and just laughed again.

"Something you want to tell me?" Tyson asked as they walked to the tower.

"Man," Cole said, "there ain't nothing I can tell you that will prepare you for her family. Jayde and I were forbidden to see each other when I first introduced her to rock climbing and repelling back in middle school."

Jayde laughed. "And we have been rebelling and repelling together against them ever since!"

"Ah, yes," Cole said. "You don't find true friends like Jayde every day, and so when you do, you keep 'em." He hugged her and placed a kiss on her cheek. At Tyson's glare, he laughed again. "Man, don't worry. I'm not after your woman!"

Tyson looked at Jayde and she kissed him full on the lips. "Don't worry so much. He is happily married. Cole is the brother I never had but always wanted."

Tyson relaxed as Jayde placed her head on his chest while Cole went through the safety spiel. When he finished Tyson asked, "Can I climb up and then repel back down?"

"Military man?" Cole asked in response.

"Yes, sir." Tyson said, still holding onto his wife.

"Go on wit' your bad self, man!" Cole granted.

"Thanks." Tyson kissed Jayde once more, and then began the climb to the top using solely a rope. When he reached the top, people erupted in applause. He had gotten to the top in a very short amount of time. He gave them a short, yet slightly embarrassed, grateful nod.

For the rest of the afternoon, Tyson spent teaching his wife the Australian way of repelling—going down face first. A quick study, Jayde grasped the concept in an impressively short amount of time. Tyson even got her to climb the rope up to reach the top of the tower. He showed her how to use her feet on the rope so she didn't have to use so much arm strength.

It was seven at night when Jayde finally called it quits. "I can't do anymore. I'm exhausted."

Tyson agreed; besides, they still had to have dinner. "Okay. Let's go then." They said goodbye to Cole and headed out into the warm evening.

When they reached the car Jayde went to the driver's side and waited. "What?" Tyson asked as he kissed her.

"I want to drive. There's somewhere I want to take you." Jayde said as she trailed one hand down his hard chest.

With one more kiss, he gave her the keys and jumped into the car without opening the door. "I'm all yours; do with me what you will," he said as he put on his seatbelt.

Forcing her thoughts up from the gutter, Jayde climbed into the car and drove off, the top down again. As the air lowered her body temperature a small bit, she glanced over at the man sitting silently beside her. He was eagerly looking around at the city as they rode.

"Thank you," she said over the wind and music.

"You are most welcome. Thank you," he responded with a grin.

"For what?"

"Being you." He reached for her hand to intertwine their fingers on the shift stick. "Where are we going?"

"Hang on, you'll find out soon enough," Jayde answered. She pulled into an old neighborhood with large, spacious homes. They were all pre-Civil War era in style. She shut off the engine and touched her hair before getting out. At the steps, Jayde turned to find Tyson still in the car. "Well, come on," she said and headed up to press the doorbell.

As his lean body was getting out of the car, the front door opened. A short woman squealed and threw her arms around Jayde.

"Baby!" the woman said. "It has been so long!"

"I know, Mey-maw. I'm sorry." Jayde pulled away and looked into her grandmother's shrewd eyes. She didn't look a day over sixty.

"And who is this?" the older woman asked.

"Mey-maw, this is Tyson, Tyson Kincade." Jayde paused for half a second. "My husband."

It was like the whole town had fallen silent. There were no car noises, no people talking, nothing. Just dead silence. The old woman looked at Tyson in the fading light. "What do your parents think of this?"

Jayde declined to answer.

The woman chuckled slightly and waved them in the house, shutting the door behind them. The home, like always, was immaculate. Around a corner came an old man who asked, "Who is it, Regina?"

"Jayde, Ben. Jayde and her husband Tyson," Regina said.

"Jayde?" the man asked with a voice full of love.

"Hello, Pey-paw." Jayde walked into his open arms.

"A husband?" The man stepped away from his granddaughter and looked at the man standing in his foyer. "He's white!" the man stated bluntly.

"Yes, Pey-paw, he is." Jayde stepped back to stand by Tyson.

"Humph," was all her grandfather said.

"It's a pleasure to meet you both," Tyson replied.

Regina laughed. "Come into the kitchen. We will eat and talk."

Jayde smiled at and looped her arm into Tyson's, following her grandparents. On the kitchen's breakfast bar was a tray of finger foods.

"Sit down and help yourselves," Regina said, gesturing to two of the chairs that were on one side of the bar. "I'd gone to the store earlier today and saw this in the display; just couldn't help myself!"

Jayde did and Tyson followed suit, taking some nibbles from the tray. After they'd eaten for about five minutes, with Tyson under extreme scrutiny from her grandparents, Ben spoke. "Where did you meet?"

"I met him in—" Jayde began.

"No, Jayde. I am asking him," her grandfather admonished.

"I met Jayde in Belize," Tyson said, around a bite of spicy chicken wing.

"And how long have y'all been married?" her grandfather asked.

"Just about five months, sir," Tyson said as his eyes began to water from the spice. He took a drink and wished to hell his mouth would stop burning.

"Five months."

Regina took over. "What did your parents say?" The look in her eyes dared Jayde to ignore her question a second time.

"They don't know, Mey-maw," Jayde confessed.

"Well," Regina said as she put another hot wing on Tyson's plate. "You know they ain't gonna like this a-tall."

"Yes, ma'am, I know," Jayde responded.

"And you two are ready to weather the crap they are going to throw at you?" Regina wondered skeptically.

Tyson slid his arm around Jayde. "Yes, ma'am." His strong voice filled the large kitchen, making sure everyone understood his conviction.

The grandparents looked at each other and broke into wide grins. "Works for us. Welcome to the family, Son."

Jayde smile and Tyson nodded. "Thank you," he said before kissing his wife.



"So," Ben asked, lighting up a pipe as he and Tyson sat alone outside on the veranda. "How long did you know each other before you got married?"

"Almost a day." Tyson sat with his feet propped up on the stool as he watched darkness fall around them.

"Almost a day. And what is it that you do, Mr. Kincade, that makes you think you can take care of my granddaughter?"

"I am in the Navy, sir." Tyson stared directly at his new in-law. "I will do what I can to give her the life that she deserves."

Ben didn't respond, just sat there puffing on his pipe. So Tyson sat with him and after a while, he found himself enjoying the relaxation.

Chapter Sixteen

While the men were outside, Jayde and her grandmother remained in the kitchen and put the food away. "How long have you known him?" Jayde's grandmother asked.

"Almost five months," Jayde said as she put the meat in a container.

"And you have been married that same amount of time?" Regina asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"How long did it take for you to get married after you met?" the older woman asked as she took the container from her granddaughter.

Jayde blushed. "Not even a day."

Regina shook her head and put the cold cuts in the fridge. "I see. Well, you have never done anything that you haven't fully believed in, so he must be something special."

"Oh, he is, Mey-maw. He is."

For a time they worked in silence as they put away rest of the food and the kitchen once again became spotless. Once done, the women sat at the table with a pitcher of iced tea between them.

Regina smiled at her granddaughter. "You know, Jayde, I was always so sorry for the way your parents treated you, especially my son. I know you probably don't believe this, but he is very proud of you and loves you very much."

Jayde scoffed. "You're right, Mey-maw, I don't believe it."

The woman's eyes softened even more. "After he began to make all that money he changed. But nevertheless, he wasn't a good father to you and for that, I am sorry."

"Mey-maw, it's not your fault. I could never measure up to daddy's expectations." Jayde fought back the tears.

"Sweetheart, you have surpassed all of his expectations. I just hope one day he will actually tell you that himself," her grandmother assured her.

Jayde didn't want to talk about her father. "What do you think of Tyson, Mey-maw?"

Regina winked. "I think he is fine. You caught a good one. What does he do?"

"He is in the Navy," Jayde said.

"I see. And are you ready for that kind of commitment?" Soft eyes got serious as they looked at Jayde.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, are you ready to stay behind for months at a time? Raise the children on your own, if and when you have them? Being a military wife is not the same as being a wife. You have to be stronger, more self-sufficient. Because when your husband is gone and there is no way you can call him home early, you must find the answer to your problem without him," Regina stated bluntly.

"I guess I never thought about it like that," Jayde said. *Add that to the worry he may not come back at all.*

Regina smiled at her granddaughter, "What does he do in the Navy?"

At this Jayde hesitated. Was she allowed to tell what he did?

"Go ahead and tell her, Jayde. It's fine." Tyson's deep voice wound itself around her and made her feel safe.

Jayde looked to the doorway and saw him standing with her grandfather. He stood so proud and strong it almost brought tears to her eyes. Turning back to her grandmother, she responded, "He's a SEAL."



It was nine-thirty when Tyson and Jayde left her grandparents house. Jayde took the passenger seat without an argument. As they drove back to the hotel Tyson asked, "What Mey-maw said is true. Being a military wife is a very hard thing. Are you having second thoughts about us?"

Jayde smiled over him calling Regina, Mey-maw. Her grandparents and Tyson had liked each other and they'd given him permission to use Jayde's endearments for them. That had obviously made her feel so much better. "No," she responded softly. "At least I don't think so. If anything, it's the fact I won't know if you will come back at all."

Tyson wanted to hold her to him and promise he would always come back, but he couldn't. Not realistically. He was a SEAL; what he did was dangerous. Could he give up the job he loved more than anything if it meant keeping the woman he loved more than life?

The rest of the ride back was silent. Both of them thought about their future and whether or it would be together. Tyson pulled into a

parking space at the hotel, then turned to look at the woman who sat in the dark beside him.

"Jayde, I would love to be able to promise that I will always come back, but I can't. I just can't," Tyson said in a low voice.

She faced him as well. "I know. I'm not asking for that promise. Even if your job were a normal nine-to-five I wouldn't ask that. It is just a lot for me to digest."

"You've had months to digest it," he retorted, tired of her excuse.

"I've had months to think I'd participated in a sham marriage to a guy that somewhere along the way I fell in love with, only to hear him call out another woman's name in the hospital!" Jayde snapped in response.

Tyson's mouth dropped open. "You love me?" It was the first time she'd said so without him asking her so.

"Yes, Tyson. I love you. I. Love. You. I love you. And I think part of me always has." Jayde opened the door and headed for the hotel entrance.

Tyson sat there in the car for a second and watched her walk away. Then, he jumped out, locked the car, and had jogged up in time to escort her in the automatic door. His strong arm slid around her waist, his eyes daring anyone who might be of ignorance to voice discontent over his relationship with the woman beside him.

In the elevator, Jayde leaned back against his rock-solid body, his muscular thighs on the outside of hers. Settled at her waist were his hands, the fingers laced together just under her belly button. Tyson saw her eyes close, as if soothed by his embrace.

When they entered their room and Tyson closed the door behind them, shutting out the rest of the world, Jayde glanced at him from under her lashes. "I am going to go get ready for bed," she said. She walked to the dresser and pulled out some clothes before heading to the bathroom, locking herself in. Or him out.

Tyson put his own clothes away, went to the phone, and ordered a bottle of champagne with strawberries. As he passed his reflection in the mirror, he noticed the bags that'd been under his eyes seemed to have disappeared completely. The stress lines had receded and he looked satisfied. Apparently married life agreed with him. Correction: Being with Jayde agreed with him.

The champagne and strawberries arrived before Jayde got out of the shower. He'd set up everything in the sitting area when she finally

emerged from the bathroom. Tyson was settled in an armchair listening to soft rock when he felt her presence behind him.

Turning his head, he realized it was a good thing he was sitting down. She took his breath away. Scrubbed clean by the shower, Jayde's skin shone. He could smell her baby powder and citrus scent as his gaze raked her scantily clad body.

She wore one of her negligees. It was long, reaching down to her ankles. A sharp V-neck allowed him to see the swells of her full breasts. Thin spaghetti straps held up the material and it was a vibrant emerald green color. Against her brown skin, it offset perfectly.

With slow steps she floated over to him. Her hair hung down her back and swayed with every step she took. "Well," she asked in a silken voice, "what do you think?" Stopping before him, she turned a complete circle, showing off the low-slung back, exposing her flawless skin to his lecherous eyes.

"Jesus," he spoke in a sotto voice. "You look amazing."

Jayde faced him once again. Her eyes delivered a message that her mouth had no need to say. With one smooth motion, Tyson was on his feet, drawing her in closer to his body. He hesitated for a moment and then she spoke.

"Make my wish come true, Tyson." She pressed her soft lips against his and slid her tongue into his mouth.

"Do you want to keep this piece of silk?" Tyson asked against her mouth.

"Yes." Then curiosity won and she pulled back. "Why?"

"Because I am about to rip the damn thing off of you," he growled as his hand slid one strap down, baring her smooth shoulder.

The heat in her eyes was undeniable. "I have others," she said in a low voice.

Tyson found and held onto his last bit of control. "Do you know what you are saying?"

"I know exactly what I am saying, Mr. Kincade," she mumbled as her lips found his again.

"I love you, Jayde...my little rose." Tyson moved his hands down to the lower back of her gown and with one powerful motion, ripped her silk nightgown, leaving her indisputably naked before him.

Tyson made good on his word. It wasn't until seven in the morning that they finally succumbed to a much-needed sleep. The strawberries and champagne were gone, and not an inch of skin on either of them hadn't been loved by the other.

Around one in the afternoon the room phone's shrill ringing awakened the sleeping lovers. They were intertwined to the point it was hard to tell where one ended and the other began.

"Hello?" Tyson grumbled into the receiver.

"Lunch is going to be served at the house in an hour. Be there," the female voice crackled in his ear.

"Yes, Mey-maw," Tyson said as he hung up the phone. Then he turned his attention to the woman who was sprawled over him like a sheet. He could feel the drool on his shoulder from her mouth.

He shook her gently. "Jayde, come on, you have to get up." He shook her again.

She mumbled something very unladylike against his shoulder but did push away and look down at him. "Why?"

"That was Mey-maw. Lunch is in an hour and we've been ordered to be there." His eyes darkened as they ran over her delectable body. "How long does it take to get there again?"

Jayde grinned saucily in return. "We have time," she muttered as she lowered her head to his.

With a little bit of speeding and a whole lot of luck they made it in time for lunch. They jumped out of the car and went up the steps to the door where Ben and Regina met the couple knowing looks.

"Afternoon, Pey-paw, Mey-maw," Jayde said as she kissed them both.

"Y'all almost late," Regina said.

"My fault, ma'am," Tyson admitted as he slid his arm around his woman.

"I bet," Ben muttered and smirked. "Well, come on, we got us some chittin' and chattin' to do."

Jayde blushed and turned her head into Tyson's shoulder. "What's wrong, my little rose?" he asked as he turned up her face with one hand.

"They know!" She gestured with her hand. "What we were doing!"

All he did was chuckle. "Of course they know. They couldn't be happier for us." He brushed a gentle kiss along her pouty lips before escorting her to the kitchen.

Soon all four were out in the back yard sitting at the large table. "So, are you coming this evening?" Ben asked over a bite of mashed potatoes.

"This evening?" Tyson inquired as he arched an eyebrow to Jayde.

"Didn't she tell you?" Regina asked and sent her granddaughter an admonishing frown.

"No, I didn't tell him," Jayde defended herself. "I wanted a chance to tell Father and Mother before they met him."

"Little rose," Tyson said. "I won't let anyone hurt you."

"I know that, Tyson, but this is something I have to do on my own." Jayde stood firm.

"Where is this evening happening?" Tyson asked Ben.

"At the park. Tonight is the informal gathering while two nights from now is our formal party. You know, the whole nine yards—tuxedos and evening gowns." He looked at his wife. "It's the way my son shows the town he is very prominent."

Regina added, "So will you come tonight?"

"I will be nearby just in case Jayde needs me. But otherwise, I will respect her decision to face her family alone." His hazel eyes met Jayde's dark brown ones and he smiled as he saw her gratitude at his understanding.

Just as Tyson was finishing up, his pager beeped. He looked at the number and excused himself from the table, pulling out his cell phone as he walked further into the backyard.

When he returned, he saw them clearing off the patio table so he went into the kitchen to find Jayde. "Are you ready to go?" He wrapped his arms around her from behind.

"Do you have to leave?" Jayde asked as she spun in his arms.

"No. That was just Scott checking in on me." He put his face down so their noses were touching. "He sends his greetings to you 'the Megalodon Amazon.' I think you bewitched him."

"The Megalodon Amazon? Do I even want to know?" Jayde wondered.

Tyson smiled. "It's an honor. You are an honorary teammate."

"And here I thought Scott didn't like me," she teased.

Tyson narrowed his eyes. "Oh, trust me, he likes you."

Jayde grinned. "Are you jealous?"

"Any man would be jealous of others around you." He kissed her lips.

Jayde wrapped her arms around his neck and returned the kiss with passion. Her legs wound themselves around his waist, pressing them closer together. She pulled away to add, "I like him too."

Tyson arched an eyebrow. "How much do you like him?"

"Oh, pretty well. I mean he is very handsome. Did you see his eyes? They are such a vibrant shade of blue...and his mouth..."

Tyson kissed her silent. "I get it; no need to say anymore." His lips found hers again and went back to doing what they did so well together.

Finally, a cough broke into their little world. "Is this what y'all have been doing in here for the past ten minutes?" It was Regina.

Jayde turned her head and met the amused glance of her grandmother. "Hello, Mey-maw."

"Perhaps, chile, you should get off his waist and get ready for this evening," Regina suggested.

Tyson slid her down his body and smiled at her reaction to feeling his body against hers. "We do have some things to do," he admitted.

Jayde walked over to her grandmother. "Mey-maw, can I ask you something?"

Reaching for her granddaughter's hand she said, "Of course, dumplin'. What's on your mind?"

Jayde led her grandmother to the divan in the parlor and sat down beside her. "What kind of accident was Kinden in?"

"Accident?" Her grandmother looked at her strangely. "What the devil are you talkin' about, chile?"

"Ron called me and demanded that I come home to take care of Kinden because she was in some kind of accident and needed in-home care. I haven't gone to see her 'cause I'm frightened of what I will find," Jayde confessed.

Her grandmother swore. "Ain't nothin' wrong with her! That child fell down and fractured her ankle. She just didn't want to do anything for herself so she whined to your mother, who no doubt had him call you."

Jayde scowled. "Do they think so little of me?" she muttered. "Thanks Mey-maw. I will see you this evening."

"I'm so sorry, dumplin'," Regina said softly.

Tyson was there to help Jayde stand. Side by side they walked to the door and said goodbye to her grandparents. Jayde kissed them both and Tyson kissed Regina and shook Ben's hand. Soon they were headed back to the hotel.



Jayde climbed out of the shower and went through her usual routine of baby oil and baby powder. Soon, she was standing in front of the closet looking over her clothing, unsure of what to wear.

"You're rocking back and forth, little rose," Tyson's voice reached her from where he lounged on the bed. "Why are you scared? I will be there if you need me."

Running her soft hand over her face Jayde answered, "I'm not scared."

"You always rock back and forth when you are scared. I have learned that about you," he told her.

She turned her head and met his gaze, her own eyes growing sultry. "What else have you learned about me?" One of her fingers trailed down the thick collar of her robe.

He crooked his index finger at her. "I've learned many, many things about you."

"Like?" she prompted even as she approached him slowly.

"Like, chocolate tastes even better when it's eaten off your silken skin. That you are ticklish behind your knees." Tyson sat up and removed his shirt, bearing what God gave him to her eager eyes.

"Dear, God, you're fine," she said huskily. She was drawn to him as if by an invisible string.

Tyson slid to the edge of the bed and brought her between his legs. His hands lingered on the white sash that kept his gaze from its treasure. "And you are stunning."

"What else do you know about me?" Jayde asked.

He looked up at her. Her hair fell over one shoulder and he reached up to touch it. "I know you love to rock climb. I know you love to paint. I know you sing in the shower and hum when you are concentrating." He pulled on the tie of the robe, exposing her naked body to his eyes.

"I know you purr when you are about to have an explosive orgasm. I know how your body reacts to my every touch. How your nipples harden just by me looking at you like this." His voice was a low timbre of seduction.

"Okay, okay. I get it Tyson. You do know me." Her body was on fire for him, but she did have some questions for him. Tightening the robe back around her brown body, she straddled his lap. "Now I have a question for you." Her manicured fingers traced his pectoral muscles.

"Ask away, my little rose." His hands only clenched the material that kept her luscious body hidden from him.

"When did you get that tattoo?" Jayde was talking about the one on his left bicep. It was of a trident, prongs up, that was crossed with a double-sided axe.

"After we got back from Belize and the men told me all about this amazing Amazon who had saved my ass."

Curious even more she asked, "What would possess you to get the trident and a battle axe?"

"It's a sagaris," he said as he trembled beneath her soft touch.

"A what?" Jayde tipped her head to the side watching him carefully.

"A sagaris. A weapon used by women in rituals and battles. Eventually it became a symbol for the Valkyries and the Amazons."

Jayde cupped his face in her hands, bringing it up so she could meet his gaze. "Why would you wear a symbol for warrior women?" A warmth began to spread throughout her body.

"Because, the trident is a symbol of the SEALs and the sagaris is a symbol of the Amazons. So together, it is us. SEAL and Amazon whose lives are intertwined forever," he admitted.

"Tyson," she mumbled as her lips grazed his. "I have never received such a wonderful gift." To Jayde it meant the world.

"Jayde, when they told me what you'd done I was so full of pride I just about burst. It was a way for me to always display how much you mean to me."

"Can I have one?" she asked.

His eyes grew wide. "You want a tattoo?"

She nodded. "Like yours."

"Why would you want to mar this perfect skin?" He pushed her robe to the side placing kisses along her shoulder.

"To show you just how much you mean to me," she purred and trembled.

"You don't have to get a tattoo to show me that."

"What if I want to?" she insisted.

"Then I will take you there and hold your hand the whole time." His kisses moved lower.

Jayde's head fell back. "Good, 'cause I was thinking of having it done on my left breast."

Tyson snapped her back upright and had her face right in his. "I don't think so," he deadly growled. "Shoulder fine, back fine. Breast—not in this lifetime."

"Just making sure you were paying attention, sailor." Her grin told him she was jesting.

"I am always paying attention to you." His mouth anchored itself onto hers and for a while, words were exchanged with touches.

Two hours later Tyson was washing his wife's back in the shower. He'd just finished loving her body in ways neither of them had ever dreamed about with other people. He was sore and he knew she was as well. But the shower's hot, pounding spray did ease their tired muscles a bit.

"I don't want to go to this, Tyson," Jayde said as his soapy hand continued stroking over her back.

"Then don't." His lips suckled on the curve of her shoulder.

"I have to go. I can't spend the rest of my life running from them," Jayde complained.

Tyson took 'them' to mean her parents. "I will go with you if you want."

"Nothing would give me more pleasure, but I have to know I can stand up to them on my own. I can't always be intimidated by my family." She leaned back against him, rubbing her lathered body against his only to turn and press her chest against him. Her eyes dark with desire she murmured, "Oh, dear, now we are all soapy again."

"And will be well rinsed by the time we get out this shower." Dear, God, how this woman made him insatiable with lust! Tyson and Jayde made love until the water turned cool.

Chapter Seventeen

Well later than they'd expected, Jayde found herself right back in front of the closet. It was after five and the gathering had already begun. "I just don't know, Tyson, what should I wear?"

Tyson, who'd dressed in a pair of ripped blue jeans and a black tee, sidled up beside her. "Well, what about this one?" He pointed to a dress that was pale bluish-purple.

"Okay." Jayde pulled the dress off the hanger and in moments stood in front of Tyson with a question in her eyes.

It was simple but very elegant. With thin straps tied behind her neck, it showed off her full chest and defined her waist. Her shoulders were erect and even though she trembled slightly. The dress fell to just below her knees, showing off her smooth legs.

"Stunning," he said with a healthy appraisal of her body.

"I guess so." She attempted a smile. "Well, since I am already an hour late, I guess I should be going."

Tyson gathered her close. "You will be fine. Don't forget, I will be near if you need me."

Those words made her feel like she was ready after all. "Okay." Jayde walked to the door and picked up her purse.

"Umm, Jayde?"

"Yes, Tyson?" She turned her head fast causing her hair to billow around her shoulders.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" He stood there with his muscular arms crossed over his powerfully built chest.

Damn, he's fine! She cocked her head to the side and looked at him. "I don't think so."

"I do," he drawled as he crooked that finger at her.

"What makes you think that will work?" she asked, arching a brow at him.

"Come here, woman. Come here and kiss your husband," he ordered.

"No," she refused, trying to keep the smirk off her face.

"No?" His eyebrows rose in disbelief.

"No. You come to me."

"As you wish, my little rose." He began to stalk her and she moved back until she was against the door. "As you wish."

He slid his tongue into her waiting mouth and dueled with hers. Jayde moved into his body and wrapped her arms around his waist.

"Feel better now?" He asked as he pulled back.

"Much," she moaned. "Can't we just stay here and forget the rest of the world even exists?"

"Of course. But your grandparents would be disappointed." He caressed her cheek. "Go on. Have some fun."

It was a very reluctant Jayde who headed out of the hotel to her car. So focused on her upcoming dilemma, she didn't notice that Tyson had emerged from the hotel behind her.

Sliding behind the wheel, she turned on the engine and pulled out onto the street, heading for the park. Upon arriving, she parked her car and sat for a moment to gather herself. Jayde could see her family laughing and running around in the grass.

With a firm nod to herself, she left her car and headed towards them. As she walked, her eyes strayed to the park's basketball court and just about tripped over her own feet. Her husband was there watching the action. She could have sworn he nodded at her.

Jayde walked confidently — on the outside — up to her family. Not quite as ready as she thought she was, Jayde approached her grandparents first. "Hello, Mey-maw, Pey-paw." She kissed them both.

"Jayde, so glad to see you," Regina said as she kissed her back.

"Hello, Sister," a woman's voice reached her.

"Hello, Kinden." Jayde didn't even have to turn around; she would know that loathing voice anywhere. But turn she did and met her sister's glare. "Glad to see you are doing well; I was sorry to hear about your accident."

Kinden scoffed and tossed her head back. "Like you even care! You didn't come down to see me!" *Or take care of me*, was what she didn't say.

"I don't want to argue with you, Kinden," Jayde said as she moved away to greet more cousins.

Kinden followed and was soon joined by Ron. "Then why are you here? What reason could you have for coming?" Kinden's scornful voice raked Jayde's heart.

She turned away from the relative she'd been hugging and faced her two eldest siblings. "I don't know what I did to make you hate me, but

let's just not talk to one another. And why wouldn't I be here?" she asked. "The last time I checked, I was still a member of this family, no matter how much I wish I wasn't. And regardless of how low you think I am for not dropping my whole life and running down here to take care of you when you fractured your ankle, I would never miss Mey-maw and Pey-paw's anniversary." Forcing herself to relax, Jayde took a deep breath. "So unless you have something nice to say to me, just keep your flippin' mouths shut around me!" Jayde walked off and glanced over to the basketball court. Tyson was still there watching the game.

"Hello, Daughter," her mother's voice reached her.

"Mother." Jayde responded with the same amount of feeling. None.

"I see you finally decided to come home." No hug for her daughter.

"I am here for the anniversary. I will be leaving in a few days." Jayde wished she had Tyson beside her as she spoke to her hateful mother.

Porscha Porter huffed. "Your father won't like that."

"So what else is new? I haven't been able to measure up since I was born." Jayde walked off. She said hello to her other brothers Sam and Darnell, and her other sister Chantelle, who was Darnell's twin.

Sitting with some cousins, Jayde felt a hand rest on her shoulder, caressing her bare skin. She felt immediate revulsion. Shrugging away from the touch, she glanced over her shoulder and into the dark eyes of George.

"Hello, George," she said, determined to be polite.

"Hello, Jayde." He leaned over to kiss her but she backed away.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "What do you think you are doing?"

"Getting a kiss from my fiancée." His hand shot out and grabbed her arm.

"I am not your fiancée and let go of me." She pulled away from him.

"You will be soon." His eyes ate up her face, sending more chills down her spine.

She shook her head. "No. George, I meant what I said in New York; I want nothing to do with you."

His own eyes narrowed into slits and he advanced on her slowly. "I don't think..." He stopped and looked towards the court. "Excuse me, but there is some white boy looking over here. I'm going to go find out what the hell he thinks he's looking at. We will continue this later."

Jayde followed his line of sight and sure enough Tyson was standing and looking directly at them. She shook her head slightly but knew it didn't matter; Tyson would not stop defending her.

Tyson watched as the muscular black man strode across the grass towards him. The second he'd touched Jayde, Tyson had narrowed his gaze; when he'd bent down to kiss her, Tyson had growled in his throat; but as soon as his hand had reached out and grabbed his wife, it'd been on. Tyson's warrior body was ready for battle.

"What are you looking at, white boy?" George snarled as he approached the ball court.

Tyson shrugged. "Just wondering what kind of guy has to man-handle a woman to get her to pay attention to him." He totally sized up his opponent. It wouldn't be an even match between them and he wouldn't back down, even if he'd seen Jayde shake her head against the inevitable confrontation.

"That's my fiancée, boy, not that it's any of your business." George gestured for the ball. "You play?"

"Yep," Tyson said. "Didn't look like she wanted anything to do with you."

"You like looking at black women, man?" he sneered.

"I like looking at *beautiful* women." Tyson stepped onto the court and waited for George to join him.

"Well, keep your eyes off mine," George warned.

"Name's Kincade. What's yours?"

"Not that I see us being friendly and all, but it's George." He threw the ball straight into Tyson's stomach.

The game was on.

An hour later both men had stripped off their shirts and ran up and down the court dripping sweat. Even people from the reunion had gone over to watch the game.

Tyson gave as good as he got. The men used cheap shots and underhanded blows. They'd both been knocked to the ground and were bleeding from superficial wounds. Eventually, Tyson dunked on George for the last time and won the game. He nodded and offered his hand to George, but the other man took a swing at him.

Anticipating the move, Tyson instinctively reacted and George went stumbling past him and Tyson twisted George's arm behind his back, putting just enough pressure on it so George couldn't move. "I don't like men trying to hit me," he growled in George's ear.

"Get off me, man!" George hissed. "I'm gonna —"

"You ain't 'gonna' do nothin', man, except stay the hell away from Jayde." Tyson wrenched up on the arm he held.

"Jayde? What the hell does that bitch have to do with this? Do you know her?" George asked.

Tightening his grip on the arm he held, Tyson advised in a low growl, "Don't use Jayde and bitch in the same sentence. Yes, I know her."

"What is she to you? Or are you someone she met in Seattle? Forget it man, you will never have her!" George spat.

Tyson gripped even harder, causing George to wince in pain. "Our relationship is none of your business. But know this: if you hurt her, scare her, or even try to intimidate her, I promise you, there is nowhere in the world that you will be able to hide from me. I will find you and I will — listen to me, now — I *will* do you such bodily harm you will wish you were dead."

George swallowed audibly.

"Do you understand me? You are a man who likes to intimidate women, but if you cause her one ounce of pain I will come for you. Now, tell me you understand." There was not one shred of kindness in Tyson's tone.

"I understand," George muttered.

"Good," the deadly rumble came. Tyson let go of George as quickly as he'd immobilized him. "Thanks for the game man," Tyson said as he picked up his shirt and glanced across the park to look at Jayde one more time. He still wanted to run over to her and announce to all of them they were married. But he respected her decision to tell them first. He headed for his Jeep, feeling her gaze on him the whole way.

Then, his pager went off.

"It's pretty uncommon for a white man to play basketball one-on-one in this area. Especially a man we don't know."

Jayde turned towards the voice. "Hello, Father." She wanted to run after Tyson and yell for him to wait for her. But she didn't.

"It's been a while." Jonas Porter's impassive face looked her over. "How are you?"

Most fathers gave their daughters a hug when they saw them after a long period of time. Not hers. "Fine. I am doing well in Seattle."

For a mere second she would have sworn she saw emotion in his gaze, but then her mother yelled and it was gone. "That man could

have hurt George!" she exclaimed as she came up on them. "Don't you care your fiancée almost got hurt?"

Jayde looked at her mother. "George is not my fiancée. Nor will he ever be."

George came over and said, "Jayde, I need a word with you."

She didn't want to, but she also knew this discussion needed to happen away from her family. They walked off a bit before she stopped and leveled a stare at him. "What?"

"Who is that man to you?" he demanded.

Jayde knew exactly who he was talking about but still asked, "What man, George?"

"That Kincade guy. He said he knew you." He started to approach her, but then looked around and stayed put as if he thought he were being observed.

"Leave me alone, George. Just leave me alone," Jayde said.

"Oh, so you went to Washington and now got too good for the rest of us?" This time he did take a menacing step towards her. "Is that it? Did you sleep with him?"

"I owe you no explanations." Jayde walked off.

For the rest of the night, Jayde stayed by her grandparents. It might have been a coward's way out, but it was all she could do. As she headed to her car, she noticed George following her, so she increased her speed and drove off before he reached her.

At the hotel, she hurried inside and found Tyson's stuff was gone. Her heart fell to her feet. "Where are you, Tyson?" There was a note folded in half with her name scrawled on the top for her on the mirror.

Jayde:

I wish I could have told you in person, but I think it would have violated not telling your family about us. I will come back to you as soon as we return. I love you.

~Tyson

He was gone. Again. What in the hell was going on in the world that required him to leave all the time? An ugly thought filled her head: what if he was going to see Carrie?

Tired and sad Jayde fell into bed. Her dreams were filled with spiders and Tyson telling her he wanted Carrie. Thankfully, a pounding on the door awakened her around seven.

Exhausted she opened the door and came face to face with her mother. *Oh, dear God, it was too early for this!* The woman shoved her way into the room. *I should have realized she would have someone follow me just so she could be a pain in my ass; she always has before.*

"Well, I see you went and ruined things with George. Thankfully, I smoothed them over, so he's willing to take you back. All you have to do is apologize," Jayde's mother said as she looked through the entire room.

"Are you looking for something in particular?" Jayde wondered.

"We just thought you might have met that white man later." The scornful voice came.

"Who is 'we'?" Jayde wanted to go back to sleep, not deal with her mother.

"Why, George and I, of course. Don't worry; we know that fake ring you're wearing is just for show," she gloated as if she had discovered a huge secret.

"First, there is no man in this room with me. Second, I don't want things smoothed over with George. I want nothing to do with him. I will not marry him; in fact I don't even want to talk to him! So the very notion he wants me to apologize to him is not going to happen," Jayde said as she slid on her bathrobe and sat down on the edge of the bed. *This ring is not just for show, and I can't wait until you realize that.*

"Don't get sassy with me," her mother snapped.

"Listen to me. George and I aren't an item." Jayde stood and walked to the door, opening it. "Now, if there is nothing else..." She pinned her mother with a look that said "get out!"

"We are all ashamed of you for not coming down to care for your sister. But I guess that is to be expected." The woman just wouldn't take a hint.

Jayde felt dread grow in the pit of her stomach. "Meaning?"

"Meaning you aren't my child."

Why the hell is she doing this to me? For a moment, Jayde could only stand there and stare. "What are you saying?"

"You aren't one of us; you don't belong with us. The only reason you were here is because my stupid husband made a promise to his sister-in-law. If it weren't for who he was in the city, I would've made him get rid of you from the very beginning."

"Get out!" At her mother's hesitation she shouted again. "Get out! Damn you, just get out!"

The second Porscha was through the door, Jayde slammed it in her face, cutting off whatever she was going to say next. Then Jayde succumbed to tears.

For the rest of the day, Jayde tried to be upbeat, first spending the day at the beach with her cousins, then having dinner with Cole and his wife. However, thoughts of Tyson and her mother's words weren't far from her mind.

The next day, Jayde treated herself to a day at the spa. She got a massage anointed with water lily and dark amber oil, a body wax, a manicure, and a pedicure. Her hair was swept up in a dazzling display with only one tendril left to hang down by her right ear.

Back in her hotel room, Jayde slid on her dress for the evening. It was a black formal gown that fit her body like a dream. The straps were offset on her shoulders and the neckline sweetheart neckline tantalized what lay beneath the satin material.

As she stared at her reflection, she removed her gold necklace and replaced it with a silver one that had a sapphire rose pendant on it. She also put in silver dangling earrings that had three chains. At the end of each was a small sapphire teardrop.

She placed a sapphire and diamond ring on her ring finger on her right hand. Her only other piece of jewelry was the silver filigree bracelet on her left hand and her wedding ring. Jayde slipped her feet in T-strapped, three-inch black heels and picked up her small purse. She was ready to go.

A good portion of the city had turned out for this, or so it seemed. The ballroom was practically wall to wall with people. Her grandparents were really well liked and respected here. As she sat off to the side and watched the couples dancing, she spotted George moving towards her.

She wanted to flee, but she refused to make a scene on her grandparents' night. "What do you want?" she asked as he stopped beside her.

"A dance," he said in his normal condescending tone.

"No. I don't know how many times I can say this or in how many different ways. I don't want a relationship with you. I don't want anything with you, so go away and leave me alone," Jayde responded, so tired of the same old thing between them.

The room erupted in applause as the guests of honor spoke. "Thank you for this, to our family and friends who came together to celebrate our union. Now continue to eat, dance, and have a wonderful time."

The band struck up the beginning to a slow dance and as George reached for her hand, something behind her caught his attention, causing him to back away. Little by little the whole room fell silent until the only thing she heard was a set of very deliberate footsteps walking across the ballroom floor.

Jayde turned in her seat. What she saw brought tears to her eyes. It was Tyson in full military dress, striding purposefully toward her. His white uniform stood out sharply against his tanned skin, his hat tucked under his left arm. On the left side of his uniform was, in brilliant gold, his Trident pin, marking him as a soldier in the Teams. Under that were numerous rows of ribbons, many with pins in them as well. It was obvious he'd gone above and beyond the call of duty many times over. His hair had been freshly cut, shorter than when she'd seen him two days ago.

Whispers filled the room. "Look at that!"

"Who do you think it is?"

"Looks like that same guy who played George on the court."

Stopping before Jayde, Tyson looked down, those gorgeous eyes of his bearing into her soul. "Figured you might want a date for the party." One lean hand reached out and stroked her face. She could smell his aftershave.

"So you just came out of the goodness of your heart?" she asked behind a smile as she pressed her face into his touch.

"No, I came because there's not another place I would rather be than by your side," Tyson pledged, his eyes backing up his statement with love.

"Who are you?" a deep voice intruded.

Tyson moved his gaze from his wife to the older man who stood beside her. "And you are?" Tyson asked, dropping his hand from Jayde's face.

"I believe I asked first. That is my daughter," the man claimed.

Tyson scanned the room and noted the unsure looks he was receiving. Then looked back at her. "Jayde?"

She rose and placed her hand in his outstretched one. "Now is fine," she said.

Instead of answering the sour-looking man, Tyson set his pristine white hat on the table and spun his wife in a circle. "You look amazing." He twirled her back into his decorated chest and, putting one hand behind her head and the other at the small of her back, kissed her.

The room erupted in cheers and accusations. "Get off of my daughter, you bastard!" Jayde's father yelled and swung at him.

Tyson gathered Jayde close and sidestepped the attack easily. "Don't ever raise your hand to me. Or your daughter." He looked down her. "Are you okay?"

Jayde smiled up at him. "I'm always okay with you around."

Tyson winked at her and tucked her under his arm, then turned his attention back to the man in front of them. "Forgive me, sir, but I will not let anyone take a swing at this woman."

"I remember you from the park the other day. You beat George. Who the hell are you?"

"Yes, I beat George, and I warned him to leave Jayde alone, a warning I don't think he heeded very well." Tyson swung his gaze over to George, who blanched and backed up even more.

"Who the hell are you to think you can tell my daughter's fiancée to leave her alone?" her father demanded.

"Her husband."

The room plummeted into silence

"What did you say?" A woman screeched as she headed across the floor, her movements elegant despite the anger radiating from her.

"You must be Jayde's mother," Tyson said dryly.

"She is not married!" the woman insisted. Tyson *really* didn't like her. Her narrowed eyes focused on Jayde. He felt his woman tremble beside him. "She is nothing but a slut!"

"Mind your tone as you speak to my wife. And yes, she *is* my wife." Tyson knew all present heard the hard edge to his tone.

"Jayde!" her mother screamed. "Tell them this is a lie. Damn you! Tell them!"

"I can't do that," Jayde said as she sank back into Tyson's protective touch. "He is my husband. I did marry a stranger. I married him in Belize." Her eyes grew defiant as she stared down the spiteful woman. "I married a man who I hadn't even known for twenty-four hours. And

you know what else? I have felt more alive with him than I have ever felt before in my life. I love him."

"I love you, too, little rose." Tyson turned to Ben and Regina and went to them, Jayde in tow. "It is wonderful to see you both again." He kissed Regina's cheek and shook Ben's hand.

"And you, Tyson, glad you could make it," Ben said. Then he waved to the band for music. "Now, go dance with that lovely wife of yours. In fact, I think we will join you."

"Yes, sir!" Tyson moved Jayde out to the floor, her grandparents right beside them.

Eventually other couples started dancing as well and the party atmosphere returned to room. Tyson could still feel all eyes on them. Not really liking all the attention, he walked Jayde back to where she'd been sitting.

He pulled her chair out for her. "Here, Jayde, have a seat."

She smiled gratefully at him. "I can't thank you enough for coming here tonight. Look at you! So amazing...so handsome..." She touched the gold pin and asked, "Is this it, the pin that sets you apart from the rest of the Navy?" Her fingers moved over his chest to the ribbons on the other side.

"Yes. The Budweiser or Trident. It tells everyone I am in the Teams." He put his hand over hers and placed it against his heart. "You never have to thank me for spending time with you, Jayde. I love you."

She stepped closer to him and dropped her voice to a whisper. "I have to confess something to you."

His eyes grew dark with desire. "Unburden your soul," his velvet tone ran over her body as his finger traced her cheekbone.

"When I went back to the hotel and saw you weren't there...I thought maybe...maybe you had gone back to *her*." Jayde blushed.

"My little rose, I don't want Carrie. I have never wanted her the way I want you. And now I only want *you*." He cupped the sides of her face, bringing them nose to nose. "Only you, for the rest of our lives."

"Oh, Tyson!" She threw her arms around his neck and said, "I love you!"

As if she didn't weigh more than a feather, he lifted her in his arms, handing her to the sky. He was filled with an overwhelming sense of peace and contentment. Her head leaned back and her bare arms fell

open as if she were embracing the world as a husky, peeling laughter rang from her. "I love you, Tyson! I love you!"

He brought her mouth back to his and devoured her. After a long moment, he reluctantly set her on her own feet to the thunderous applause from the room. Her immediately family merely scowled. Jayde and Tyson walked over to her grandparents and kissed them goodbye. Then he scooped her up in his arms and carried her up the stairs and out the door, his hat settled on her head.

They made love once they got back to the hotel room. Later on, they put on sleep clothes and shared a relaxing bottle of wine, both jarred to alertness when a knock sounded on their door. It was a little after ten o'clock at night.

Tyson sauntered over to the door dressed solely in a pair of flannel pajama pants. He opened it and found himself face to face with his father-in-law and his eyes narrowed.

"Can I help you?" Tyson asked.

"I'd like to talk to Jayde." Jonas Porter stared at the man who filled the doorway. Tyson knew he was taller than Mr. Porter by a few inches and full of muscles. He hoped the older man didn't mind his attire too much. Then again, he didn't much care.

Tyson moved back. "Come on in."

Jonas moved into the room and saw his daughter curled up on the lounge in the room. In her hand was a glass of wine and the light glinted off her wedding ring. "Jayde," he said.

"Father," she said warily. "What are you doing here?"

"I needed to talk to you. Can you spare me some time?"

"You're here, go ahead and say your piece," Jayde said, scooting closer to Tyson the moment he sat beside her. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Wine please," her father said.

Jayde poured a glass and handed it to him, being careful not to touch him, Tyson noticed. Then she sat back down next to her him, relaxing as his arm settled around her. "Well?" she prompted.

"I realize that I am not a candidate for Father of the Year in your book, but I owe you an explanation," Jonas began.

Jayde just looked at him with a blank stare.

"Okay," Jonas tried. "I know you will probably never forgive me for the way I treated you your whole life, but I had my reasons for doing so. Porscha is not your mother. My sister-in-law is."

"You slept with your sister-in-law?" Jayde was clearly astounded. Tyson began stroking her arm in silent support.

"Yes. It was a one-time thing, and you were the result. When she and my brother died and we got custody of you, I realized you were mine. So did Porscha. When you were small and I would show you any affection, Porscha would just be meaner to you. But if I ignored you and gave all my attention to 'our' kids, she would just leave you alone." Jonas took another long drink of the wine.

"I know that is not an excuse; I should have fought for you. I should have been a man and been a father to you. I've never told you how proud I am of your accomplishments, your double major, even your paintings. I have one; I keep it in my office at work, that way Porscha won't ever see it." He smiled sadly.

"Anyway, I just thought I should tell you before you leave and I never get to see you again that...that I love you. I wish I had been a better father—hell, I wish I had *been* a father. Regardless, I see you are in very capable hands with this young man here. A SEAL, are we? Can I ask what your name is?"

"Tyson, sir. My name is Tyson Randolph Kincade. I love your daughter very much," Tyson said respectfully, understanding how hard it must have been for Jonas to admit his faults not only to his daughter, but to a strange man as well.

"I can see that." Jonas set down the empty glass and stood. "Well, I guess I came to say what I needed to...so...I will just be going."

"You know, maybe you could stay for a while longer. We could tell you how we met," Jayde offered.

Her father's smile softened his face more than she'd ever seen. "I'd like that. A lot."

It was after midnight when Jonas finally left his daughter and son-in-law's hotel room. A tentative peace had been made between them. Tyson shut the door and looked back at the woman who wore one of his Navy T-shirts and a pair of his boxers. "How are you doing?" he asked as he walked over to her, pulling her up from her sitting position into his arms.

"Okay I guess. It has been an amazing day. Just goes to show you that the good guys do still wear white." Her head burrowed into his bare chest.

"So I'm a good guy?" His hands ran idly up and down her back.

"Most definitely. And you look so good in white." She began to press little kisses against his skin.

"And you, Mrs. Kincade, look so good in my clothes." He captured her face and kissed her once.

"Tyson?"

"Yes?" He stared at her lost, in the richness of her eyes.

"What are we going to do now?"

"Well, tomorrow we need to get you military identification and figure out where you want to live," Tyson said.

Jayde smiled. "I don't care. I just want to be where you come home to."

"My little rose, you are home. *My* home." Tyson gently touched her face, running his thumb over her lower lip.

"Thank you, Tyson."

He arched a brow. "For?"

"Finding me. Freeing me. Most of all, for loving me," Jayde whispered with tears in her eyes.

Brushing the tears away he responded, "You make it so easy to do so. And thank you for all the same reasons."

That night a Navy SEAL and an extraordinary woman realized they'd found true love. They'd faced danger, disapproval, and survived. All they had left was a future that would hopefully be long and loving. No matter how long they had, they would be side by side.

Tyson knew he'd found one of the rare women who had what it took to be a military wife. Jayde understood that of the few men who became SEALs, she had one who would love her forever; and she knew he would try his damndest to return from every mission for which he was deployed.

When Jayde awoke from a nightmare, her very own knight calmed her fears immediately. Tyson took her out on the balcony and together they watched as two stars fell, crossing each other's paths.

"That's us," Tyson whispered.

"Why do you say that?" Jayde asked in a hushed voice.

"Because each of us was on a different path, but then we crossed and are forever changed." Tyson gathered her closer to his strong body.

"For the better I hope," Jayde said.

"Most definitely." He kissed her gently.

As they sat together, Tyson watched his wife fall back to sleep. She was his warrior woman, his love, and his reason for living.

She was Kincade's rose.

About the Author

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Aliyah is married to a career military man. They have a German Shepherd, a Borzoi, and a DSH cat. Her days are spent splitting her time between work, writing, and dog training.