

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



Lily's
WAR

KRISTIN DANIELS

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Lily's War

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LILY'S WAR

Kristin Daniels

Chapter One

Eric Jameson knew he was going to break Lily Ward's heart tonight. The idea of actually doing it, however, ranked about as high as his willingness to get caught in the middle of an enemy sniper attack. But, honest to God, he couldn't see any other way around it.

Slumped in the front seat of his truck in the middle of her driveway, he stared through the dim evening twilight at the paper clutched in his hands. The paper that paved the way to Lily's heartbreak.

Recalled to active duty. *Goddamn it.*

He squeezed his eyes shut and thumped the back of his head against the rear window of the truck's cab. Every word on the paper was emblazoned behind his closed eyelids. No wonder though, since he'd stared at the orders so many times over the last few weeks. He knew each line by heart, especially the one that highlighted the date he was to report back to his unit, back to living hell.

March the fricking eighteenth. Tomorrow.

While everyone else he knew was out partying and getting drunk on green St. Patty's Day beer, here he sat in a beat-up truck with dread weighing heavy in his heart. Maybe he should've taken Zach up on his offer and headed over to the local bar for one last hurrah. But Lily had wanted this night together, wanted it to be just the two of them.

And Zach Howard—being Eric and Lily's best friend—more than understood their need for a little private one-on-one time tonight, so he hadn't pushed the issue, which was a good thing, Eric supposed. Lord knew he didn't need an audience for what he was about to do.

As an Individual Ready Reservist in the Marines, the possibility of being recalled always hung over his head. And now that the possibility had turned into stark reality, he felt to his bones the need to set things right. Some might call it morbid, but Eric was no fool. He'd spent more than half his last tour overseas. He knew the risks, the dangers. The all-too-real chance he may not come back alive.

All right, time to quit stalling. He sucked in a deep breath and forced his unease aside. Best thing would be to just go in there and do it. Rip the bandage off, so to speak. No sense dragging out how shitty this was going to be. How hard telling her not to wait for him would be.

He re-folded the orders, shoved them a little too forcefully into the glove box and then schlepped his ass from the truck up to her front door. With a quick knock, he twisted the knob and entered before she could answer, just like he always did.

The front room was dark, with only a few glowing candles to offer up any light. Soft music played in the background and the aroma from the lavender soap she used wafted delicately through the air.

As he stepped farther into her house, he couldn't help but think she'd somehow turned the tables on him. He smiled at the thought of her trying to set the perfect scene for him on his last night home, but then the smile faded for the same exact reason.

This could be his last night home.

He made his way down the short hallway and stopped at her bedroom door. It hung partially open, and when he set his palm against it to push it the rest of the way, he closed his eyes to prepare for what he imagined waited beyond it.

When he opened them again, he nearly faltered. He always considered himself to be a tough guy more or less, but the sight of Lily stretched out against a heap of pillows wearing a virginal white negligee had him ready to drop to his knees and beg for mercy, let alone for a reprieve from his unexpected orders.

"You're late," she said, then pursed a set of full lips to sip from a glass of champagne she held so gracefully in her hand.

He swallowed past his rising lust and took a guarded step into the room. God, how could he tell her not to wait for him when she looked like that? When every cell inside him screamed that he wanted her to do the exact opposite?

Her dark hair was tossed on top of her head in a mass of unruly curls, with several errant strands working loose and framing her face. And Christ, the negligee. The creamy satin—and the way the material barely covered those amazing breasts—was nearly enough to undo him.

She smiled then and his heart flipped at the same time his stomach flopped. She deserved so much more than what he had to offer her right now. She was so vibrant, so full of sensuality and possessed such a remarkable lust for life, he could never ask her to set aside all of that just to wait for him. Because he knew without a second of forethought that she would, and for her to do that—for her to put her needs and desires on hold—would only dim the vivacious spirit he so loved about her. Never mind what it would do to her if he didn't come home at all.

No, it'd be better for all of them if she forgot about the last few weeks, if she moved on and found someone else. If they went back to just being friends.

"Only by a few minutes," he finally managed.

She set the flute on the nightstand and crawled to the end of the bed. "A few minutes too long. I missed you."

Hell, if she missed him already... What in God's name would the next year or so be like for her? He didn't want to think about that, but when she rose to her knees and held out her hand for him to take, he couldn't think about anything else.

"Come here," she whispered, her sexy little grin back.

Lord, he wanted to reach out to her. The scents in the room, her in that goddamn sexy lingerie... His dick was practically bursting through his zipper already.

"Lil," he said, not moving a single muscle. Not daring to. "We need to talk."

She sat back on her heels, her outstretched hand drifting down and resting on her thigh as the smile fell from her lips. She stared at him, her breaths heavy, her swallows forced. But when her eyes welled, that's when he had to look away. He hated the thought of making her cry. He hated every single moment of this.

"I don't want to talk, Eric. Not now. Not unless it's you telling me how you're finally going to make love to me tonight. Or where on my body you're going to touch me."

And God, how he wanted to touch her, to make love to her. To memorize every inch of her and to ingrain every cry and moan into his psyche. He didn't want to forget a solitary thing about her.

He forced himself to look back at her. "It's important."

She shook her head, said, "Please," and held her hand out again. "I have a feeling I know what you're going to say. All I'm asking is for you to wait. Just take my hand and be with me tonight. Morning will come all too soon, Eric. We can talk then."

Yeah, they were going to have to.

He wanted to bash his head against the wall for wasting so much time with her before. She and Zach had been his best friends for so many years, yet he never said anything about the attraction he felt or the strong yearnings he held for her, not to either one of them. How could he? The last thing he needed was to ruin the camaraderie they'd all shared for so long.

But a few weeks back, he realized he couldn't stand not touching her any longer. So, despite the knowledge he could fuck up a treasured friendship, he took a chance. A chance that paid off in ways he never could've imagined.

And then he got recalled.

Irony was such a bitch. No way were the last few weeks with her even close to enough time.

He stepped up to the bed and she rose to her knees once again to wrap her arms around his neck. Her fingers toyed with the longer strands of hair at his nape. "They're going to make you buzz your hair off again, aren't they?"

She asked the question so nonchalantly, but her gaze never left his lips. He knew what she was doing. Avoiding. Avoiding discussing where his being recalled would leave them. He wanted to avoid it, too.

"Yeah, right after I report in."

He held her in his arms, his body lighting up from the fireworks she created inside him, from the smoothness of the satin negligee, from the heat of her equally smooth skin underneath. He roamed his hands over her back, needing to feel her everywhere, embedding it all in both his heart and his mind.

Even still, something inside him couldn't leave well enough alone. "Lil... I..."

She pressed a fingertip to his lips and then met his stare, unwavering. Determined. Damn, he loved her strength. Her passion.

"Shh. No more words, Eric."

He nodded, giving in a little too easily, but knowing in his gut it was because he wanted to touch her a million times more than he wanted to hurt her.

"For now," he reiterated, and then he kissed her.

Dear God...

He tasted the need on her lips, the rush of urgency as her tongue glided against his. Why in the hell had he waited so long to take her? This—her being in his arms, their bodies pressed so close together—was perfect. Perfection he could've been experiencing every morning, afternoon and night for the last month.

He rocked closer and pulled her in tighter. God, he couldn't get enough of her taste, of her fragrance. He scooped her into his arms and carried her around the end of the bed to the side. Setting her on her feet, he fisted the satin at her hips and pulled the

material up and off. The negligee fell from his hand as he took in the heavenly sight she made.

He wanted to say something, anything. But instead he froze, too afraid of the three little words dangling a bit too precariously from the tip of his tongue.

Wait for me...

Rather than speaking those all-too-telling words, he smoothed his hands over her shoulders and feathered his fingers down her chest to her breasts. They were the perfect shape and size and fit within his palms as if she were made just for him.

Well, maybe she was.

The thought made his heart ache even more than his throbbing cock. He needed her, needed to be inside her. Wanted that connection to her for however long he could hold on to it.

He stroked his thumbs over her taut nipples and met her gaze. Her eyelids were heavy, her irises dark and glassy. A breathy gasp rushed from between her lips.

"On the bed." He recognized how the raw need for her had reduced him to single syllables, but he couldn't say any more. If he did, if he let loose the real thoughts rambling around inside his head...

No. He wouldn't.

She bit her lower lip as she sat on the edge and scooted back, doing as he said. He practically ripped the t-shirt off his body, didn't waste any time in shedding his jeans and boxers, either. He climbed on the bed, slid over her and covered her body with his. The heat, the electricity racing between them... *Sweet Jesus.*

He took her mouth again, insistent and on the verge of carnivorous. But she didn't seem to mind, if anything she seemed more in tune, more...

God, just more.

A need like he'd never known assailed him.

He loved it.

Hated it.

Cursed it.

Hands everywhere, they fought to touch each other, to cling to what they knew they were losing. Their bodies were tense, their muscles rigid and tight. A battle for sexual supremacy if he ever saw one. But it was a battle he'd irrefutably win.

A heady dominance surged through him. He grabbed her wrists, held tight and swept her arms above her head. He held her hands firmly within one of his, letting his control take over, his desperation for her show through.

"Eric," she groaned when he moved his lips to her chin, then lower past her neck to kiss along her collarbone.

The sultry way she said his name urged him on, gave him the justification to keep going. Good thing, too. He might just die right now if she told him to stop.

He grasped her hip in his free hand while he worked his lips lower. When he came to the rise of her breast, he kissed along the top and down the soft swell to the underside, circling around until he came to the center. With gentle pulls, he latched onto her nipple. When she arched into him, her heat, her wetness slicked along his abdomen. Christ, she was so ready for him. It took every bit of inner strength he possessed not to raise up and plunge right into her.

But there was something else he wanted even more. To taste her.

He released her wrists and cupped her breasts with both hands. He lavished attention on them, splitting his interest between both equally. Underneath him she writhed and moaned while tugging on his hair.

He chanced a look up to her face. Thick curls fanned the pillow, her eyes were closed, her lips slightly parted. He did his best to ignore the ache that one little look caused, and instead trailed kisses down her quivering stomach, nipped tiny bites along her hipbones. Sliding his hands down her thighs, he lifted her knees to spread her legs wider.

The width of his shoulders held her open for him, and he stopped for a moment to just stare. So pink, so pretty. She glistened just for him, *because* of him. This close to her core, the scent of her arousal made every ounce of his blood burn through his veins, made his cock pulse with a ferocious need for release. But he reined all that in—he had to, for her.

With a suddenly shaky finger, he traced along her labia before dipping inside her. She bucked under him, but he never let up. In, out... God, she felt so good. Tight. Wet.

His. At least until morning came.

When he added his tongue into the mix, she cried out and fisted the sheets at her sides. The flavor of her, of those luscious juices spilling over his taste buds... He dreamed she'd taste just like this. Sweet, like paradise dancing on his tongue.

He shouldn't have expected anything less.

He left no crevice of her pussy unexplored, locked every flavor he tasted and each sound she made into the steel vault in his mind, the one reserved only for memories of her. And when she came on a deep groan moments later, he locked every tremor away, too.

He waited for her to still a bit before he crawled back up her body, licking and kissing as he went. By the time he reached her neck, she was still panting and her eyes had drifted closed. But it was when she turned her head into the pillow that he caught sight of a single tear at the corner.

"Lil..."

She turned back to look at him with a sad smile. "I'm okay. Really," she said when he opened his mouth to speak again. "Don't stop. Please..." She reached over to her nightstand, and then pressed a condom in his palm. "I need you inside me."

When she cupped his cheeks and bit her bottom lip, he had to hold back a brokenhearted groan.

"Please, I want you. Now."

Now. Yes...*now*...

He wanted to. Shit, he *really* wanted to. But her tears... He was already hurting her and he hadn't even dropped the bomb yet.

"You're thinking too much, Eric. We knew... We both knew this wouldn't be easy tonight. But I want to be with you, no matter what comes later." She plucked the wrapper from his hand, ripped it open and reached between their bodies. The instant she touched him with the latex, he thrust into her hand to help roll the condom on.

When she drew her knees up, the action settled him right where he needed to be. With one hand he held onto her hip while he slid the other under her back and up to the nape of her neck to tangle in her hair.

He held her tight and kissed her hard, plunging his tongue into her mouth as he drove his cock in deep. A rush of heat enveloped him—a mimic of the electricity racing down his spine and around his balls. He staved off the need to come right then, stilled for just a second until he regained control.

God, how the fuck was he ever going to walk away from this?

When she shifted under him, he began to move, to drive and retreat over and over until he lost himself in her body, in the moment. He broke from her lips, sucked back a harsh breath and dove to her neck, still needing to taste her but needing air, too. He felt light-headed from their connection, from the power surging between them.

She cried out with each thrust inside her—his name, or God's, or any combination of the two. And with every shout she tightened on him further. Her hands on his shoulders, her latched ankles at the small of his back, and that sweet pussy around his cock.

He straightened his arms, hovering just above her. She stared back with her eyebrows drawn together and a sexy flush coloring her cheeks.

"We do this together. Look at me," he instructed when her eyelids drifted shut. "I can feel you. You're close, baby, aren't you?" When he shifted angles, she arched into

him as a deep groan rose from her throat, a groan he unconsciously echoed. "Right there... God, right there. That's your sweet spot. *My* sweet spot."

"Yes..."

A deeper thrust, then another... His balls drew up tight, sweat broke out over his chest. He wanted to keep going, to hold off as long as he could, but when she reached that wicked edge of bliss, then a split-second later tightened around his cock with a pulsing rhythm so strong, he didn't have any choice but to follow. They came together, just like he'd wanted, with their groans in time with one another's, their bruising grips matched in the way they clutched the other's slick, sweaty skin.

He dropped to his elbows and buried his face against her neck as a quiet sob broke from her lips. But he couldn't—wouldn't—falter in his plans. Come morning light, he'd do what he had to do. As much as he hated the thought of it, he'd suck it up and tell her to move on.

With gentle strokes and tender kisses, he tried to calm her, all the while wishing for the first time in his life that the sun would fail to rise.

Chapter Two

"Will he come home?"

Zach closed Lily's refrigerator door and sighed. "You and I both know he'll do anything so he can. Bureaucracy being what it is, politics too... It takes time, Lil. Right now he's where he needs to be. TCB, babe. "

Taking care of business. Yeah, him and every other Marine out there. She hated where he was. Despised that he had to be there, so far away from home. So far away from her.

"He's been gone a little over a year now." She curled her legs under her on the couch and rested the wine glass on her thigh as Zach stood a few feet away in her tiny kitchen, pouring a beer into a tall pilsner. "He didn't think he'd be gone this long. And now I worry over how long it takes him to answer my emails anymore. Every response he sends back is so short. Clipped. Impersonal. It's like the second he stepped out of our lives and climbed into that damn plane, he became a new person. He's different now. Detached."

"He has to be." Zach took a slow sip of his too-full glass while making his way into the living room.

Oh, please. What macho crap.

"He loves me, I know it. How could he just leave like that?" She waved her hand in the air. "I realize it wasn't his choice to go. But why did he feel like he had to tell me to not wait? I would have. Still am, really."

She hadn't dated anyone since Eric left, didn't want to. He'd crushed her heart when he told her to move on, and she wasn't sure exactly how to begin repairing it. Dating random guys certainly wasn't the answer, the idea didn't even appeal to her. The only men she ever felt an attachment to were Eric and Zach. Her best friends. She simply didn't need anyone else.

Zach sat on the couch facing her and stroked a gentle hand up her calf. "Babe. You have to know why. He didn't *want* to do it, but I'm sure he felt it best at the time. He *does* love you. We both do. It was never a question of that."

She swiped at a pathetic tear as it slid down her cheek. "I replay that morning in my head all the time. You know, like maybe if I said this, or argued with him about that... I could've changed his mind."

"He caught you off guard."

She shrugged. "Somewhat. To be honest with you, I had a feeling. But I ignored it. I thought that after we... Well, after what we shared, he'd feel differently. Guess I was wrong."

Zach set their drinks on the table in front of them and slid her legs out from under her. He scooted up next to her and drew her into his arms.

"I just miss him, Zach. So much."

"Me too, Lil. Every damn day."

She snuggled into Zach's hold as he reclined a little more against the pillow propped up on the arm of the couch. His scent reminded her of Eric's—the smokiness, the masculine aroma of the outdoors. She loved it—both the reminder and being held by him. He always made her feel so secure.

Whereas Eric had always been her tough guy, the one she could count on to defend her with a quick show of force, Zach prided himself on being more of a wordsmith. Reasoning situations out by talking was his thing, even if he could easily rival Eric in the muscles department.

Zach was yin to Eric's yang. Opposing, but still so interconnected.

She burrowed deeper into Zach's arms and laid a hand over his taut abs, working it up and over his pecs until she covered his heart. The steady thumps against her palm soothed her even more. "He'll be home. Any day now, he'll come home."

He pressed his lips to her hair. "And until then, just keep him in your heart."

She closed her eyes, weary. Sad. "He never left it, Zach. He's always been there."

"As he should be," he said as she settled in further, relaxed and warm.

Wanted.

Zach woke to the warmth of Lily's body pressed against the length of his left side. The candles they lit had burned out, and the room was now aglow only by the flickering light of the television screen.

They both must've drifted off sometime during the movie, but he didn't mind. Not when he had such a rare opportunity to hold Lily in his arms.

He knew he should feel like a shit, like he was horning in on his best friend's girl, but something inside him knew that wasn't the case. Lily—in a lot of respects—had always been Zach's girl, too. He felt that deep in his heart. It's just that Eric had beaten him to the punch and claimed her for his own before Zach ever found the chance.

Before he'd ever found the *guts*, more like it.

Zach often wondered, if he'd been the one to confess first... What would've happened then?

And wasn't that the obstacle he faced now? Zach knew Eric's insistence that she find someone else would never change the way she felt, the way she still loved him. What if Zach wanted to throw his hat into the ring now, too? With the connection the three of them shared... Hell, even if they didn't see it, Zach did. And it was getting harder and harder to ignore.

Nevertheless, something in him felt as if he had to. He had to hold back, had to let them figure it out on their own.

He rubbed his lips over her forehead and looked down at her. Nestled the way she was in his arms, she looked so gorgeous and smelled so damn good. And at some point while they slept, she'd draped her leg over his lap. Her thigh rested over his cock, which was now harder than he ever remembered it being.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

All he really wanted to do was roll over and take her. To drive himself into her until everything around them faded away. He knew she'd be soft in all the right places and tight where it mattered most.

His heart nearly beat out of his chest at the thought. He already loved her mind and spirit, and now – finally holding her the way he'd always wanted to...

He ached from it, and the pressure of her thigh only made it worse. When a low growl rose from his throat as he tried to move, Lily's head popped up. Still sleepy, she peered up at him.

"Zach?"

"Shh, babe," he answered. "Everything's okay. Go back to sleep."

Without a word, she dropped her head to his shoulder and grabbed him tighter, wriggling a little to get settled back in.

Ah, fuck him. She'd shifted and situated her leg right over his cock again. Only this time, being awake, she had to have felt how hard he was.

She froze within his arms. Zach squeezed his eyes and bit back a curse.

Oh yeah, she felt it, all right.

Her hard swallow bumped against his left pecs, inches above a nipple that tightened on its own volition as her hand stilled on his abdomen. When she lifted her head again, he didn't know what he wanted to see on her face – horror or lust.

When he opened his eyes to meet hers, she was staring back at him with a hungry gaze, her lower lip caught between her teeth.

Seemed lust won out.

He didn't wait even a second to think about it – knowing if he did he'd only end up talking himself out of doing what he wanted most. So he cupped her cheek, tossed every bit of reasoning out the fucking window and kissed her.

Her lips were soft under his. Supple. And God, the way she kissed him back. His entire body sprang to life as his breaths became shallower. Quicker. But so were hers. She grabbed at his shirt, pulled him closer and opened her mouth to allow his tongue to explore inside.

He groaned—couldn't help it. She tasted like black-cherry wine and sleep mixed with a fiery passion. His new favorite flavor.

She pulled back and searched his eyes with hers. Confusion painted her expression, and he knew it only mirrored his own.

"Zach, what..."

"I don't know." *I don't care.* But even as he kissed her again, he knew. He knew in his heart she was meant to be his. Someway. Somehow.

She broke away from his mouth again, this time to push herself up and straddle his thighs. He ran his hands up into her hair. They both stilled. Panted.

"We can't do this... Can we? I shouldn't. We shouldn't. But *God*... Zach. What's going on here? I don't understand..." The words tumbled from her lips, even as she clutched his biceps and ground herself against him.

"What's to understand?" He pulled her closer, licked along the seam of her mouth until her body relaxed and she melted into him. The tiny, kitten-soft noises she made as she rubbed over him nearly killed him. Noises he drowned out with groans of his own.

"We're going to have to talk about this," she said when he moved his lips to her jawline. God, he loved the way her eyes drifted shut and her tongue peeked out to gloss her lower lip.

"Mm hmm." *Later.*

"Eric—"

"I know, babe," he interrupted, working his way down her neck with nips and licks.

"But—"

With absolutely no finesse, he traded positions with her, flipped her under him and covered her body with his. He needed to make her see, to make her trust in the here and now. "But nothing, Lil. You're here right now. With me."

"Zach..."

"Lil, babe. Talk to me. You know I'd never force you to do anything. But you have to help me out here. Tell me what *you* want."

She held his face in her hands and swirled her thumbs over his cheekbones. "I... I'm just not sure."

Yeah, he knew he was confusing the hell out of her right now. Still, he didn't want to give her the opportunity to say anything further, to possibly refuse what they both needed. In a cautious motion, he eased her t-shirt up her ribs and drew it over her head. "Could it be this maybe?"

As gently as he could, and despite the fire rushing through his veins, he silenced her next words by covering her mouth with his, then moved lower to breathe more featherlight kisses over her chest.

"Or this?"

He nuzzled the lace covering her nipple before closing his lips over the thin fabric and sucking on the tight bud. A sigh fell from her lips as she weaved her fingers through his hair.

When she arched into him, he slid one hand to the small of her back and the other between her shoulders to hold her there.

"Zach, you're killing me..."

"Never, love," he whispered against her breast. "I'm only helping you live."

He laid her back down and moved his lips lower, over the sexy dip of her tummy to rim her belly button with the tip of his tongue.

"I want... That's what I want. Help me, Zach. Help me live again."

She didn't have to ask him twice. He sat back on his heels and tugged his own shirt off before continuing his torturous meanderings down her stomach. With a firm grip he clutched her waist, yet hesitated to reach for the button on her jeans.

She bucked under him, and for a second he thought she may've changed her mind. But when he straightened his arms to hover over her and she dove for *his* fly, he tossed up a silent word of thanks to whatever god might be listening.

He rose to his knees, fished his wallet out of his pocket and dug through it for the condom he kept there, and then took over for her by pulling open his button-fly. When his jeans fell down his thighs, she looked him up and down and sucked in a shaky breath. His masculine pride roared at the underlying meaning.

Lily lifted her rear and tried to shove her own jeans past her hips, a difficult maneuver with him situated between her legs. "Hurry, Zach. God, I need this... I need you..."

He dropped the condom onto her belly, helped by lifting her legs and resting the backs of her calves upright against his chest. He curled his fingers under the waistband of her jeans, yanked and peeled them up and off, which left her legs raised like one of those sexy pin-up poses. He grabbed an ankle, kissed along the inside before nipping partway down her calf. She groaned, latched on to the back couch cushion and arched her delicate back once again. The action lifted her ass, and with one hand he held her there, rubbing against her slick heat with the head of his swollen cock.

It felt so good. *She* felt so good.

Pressure mounted inside his chest and traveled down into his balls. He hitched his chin and motioned to the condom. "Give me a hand and open that."

She did as he asked and handed over the ring of latex. With a firm grip still on her butt, he took the condom and reached between their bodies to cover himself. When she started to drop her legs, he stopped her with a deep-seated growl. "No, leave them up there. Put your feet on my shoulders."

She looked at him with a sexy hesitancy lighting her eyes.

"You've never been taken like this?" He leaned forward, aligning his cock and nudging her tight entrance. "Ah, babe. The angle..."

"Zach..."

He slipped inside her, just the head, but enough to make him catch his breath. "I can go so much deeper like this."

He gripped her hips, met her stare...and plunged deep. She cried out and turned her head into the pillow. He withdrew slowly—God, near torturously—only to thrust to the hilt once again.

So tight...goddamn it. He knew she would be. Her eyes flew open with his next drive into her. The passion swirling in them fit her, spoke volumes of who she was.

And—*fuck*—he wanted her to be his. Theirs.

She locked gazes with him, held onto him with her stare, with her spirit. He thrust again...and again...and again, losing a little more of himself with each one. When she tightened on him, he couldn't stand it any longer. He pushed her legs to each side and slid over her—harder into her—and took possession of her mouth. Their tongues sparred, dueled. She held him to her with fingers twisted in his hair, with her feet secure at the back of his thighs.

Holy shit...

She tilted her pelvis ever so slightly, and he felt it. Felt the little ripples as they morphed into tight contractions. With a primal groan, she broke away from their kiss as her sweet pussy clenched around his cock. The sensations assaulting him were too much, no way could he hold on, not for another second. He let go and soared with her, joined her in every wave.

"Oh dear God." Her heated breaths puffed against his shoulder on each word.

"Yeah," he blew against her neck. "No shit."

She pushed on his arm until he leaned up on his elbow and looked at her.

"Zach? What... Eric..."

The euphoric glow dancing just a few moments ago in her eyes was quickly turning into gut-wrenching alarm. He couldn't let that happen. If it did, if she withdrew from him...

No.

"Lily, easy now –"

"God, explain this to me. Please. I don't understand..." She pinned him with a stare that bulldozed straight past alarm and ended up somewhere in the vicinity of panic.

"Babe, it's okay. We'll figure it out. Together."

"Together," she echoed, with a quiet disbelief in her voice. "I never knew. You were always right there, too... But I never knew..."

He smiled and nuzzled her cheek in an attempt to reassure her. "I know."

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and buried her face into his neck. "Oh, Zach. What in the hell am I going to do?"

Chapter Three

Eighteen months.

Well, really eighteen months, two weeks and three days.

And nine godforsaken hours.

That's how long he'd been gone. Too long, too much time. Time enough for people to change, for *her* to change.

Lily blew out a long, anxious breath.

Eric—in all his six-foot-two, blond-haired, blue-eyed, red-white-and-blue-American-pride powerhouse glory—ambled into the small reception hall and tossed his dusty duffle bag next to the door. He wore the standard beige Desert Camouflage Uniform and beat-to-hell work boots that every other Marine did, the shade so reminiscent of the bland tans of Mother Earth and the rare mud of the region where he'd spent the last year and a half.

But, Lord have mercy, how he filled them out.

His folks had picked him up from the airport and driven him straight over. Within seconds of him entering the small room, extended family, friends and neighbors, not to mention all the tough-ass guys he'd served with in the Chicago Police Department, surrounded him with bear hugs, hefty claps on the back and steady pumps of handshakes. A few of his buddies even threw in a good-natured whack or two upside the head.

Their man had finally come home.

The deep, whispered voice at the edge of her ear rattled her nerves even further.

"Damn, Lil. He looks great."

She tamped down the annoying belly-flutters and nodded. Swallowing past the Texas-sized knot in her throat, she tried to breathe through the sudden painful tightness binding her chest while fresh tears stung her eyes. "Yeah. He does." *Too good, in fact.*

"You scared?"

Lord, and how. "Terrified."

Zach rubbed tiny little circles at the small of her back, but his attempt at reassurance did little to dissuade her ever-increasing nervousness.

"Not to worry, sugar. It's still Eric. He's the same, no matter how long he's been gone."

She clutched her entwined fingers against the steady beat crashing inside her chest, all the while knowing that if she wasn't even close to being the same person she was before he left, how could Eric be? "I don't know, Zach. I think we've all probably changed even more than we realize."

He tensed ever so slightly behind her. "You've got nothing to worry about, you know. Any issues he'll have with this will fall on me. After all, I'm the one he asked to watch over you while he was gone."

She bit back a distraught chuckle before it turned into a pitiful cry. "Somehow, I don't think what happened was exactly what he meant by *'Watch over her.'*"

His soothing hand continued to swirl its wicked magic on her lower back, then searched even lower along the swell of her hip.

"Come on, you know Eric's like a brother to me. We'll work it out, just like we talked about, I promise. We'll make him see. Have a little patience."

She softened a bit against the tingles that plagued her insides, the sensation a heady mixture of fear commingled with utter hope.

"Oh, Zach... It's been so long..." Seeing Eric again after so long just brought back all the heartache from when he left. The hurt, the shock of him not wanting her to wait for him.

She thought he loved the excitement, the freshness of their budding passion. The newness of their relationship was something she had cherished, something she believed Eric had shared with her. To realize maybe he hadn't...

"God, I keep going back to when he told me not to wait for him... Maybe he doesn't even want me anymore. Maybe he won't—"

"He does," Zach's breathy statement interrupted, "He'd be insane not to, Lil. You have to trust that."

She attempted a cheerful smile at Zach's optimistic words, but she knew the uneasy twitch of her lips appeared more forlorn than anything else. How did he do that? The way he always knew what to say, the way he understood exactly what she needed—she so loved that about him.

When Eric found her from the opposite side of the hall, she stiffened. At that moment she knew what he thought, that she'd waited for him. And she had...but there was so much more to it than that.

God, how was she going to explain all this?

Eric studied her for a moment before his lips curled slightly upward, his oh-so-devilish dimple breaking the smooth skin of his right cheek. The heat in his eyes pinned her to where she stood. She wouldn't have been able to move even if she wanted to.

He looked then to Zach—her personal tower of strength who stood mere inches behind her—only to return his searing gaze to her once again. The blue ice of his intense stare cut into her soul from clear across the room. Fear of what might come next—of failing to get what she now realized she wanted more than anything—made her nearly run away and hide. But she stood firm and stomped down her misgivings. She wanted *him*, more than she wanted to give in to all the what-if's and maybe's.

"This is it, babe. Go easy, just like we talked about," Zach whispered against her ear.

The heat of his breath sent a shiver to the most sensitive depths of her body. Yeah, they'd discussed what to do months ago, how they'd explain and make Eric

understand, hopefully even accept. It all came down to this, to what happened right now.

Steady as she-fricking-goes.

Her nerves were having a free-for-all. She treasured both men—so much so she'd never feel whole without them. They completed her. *Both* of them. She knew that now, beyond a shadow of doubt.

As her stomach quivered and her heart clenched, she took the first step toward what she hoped would be her future. What had to be her future. Nothing less would do. Not for her, anyway.

Not for any of them.

Lily.

There stood Lily.

Fresh. Sun-kissed. Not to mention drop-dead sexy.

And behind her stood Zach, the man he thought of as a brother more times than he could count.

But he couldn't keep his eyes off the supple woman in front of his best friend. That she was here... God, he almost couldn't believe it. She'd waited for him, even after he'd told her not to. Relief burst in his chest, a heated flash of desire exploded everywhere else.

Damn, she looked so nervous. But she shouldn't be. He was home now, done for good. Even Uncle Sam couldn't drag him back again. He'd served honorably and with everything he had in him, gave himself over fully to every intense moment of his sworn duty.

But now, time was his.

Hers.

Theirs.

He smiled tightly through the last of the welcoming handshakes and hugs. His family had insisted on throwing him this little shindig. A coming home, of sorts. They were thrilled to have him back, in one piece. Alive and uninjured. Well, physically anyway.

They wanted to celebrate and he couldn't deny them that. He wanted to as well, for more than one reason now.

The edge of his lip twitched and blood rushed like fire through his veins. He knew the charge was from seeing Lily again, but the sensations were so close to that all-too-familiar panic, the memorable, undeniable fear...

Fuck...

Even through any happiness he may feel, darkness always lurked close by. He cursed the war-torn shit that chose that exact moment to pop in his head. The memories always attacked him at such inopportune times. Times like now.

He was so tired of consciously pushing away all those fucked-up, morose thoughts of what happened on the other side of the planet. But after months of living the nightmare, he'd become a master at masking—thank God. An instant flick of an internal switch, and presto...the shit disappeared. Unfortunately, it never stayed away nearly long enough.

With all the aggravating memories temporarily forced out of his head, he concentrated on the heavenly woman gliding toward him now.

Perfect. Incredible. And—holy Christ—his. He hoped. Thoughts of the hurt he caused her when he left invaded his mind and he nearly cringed.

But, still...she was here now. What else could that possibly mean?

The small crowd parted as she drew near. Her tear-brightened smile lit up the room, her choke on a half-laugh, half-sob as she came closer convinced him to stifle one of his own.

Lily.

She drifted into his arms, silent. He latched onto her delicate body so tight, stroked over and over the long, dark curls that fell well past her shoulders. Man, how he missed the smell of her shampoo, the clean fragrance of her lavender soap he remembered so well. He'd thought back often, while huddled in some dark alley or burned-out building, of that exact scent. Of how he'd wrapped his hand in her hair and breathed in her perfect aroma as he came hard inside her heat.

Her power—that brilliant clarity she radiated—attacked him in a big way. He closed his eyes, buried his face into her hair while he sucked her essence in deep. The lushness of her curves snuggled up against the hard exterior of his tight, trained body.

No way could she be more of a godsend. She felt like pure, unadulterated heaven.

"You smell so good, sweetheart." He groaned and drew in a deep breath. "Lavender, Lil. My favorite."

Her sigh blew hot and heavy against the sensitive skin of his neck. "I know. Oh, Eric..."

"Shh, babe. S'all cool. I'm here. I'm home now, Lil. For good."

She pulled back, the tenderness of her gentle fingers on his cheek a more than welcome touch. When she stood on her toes to kiss him, aligned her perfect lips with his, every muscle in his body slackened and he felt blessed with a calm he'd not experienced in well over a year.

The peck of her lips was gentle. Soft. Shy.

And too damn short.

"For good?" she repeated against his mouth.

"Yeah," he breathed. "I'm done."

She nodded, apparently satisfied with his answer, and twisted to lay her head on his shoulder. Then Zach appeared on his other side, ready to grip him in one of those macho-man half-hugs, complete with the required slap on the shoulder. The gesture meant the world to him.

"Damn, I'm glad you're home, Eric. You don't look any worse for the wear either, man."

Eric smiled. The action made his face feel funny since he hadn't smiled for real in what seemed like ages. "Nah, not too much."

Not on the outside, anyway.

"What d'ya say to a beer? You look like a man who could use a cold one."

"Yeah, damn straight."

Christ, he needed this. Normalcy. Good ol' everyday shit. No more duck and run, no more fifteen minute battle naps, the end to war zones and ready-to-eat meals in shitty throwaway packages. And the end to daily dealings with death.

But what he really needed right now more than anything was Lily. To pick up from where they left off, or start over new again. Hell, either way, it didn't matter to him. As long as he could be with her, buried inside her, he'd be cool. Better than cool. He'd be back on his way to whole again. Back on his way to being the man he was before, when he'd been lucky enough to have those few weeks with her.

Weeks he'd wasted by not making love to her every chance he got—a regret he couldn't wait to rectify now.

In the deep crevices of his mind, he knew now that he'd been counting on the fact he and Lily had something together. Something strong, worth waiting for. He sometimes wondered—when he allowed himself those rare moments of self-reflection—where the strength to tell her not to wait for him had come from. But he had to do it, had to draw on that courage from deep inside his soul. War was unpredictable at best, and he hated to think of her heart broken any worse than it already would be should he meet the same unfortunate end so many of his Marine brethren had. At the time, he thought he was doing the right thing by her. Saving her from potential heartbreak. But now? Now he was just so stoked that she hadn't listened to him.

Not once in eighteen months had he ever stopped thinking about her, ever stopped loving her.

He held her now, her softness nestled snug against his side. Christ, he couldn't wait to get her alone. To get his mouth on her, to get inside her.

He secured an arm around her waist and together they headed to a table near the bar. Zach slapped a cold longneck in his free hand, handed one to Lily and they all clanked their bottles together as the crowd around them lifted their own.

"Here's to you. Welcome home, my friend," Zach called out.

A chorus of "Hell, yeah", "'Bout time" and whistles and shouts rang throughout the room. Eric leaned down to touch his lips to Lily's. Oh man, she tasted so good. So perfect.

She pulled away far too fast, worked her lips between her teeth and flushed a crimson red before flashing a quick peek to Zach. Eric caught the glance, along with the obvious connection the two shared for the fraction of a second they each held the other's gaze. Right then his world blew apart with an invisible punch dead center to his gut.

Well, well...

I'll be a son of a bitch.

Chapter Four

As the party wound down, Lily's nerves ratcheted up. Eric had seen the sudden look she threw at Zach. She wanted to kick herself seven ways to Sunday for such a stupid show of her overwhelming emotions. Since then, pain—combined with a fair amount of anger—flowed from Eric with a palpable restraint.

God, she didn't want to hurt him. She loved him. Loved them both. They already consumed such a huge chunk of her heart it ached. Now, all she wanted was them in her life—and in her bed. Forever.

Would Eric agree? Would he even understand?

A few hours later, all the food had been eaten, the welcome-home cake had been cut and devoured and the goodbyes were at last said. The three of them were the only ones remaining in the quiet banquet hall.

Eric ran a hand over his shorn hair. "I think I'll head to my folk's. Tonight's been—" Pain lit his eyes again. "Eye-opening," he finally finished.

An unwelcome tingle bloomed in the center of her chest. "No, wait. Don't go just yet. Let's... Come on, let's go back to my place. We'll talk some more, hang out. Like old times. Okay?"

When he didn't answer, she added an earnest, "Please, Eric."

After a moment he nodded, his anger a blatant force. "Sure thing, Lil. A talk right about now might be good. But only if he comes along, too."

Zach looked up from tearing the soggy label off his bottle of Bud. "Me?"

Eric lifted his rock-hard body off the small wooden chair. "Yeah. You. It's funny, but I got the damndest feeling the two of you have something to tell me."

She wrung her hands in her lap and stared at him. What was she supposed to say? Oh, yeah, by the way, I slept with Zach while you were overseas. But it's really not what you think, Eric. I want you, I want you both.

Sure, that'd go over so damn well right now.

No. She needed to approach this like she and Zach had planned. Slow and easy, warm him to the notion the three of them belonged together.

They rode in silence the entire fifteen-minute trip to her house. Settled between Zach in the driver's seat and Eric on the passenger side of Zach's pickup, she almost blew an internal gasket at the tension radiating inside the small cab. But no matter how pissed he was, Eric still held out his hand to help her from the truck once they arrived at her house. She cherished that about him, how considerate, caring and tenderly he always treated her.

The unexpected gesture brought to mind the perfect evening they'd spent together, a month or so before he'd left.

Their first kiss.

It had come straight out of the blue. After attending a concert at a local theater, they'd decided to take a walk together through the freshly fallen snow. Heading toward the deserted Riverwalk, quiet and comfortable in each other's company, he'd suddenly stopped her with a gentle hand on her elbow. And just like that, he lowered his lips to hers. God, it was a moment she'd never forget.

Somehow at the same time, though, she'd been riddled with confusion—over Zach. She never really understood why, not until she'd spent that night with him. It was then all her jumbled emotions came into sharp focus.

An ah-ha moment if ever there was one.

She pushed the key into the doorknob, unlocked her front door and entered the little bungalow ahead of them. After she flicked on the lamp next to the closet, she tossed her purse and coat on the couch and went straight for the kitchen. Liquid encouragement was an absolute must at this point.

Eric and Zach hovered shoulder to shoulder just inside the kitchen doorway.

"Three glasses?" she asked, fingers wrapped around the neck of an unopened bottle of Jack.

"Sure," Zach said.

"Yeah," Eric added.

With the kitchen island the only barrier separating her from the two hard men, she tossed a few ice cubes into three rocks glasses and poured. The deep, amber liquid shimmered in each glass against the dim light above her stove.

After she sucked back her share, she poured another finger worth, and pounded that one just as quickly before setting her glass in the sink. Her body itched; she was scared and excited at the same time. She expected what came next, and honestly, was surprised it hadn't come any sooner.

"So, Zach, how long you been fucking her?"

Eric's tone held a shitload of emotion. His free hand fisted and flexed at his side. The hurt, the anger had him completely riled as he rocked back on his heels.

She really couldn't blame him.

Zach coughed on a sip of the Jack. A lock of chin-length, chestnut-brown hair fell across his cheek. He tucked the stray strands behind his ear and sucked back a clean breath before he answered. "Shit, Eric. Way to get to the heart of it."

Eric shrugged on another swallow and shoved his fist deep into the pants pocket of his DCU pants. "I see no particular reason to beat around the damn bush. So when? Was I even on the plane yet? Did you at least wait until I left the fucking country?"

"Eric," she whispered. Pled.

He plastered her with an indignant stare. "Don't, Lil. Don't deny it. It insults me. I'm not stupid. I saw you. Saw the way you looked at him." Hurt passed in a dark cloud over his face. "Why the two of you? I just want to fucking know why."

She averted her eyes and concentrated on the ice in Eric's glass instead. Cool, it reminded her to be cool. "It wasn't like that, Eric. Not at all."

"But you are fucking him, right? Tell me I'm not wrong on that account, Lil. Tell me I'm not that goddamn blind."

She lifted her head and confronted his stare with an air of defensiveness. "No. You're not wrong. Is that what you want to hear? Do you want to hear that since you were gone, I simply moved on to the next available man? That I fucked Zach because you weren't around?"

Eric's stance stiffened. The way he leaned forward in primal battle-readiness had her regretting those last words.

Sometimes he piqued her like nobody else could. But that was still no excuse for harshness. She needed to tone herself down right now, or the entire situation would disintegrate beyond repair in the span of a heartbeat.

She softened, and chose her next words more carefully. "Because if I told you that, I'd be lying. Yes, Eric, I slept with Zach. One time." She closed her eyes to keep the tears that threatened at bay. "It was just...just something that happened. We didn't plan it. God... I was hurting, and...and he was there for me."

Oh, the way Zach had held her that night. So comforting, so sincere. And then afterwards when they'd woken in each other's arms... He knew what she needed, had given her the solace she'd craved ever since Eric had left. Neither one of them intended for the evening to end up the way it did.

She opened her eyes and cut her stare into Eric as far as it would go. "But you were, too. In my mind, you were with us."

Eric's face flushed. "Bullshit."

"No!" She shook her head, desperate for him to understand, but worried she was failing at it miserably. "Ask him. Turn to your best friend and ask him who else we talked about. Ask him who else was with the two of us that night."

Her heart pounded while Eric's head dropped.

Was she pushing too hard? Lord, how the tension radiated off him. She could feel his weariness, the way he rode the fine line along a sharp razor's edge.

And yet she had to push further.

"Ask him."

Instead, Eric spun and stalked from the kitchen. He made his way into her small living room, his big body a major presence when he landed on her small flowered couch.

She followed and stood in front of him, the coffee table between them.

"Eric."

Head hung, he ignored her.

"Eric, please."

Zach came behind her and curled his large hand over her shoulder. She sucked in the strength he offered and went for it.

"Say something. Anything. Tell me to fuck off. Tell me..." Her voice cracked and she had to stop a moment to collect herself before she could continue. "Oh, Eric, just tell me you still want me."

He lifted his head then. The hurt and anguish on his face wrenched at her stomach.

"I dreamed of you. Did you know that? Every damn night. During the day, too. Bombs exploded, I saw you. Men died in my arms, I saw you. Women were huddled over their children in the filthy corners of the streets, and I fucking saw you. You never left my thoughts. You never left my heart. And I come home to...to..." He sucked in a breath as fire lit the dark depths of his eyes. "When I saw you tonight, I figured you'd waited for me. That we could pick up from where we left off. That's all I really wanted. All I'd waited months to find out. But shit, Lil. How could you come to me like that tonight after you've been in my *best friend's* arms?"

She swallowed around the all-too-familiar lump, her lips and fingertips alight with the tingle of raw nerves. "But it wasn't like that. You were with me, too. Every day. In my mind, in my heart. And Zach's, too."

Righteous anger etched the hard planes of his face.

"Zach?" He pummeled his best friend with an icy stare. "Yeah, Zach, why don't you tell me how I was in your thoughts while you were fucking her? Enlighten me, please. Because, Christ, I can't even imagine it."

Zach spoke then, the lone voice of reason in a sea of tumultuous emotion. "Okay, everyone hold up here a second. I think we all need to take a step back—"

Eric nodded and blew out a sardonic chuckle with another swipe of his hand over his head. "Yeah. Let's all just hold up and soak that in a minute, why don't we? What a perfect fucking thing to dwell on."

Lily wanted to crawl in a hole. She hadn't known exactly what to expect once they arrived at her place, but this certainly wasn't what she pictured happening. Not by a long shot.

Their deep breaths rasped in the sudden uncomfortable silence. A hefty amount of fear coiled in her gut. She was blowing this, she just knew it. Yes, she wanted the three of them to be together. But like this? With Eric's anger so apparent? So raw? Apprehension warred with a flare of heat low in her belly. She didn't want the panic to win, but at the same time, she couldn't deny it any longer either.

Eric looked menacing. Coiled muscles flexed past his rolled up sleeves; thick, ropy veins jutted from under his skin. Antagonism seeped from every pore with such evident strength. God, it killed her to see him in such pain.

She didn't want him to be like this. She didn't want him hurt and pissed.

She only wanted to love him.

He shot to his feet. "I need to go."

"Wait..." She lurched from Zach's grip. *No, no, no!* "Stay. We have to—"

"Talking's overrated, babe," he interrupted as if he read her mind. "I gotta bounce. Get out of here before I say or do something I'll regret later."

She stilled. Her lungs seized with desperation. "Eric, please. Don't leave angry. Just... God, don't leave."

Don't leave angry?

Hell, his anger was the last piece of sanity he had. He held on to it with a ferocious grip, that final thread to reality blowing in a hurricane of gale-force emotions. The rational soldier inside him, however, knew he needed to take that proverbial step back and rein it in before he exploded. But he didn't have the wherewithal to actually do that quite yet. Not when it came to this.

Not when it came to his Lily.

In reality, her confession shouldn't have been much of a surprise. After all, he'd *told* her not to wait for him. He'd left it hanging like that, with her in tears and him telling her to move on. But deep down he assumed – prayed – she'd be there, waiting for him when he got back. Assumed she'd want him as much as he ever wanted her.

Apparently, he was way off base.

Fuck, I'm such an ass.

He reluctantly sat again, fought to control the impulse to smash Zach's face in and sucked a breath in deep. He rested his elbows on the top of his thighs.

"Sorry, babe. Anger's all I have left. Take it or leave it." He looked past the ice in the glass held in his hands to the dirty boots laced up his ankles. He felt like shit. Complete, utter shit. But he didn't care. He just didn't have the ability to in him anymore.

In his periphery, Zach wrapped his arm across Lily's shoulders and squeezed her back against his chest. "Maybe now isn't the time for this." He spoke low, right next to her ear, but Eric heard him anyway, clear as day.

Seeing the two of them together, with a closeness that went beyond their physical bodies, burned him. He thought back to all the times the three of them had hung out before he shipped off and, hell, even before then. The easiness the two held toward each other should've spoken just as loud as Zach telling him—on more than one occasion throughout the years—“how great she is”. He should've known Zach had wanted her. But he'd ignored any feelings of—what? jealousy? possessiveness?—simply because they'd all been close friends for so damn long. She fit in with them so well, been the lush softness between the hard and rough edges that made up him and Zach.

He'd always wanted her, so he supposed it made sense that Zach would, too.

Why hadn't he seen this coming?

“What the hell do you want from me?” He had to know. She'd gone on and on about how he'd been in her thoughts, been with them both. How could that be? How could she sleep with Zach and think of him at the same time? It didn't make any sense. The idea was too much to wrap his weary brain around.

She left Zach's hold and came to sit in front of him on the coffee table. He clenched his jaw when their knees touched, when her luscious lavender scent drifted under his nose. Christ, he still wanted her. So damn much. That desire had never gone away.

She took his glass of whiskey and set it to the side, then slipped her hands into his and hung them between his knees, fingers entwined. Behind her, Zach widened his stance and folded his arms over his chest. His expression was difficult to read, but Eric could sense he held back with an edge of wariness.

“What I want,” she started, “is you. That's never changed.”

He blew out a skeptical chuckle, but couldn't quite keep his pathetic heart from quickening its pace. “Me? Really? How's that, babe? How is it you want me, when you've already got Zach?”

She worked her lips between her teeth in that telltale little way she had and tossed a look over her shoulder to Zach before coming back at him. “You see...that's just it, Eric.

“I want him, too.”

Chapter Five

Zach hung back and contemplated the scene playing out in front of him. Usually it took a lot to surprise Eric, and Lil had certainly done a great job of it just now. He felt for the guy, he really did. But when it came to Lily and what she wanted, Zach found himself helpless to resist. And it would only be a matter of time before Eric would be, too.

For all Zach knew, maybe he already was.

He'd wanted to cringe before, when she told Eric to ask him who else had been with them the one night they'd spent together. But he also knew she didn't say it to hurt him. Eric had always been in her heart, always would be. He and Lily had talked so much about what they meant to each other over the last few months. He stopped doubting her feelings for him a while ago.

She loved him.

But she loved Eric, too.

And it felt right. He didn't know why, but it did. Normally, jealousy would eat away at him. And if this had been any other relationship, any other woman, he'd probably kill another man who would try to come close to what was his.

But Lily was different. Special. With a free spirit too wild to tame, she simply glowed. His perfect Lily. She lived fire and ice, breathed pure passion and pleasure. And he couldn't wait to see that fire and passion multiply and blaze inside her. To feel it.

Back in his senior year of college, he'd witnessed firsthand how a woman reacted when two men made love to her. Now older and more experienced, he wanted nothing more than to see Lily in that light. For him and Eric to bring her higher than she'd ever been.

Lily had told him after they were together that night months ago, it'd be a one-time thing. Couldn't be repeated. Not without Eric. He respected her wishes, but God, he ached for her too. He wanted this just as much as she did.

"Both of us?" Eric finally managed.

The poor bastard was stunned stupid. Without a doubt, this couldn't be what he expected. Hell, why would he?

"You're kidding, right? What the..." Eric turned to him then, and Zach could almost picture the light bulb going off over his head. "Oh, *Christ*."

Eric hung his head, and then lifted it a second later with an edge of revelation in his eyes as he peered at Lily. "He told you, didn't he?"

Yeah, he had. Lying on the couch after they made love, they'd ended up talking for hours. Every subject was broached, including past relationships. At first he'd hesitated to say anything, but something inside him couldn't help but want to nudge her thoughts along. So he confessed it was he and Eric who had been with the woman back in college. Eric had visited him on campus while on leave during his first tour of duty. After a long night of pool, darts and way too much beer, they'd drunkenly shared a one night stand with a more than willing co-ed. The tryst wasn't one of his more stellar moments, but the raw pleasure he'd received that night stuck with him to this day.

"Lil, that happened ages ago. I'm not that kid anymore. This isn't a joke to me. And it's not a one-night-stand either. You mean so much more to me than that—"

"Hold on just a sec." She straightened her back. "I'm not a kid here either, Eric. I know what I want. You. And Zach. I'm being honest with you about that."

Eric flopped back on the couch. "Fuck," he muttered.

Zach moved then to sit behind Lily on the coffee table. He straddled her, wrapped his arms around her waist and tucked her thighs between his as she continued to hold Eric's hands. She trembled in his arms. The telling reaction clawed at his control.

"*Fuck*," Eric groaned again and blasted him with a stare. "How can we... You're cool with this?"

Zach released her waist and smoothed his hands up and down Lily's arms with firm, even strokes. Goosebumps rose under his touch and the quick pace of her heart beat hard against his chest. God, he'd do just about anything to take her anxiety away.

"Yeah, I am. What can I say? The woman knows what she wants. And I happen to feel pretty damn lucky I'm a part of that. She fits with us, Eric. You know she does. You've known it for years."

Eric closed his eyes. "I... *Shit*. You're both asking a lot from me right now. I'm not who I used to be. I'm not the same man anymore."

Zach couldn't begin to understand the demons that raged inside his best friend's head. But he knew one thing for certain—Eric loved Lily. The question was, could he bring himself to share her? To share her love in return?

"I know you're not the same. I never expected you to be." Lily lifted one of his hands to her lips and kissed each knuckle. "Let's just have tonight, then. Let me calm your anger, quiet your pain. All you have to do is feel. Just feel me, Eric."

Zach winced a little inside. He knew she craved them both, but damn it... He'd told her months ago they'd need to ease Eric into this, into what she wanted. Into what they both wanted. If she pushed too hard, moved too fast...

Eric opened his eyes and Zach immediately sympathized with the ocean of angry pain swirling in his stare. He was torn, and Zach related to that. Eric could be a hard, difficult man. But Zach also knew he loved the way a woman looked and felt at the height of her pleasure. Soft and supple, her delicate back arched as she found her bliss, her pouty mouth barely open in a moan of ecstasy. A picture of pure, erotic love.

And in the most elemental terms, that was what this was about. Lily and her pleasure. Her complete love and contentment. As a direct result of hers, they'd have their own, and on a much higher plane than the mere physical. Protectiveness, nurturing, and trust would be ingrained within them. They'd wrap her in a tight cocoon

of all that, and Zach knew that after a while, they'd never be able to walk away from her or the natural high they'd both get from pleasing and sating her every desire.

He watched Eric with quiet patience as an internal struggle battled within his friend's expression, and waited along with Lily for the answer that could possibly change the rest of their lives.

He sure as hell never expected the one they got.

"I can't."

Two words never crushed Lily more.

"What? You can't?" The echo fell from suddenly numb lips.

Eric stared at their entwined hands, gave a squeeze then let go. Her heart once again shattered into a thousand tiny shards that splintered throughout her body.

"No." He stood, brushed past her knees, and strode closer to the door. "I'm jumping out of my skin here. All I want to do right now is kick his ass," he motioned to Zach with a hitch of his chin and a steely glare, "and then take you to bed and stay there for a week. Hell, a month. But I can't do either one of those things. Not without losing myself somewhere along the way. And that I won't do." He seared her with a stare. "Not even for you, Lil."

And then he did the one thing she never anticipated. He turned his back on her – just spun right around – and waltzed out the front door.

She froze between Zach's legs and stared at the closed door. A long moment and a deep breath later, she whispered, "He left."

God, her heart was being ripped from her chest.

Zach rested his cheek against the crown of her head. "Yeah. He did."

She swallowed back a desperate moan. Her eyes welled and her vision blurred with unshed tears. "You told me he'd want this too."

Strong fingers wrapped around her upper arms in a tight grip while his thumbs massaged along her triceps. "I know, baby."

She scooted forward and pierced him with an incensed stare over her shoulder, the tears momentarily forgotten. "'I know?' All you can say is 'I know?'"

"He's on edge, Lil. Cut him some slack. I told you this may take a while, to move slow."

"I thought I was going slow. God, Zach." She buried her face in her hands and fought renewed tears. "He left me."

Zach wrapped his arms around her. "No. He didn't. Not really. Give him some space. A little time."

"Time?" She couldn't keep the anguish from poisoning her voice. "I've run out of time. *We've* run out of time."

"Lil..."

She whirled from his arms and stood to face him. "Don't 'Lil' me. Just...don't." She swatted at an errant tear that finally fell down her cheek. "I've waited so long for...for both of you... I can't... Oh, Zach." She drew in a shaky breath. "It's not just that. You saw him. He needs us, too. So much. I can't stand to see him like this. Hurt. Angry. We can help him work through his pain, be with him when he needs us. I just... I know we can. We can do this, make it better, together."

Zach slid off the table, stood, and opened his arms. "Come here."

She couldn't help it, she rushed back into his hold. Oh God, he felt so good. Strong arms wrapped around her, reassuring hands stroked her back. Her one night with him had started this way, with his caring and gentle caresses. For a six-foot-one bruiser, he had so much compassion, held such tenderness.

When Zach had first told her of his and Eric's one-time ménage à trois, she'd been...hurt really wasn't the right word for it. Shocked, maybe. It wasn't as if sharing lovers was something she'd ever considered before, at least not back then. But they'd

done it. Eric and Zach...and they'd done it with someone else. The instant flare of jealousy when he announced his secret shook her. She shouldn't have given in to the envy, but in a small way she had. Since they'd all been friends for what seemed like forever, she'd always thought of the men as belonging only to her. Three peas nestled together in a cozy pod.

Sure, when she and Zach had been in college and Eric had been stationed out of state during his first tour, they'd lost touch, gone a couple months here or there without a call or email, or stopping in to see each other whenever they were home. But ever since she and Zach graduated college and Eric had come home after his first deployment, they'd been inseparable.

And that's when the confusion had hit. Both men had matured so much while the three had been apart. The new emotions she faced toward them scared her, but astounded her at the same time. They were strong—and sometimes surprisingly erotic—and they only served to confuse the hell out of her. She'd struggled within her own mind and decided it would be best to push the wayward feelings aside. The last thing she'd wanted was to mess up her friendship with these guys. They meant too much for her to do that.

So, they'd gone on that way, year after year. Being best friends and doing all the things close friends do. Movies, parties, dancing and dinners out. Nothing out of the ordinary, nothing that would remotely tip the scales.

Then Eric had kissed her after the concert that night, and everything changed.

But regardless, what still amazed her was the fact she hadn't been able to make sense of all those muddled feelings she held inside toward the two men. Not until her night with Zach and his little confession. She knew at that point nothing less than having them both in her life would make her happy.

She needed them. She felt whole with them. Zach understood.

Why couldn't Eric?

Tears flowed in fitful waves, soaking a dark stain into the front of Zach's olive green t-shirt.

"Take it easy, baby. He'll be back. I know for a fact he won't be able to stay away. Not from you. Not from this."

She sniffled and calmed some, then raised her head. "How do you know? What if he's never okay with this? With me? God, Zach, I've made such a mess of things."

With a more than easy touch, he cupped her cheeks in his palms. "No, you haven't. I wouldn't be here if I didn't want this, Lil. And as for Eric... He's got to be in shock right now. This couldn't have been what he expected when he flew off that base this morning. I'm sure he figured he'd come home to a small party, get more than a little wasted and end up back here in bed with you. We had to have thrown him for a serious loop."

She made a weak attempt at a reassuring smile as he lifted his thumbs to wipe away her tears. Tension flowed out of her shoulders. "You're right. I just know how amazing we've always been together, the three of us. How perfect this can be. I want him to see that..."

He brushed his lips over hers. So gentle. So simple.

"He will. He'll be back. Then you'll have us. Both of us."

Butterflies raced in her stomach, heat pooled between her thighs. And at that moment, a sweet yearning slowly overtook her sorrow.

The promise she made to herself that she wouldn't be with either man separately weighed heavy now. But even despite her personal pledge, she reacted to Zach—not only to his encouraging words, but to the gentle man holding her so tenderly in his arms.

She wanted him. Needed him.

But at the same time she ached to her bones for Eric.

Their gazes held for a long moment. Caught up in the calm he exuded, she rose to her toes and pressed her lips against Zach's. She needed some semblance of peace, just a little to still her rambunctious thoughts. Craving his serenity more than anything, she found herself greedily taking what he offered, any repercussions be damned.

Zach bent his knees, wound his arms around her lower back and lifted her closer to deepen the kiss. Heat radiated from his body, his erection pressed low on her belly.

And she was right there with him. Her lips parted to accept his wicked tongue, her mind whirled as she clutched his shoulders tighter.

Then a vision of Eric flashed behind her closed eyes.

Oh, God, I shouldn't be doing this... It's not fair...

The instant the thought burst through her mind, the front door shot open.

"Zach, I need the keys for your truck..."

She tore away from Zach's kiss and spun within his arms. Eric stood in the doorway, one hand held in a death grip on the doorknob, the other clutched onto the jamb. He looked her up and down as his face flushed red and fury lit his eyes. But if she wasn't mistaken, there was more to that intent look of his. Desire? Could that be what she saw?

Her heart raced at the notion. Did he still want her? Had he changed his mind about what she and Zach offered?

No. That couldn't be. It was only her wishful imagination taking over the shame from getting caught doing what she said she'd *never* do. Besides, Eric had made his stance perfectly clear earlier when he walked out on them.

He didn't want her.

But that look... The raw sexual power pulsing from his body was undeniable.

"Eric... It's not..."

"I see you wasted no time, *babe*."

Zach stormed forward then, pushed her behind him in a protective gesture. Ire of his own etched the hard planes of his face. "Shut the fuck up, Eric. You don't have a damn clue what's going on here."

"Don't I?" Eric stalked further into the living room, more than primed and ready for a fight. "Seems pretty fucking obvious to me."

Zach got right up into Eric's face. They stood nose to nose, both of them seething. "No. It's not. Maybe you really are a goddamn blind man."

All the blood rushed from Lily's head and settled into a cold ball in the center of her stomach. Christ, they were going to come to blows if she didn't do something fast.

Several options flew through her mind on how she might stop them. She could jump between their hulking bodies and hope to hell she didn't get caught in the middle of a bloody fistfight. Or she could take matters into her own hands and try to distract them.

Her mind sparked with sudden hope.

This could be it... And if she handled it right—forced the issue, so to speak—the high-strung emotional turn the entire night had taken could end up being so worth it.

Oh, hell yeah. The latter seemed like a much better plan.

Chapter Six

Eric never wanted to slam his fist into another human being's face so much in his life. With his hand already bunched at his side, he was ready to make the first move and take Zach out. But then, in his periphery, Lily stepped back. The action distracted him and her deep sigh dragged his attention past Zach and into her direction.

One simple look at her precious face and he fucking lost it. Christ, he was so gone.

She grabbed the hem of her tight little t-shirt and wriggled it over her head. Chestnut-brown curls fell around her bare shoulders in the wake. The lace of her black bra barely covered those perfect, dark pink nipples of hers. The soft mounds of her golden-tanned breasts rose, and then dipped into a blissful valley of heart-stopping cleavage.

By the time she reached a hand to the back hook of the bra, Zach had spun around and appeared just as entranced as he found himself.

Fuck, she so didn't fight fair.

"What the hell are you doing?" He growled the words on a step away from Zach.

A sultry lowering of her eyelashes and a bite to her bottom lip led to a throaty, "Hopefully stopping a bloodbath."

Eric flashed a glance to Zach, who blew out a breath, folded his arms over his chest, then hung and shook his head. Eric could've sworn he bit back a curse.

He returned his interest to the wicked seductress before him. "I'm not in the mood for games here, Lil."

She left the clasp of her bra closed and brought her hands around to her stomach instead. The way she teased her own skin with those delicate fingers of hers had him rock hard in an instant.

God, he should be pissed—and he was—but his body reacted so strongly to her, too. Always had. He could never deny the effect she had on him—physical or otherwise.

“No games, Eric. Not a single one. I told you before, I know what I want.”

His mind reeled, his blood burned.

“I want you.” A predatory step. “I want Zach.” Another seductive step.

The rise and fall of her still-covered breasts on every word, along with the movement of her fingers as they traveled higher to skim over them, tore him up. Could he do this? Could he give her what she wanted and not lose himself at the same time?

He honestly didn't know if he could share her. Didn't know if he wanted to.

But if he stuck with his “no” answer, would he lose her? Could this be an all-or-nothing deal with her?

Sure, Zach had always been like a brother to him. Eric had never trusted anyone more in his life. And he knew if anybody could make this work, it would be the three of them.

But *shit*...

She laid an easy hand on his chest, spread her fingers and dug into his pecs. He soaked her warmth into his heart.

“Please don't be angry with Zach over this, Eric. We both want you to understand the depth of what you mean to us. All we want is to share our love, to share the love we all have for each other...”

A small part of his rage eased away as his body tightened further against her touch. Mentally? Yeah, he got it. Could appreciate her rationale. But in his heart... *Damn it*.

“Lil.” Her name burned his throat as he lifted his gaze to Zach. “I've never been as close to any man as I am to you. I'd lay my life down, anytime, anyplace, if it meant you'd both be safe. But this...”

"I know." Zach loosened his arms and lowered his hands into the pockets of his jeans, then sidestepped to stand directly behind Lily. When his chest touched her shoulder, her eyes drifted shut and she held her breath. He closed in and tenderly kissed the side of her neck. A delicate moan fell from her lips. The eroticism of the simple gesture pushed Eric closer to that narrow edge of control.

"You love her," Zach lifted his head and stared into his eyes. "And so do I." He withdrew his hands from his pockets, brought them under her arms, and then spanned them over her stomach. Eric thought he'd die when Zach's thumbs teased the underside of the black lacy bra. "All we're asking for here is a chance to see where this goes. A chance to find something beyond the typical 'everyday' kind of love. A chance for...well, *more*."

Eric squeezed his eyes shut. Oh Jesus, he wanted *more*, too. After a year and a half of barely living, existing only to survive, the crushing realization of wanting what they offered hit with the force of a fully loaded Blackhawk helicopter. Right then, he knew he couldn't live without her — or Zach either for that matter.

He opened his eyes. The desire and need etched upon both their faces... *Now* he understood. He brushed his hands across Zach's as the other man caressed Lily's stomach. Their gazes caught before Eric lowered his hands to grasp her hips. "Come here, Lil."

She sucked in another breath and slid into his arms. He gathered her close and held tight.

"I want you so much, babe. But this...this is so damn hard for me. To share you... God, with anyone..."

"Eric..."

He skimmed her lower back with his rough, calloused hands. Fuck, her skin felt so amazing under his touch. His cock swelled to amazing lengths just from her heat, her softness. And he couldn't help it, he had to taste her. He lowered his mouth and nipped

along her shoulder. The hiss she released as his teeth grazed over her sensitive skin speared him.

She blazed within his arms and he instantly drew up an image in his mind of her nestled the way she was now between him and Zach. But tighter, and writhing as they made love to her slowly, torturously. She'd be sweet, so supple and more gorgeous than ever before.

Damn it to hell. He didn't know if he loved or hated how that little vision sealed the deal.

He had to do this. Wanted to do this more than anything. For her. Oh Christ, for all of them.

He tangled his hand in her hair and pulled her head back, then kissed her with everything he had in him. On a groan, she lifted to her toes and returned his passion with a sultry desperation that matched his own. She reached back at the same time, found Zach's hand and pulled him closer.

Fire. God, she was on fucking fire. The fingers of her free hand fisted the collar of his shirt. Her hips ground against his as Zach closed in behind her and once again wrapped an arm around her. Sure he'd lose control any second, Eric broke from their kiss, spun her away from Zach and slid an arm under her knees. Her head fell against his shoulder when he lifted her into his arms. After a step toward the hallway, and with Lily's hand still holding onto Zach's, he plastered his best friend with a heated stare over his opposite shoulder.

"Bedroom. Now. You coming?"

Zach's blood shot through his veins as his heart rate picked up double-time. "Hell yeah. Couldn't keep me away."

He still gripped Lily's hand as they made their way down the hallway to the bedroom. Once there, he let go and flicked on the small crystal lamp on her dresser. The mellow glow bathed the room with just enough light to see by.

Eric laid her on the bed, slid his body over hers while Zach pulled the shirt over his head. His muscles bunched in anticipation, his cock hardened to steel. The radiance on Lily's face wrecked the tentative hold Zach had on his control. He wanted this so badly, but he also needed to pull back on that desire some or he'd lose it. No way did he want this to be over too quickly.

She held out her hand. "Come lie with us, Zach. Right here, next to me."

Heat rushed him when he enveloped her dainty fingers in his grip, climbed onto the bed and settled next to them.

Man, this felt so fucking right.

Her eyes glistened with happy tears. Zach leaned closer to kiss away a drop that hung on the edge of her lashes. Her chin quivered when she smiled and a little more of his control slipped further away. He wanted her, ached for her so damn much.

She tilted her head and kissed him with a tenderness he hadn't yet experienced with her. Their one night together had been so urgent, so frantic. But he loved this side of her, too.

Eric nuzzled her neck as Zach sucked the tip of Lily's tongue into his mouth. The inferno in his friend's eyes was unmistakable when he moved to lick along her ear and their gazes caught again.

Zach groaned and broke away. Lily cupped Eric's cheek then, angled her lips to meet with his for a quick, scorching kiss.

"You're the world to me, baby." Eric soothed her with gentle nudges from his lips, tender caresses on her cheeks with his thumbs. "If this is truly what you want, I'm in. All the way. All I want is for you...for *us* to be happy."

She drew her hand over Eric's stubbled head, and then turned back to Zach. He entwined his fingers with hers and nibbled on the inside of her wrist.

"That's all any of us wants," Zach added. "The most we could ever hope for."

With an easy thumb on her chin, Eric leaned in and rekindled his kiss. Their breaths rasped together, their tongues dueled. Zach thought his cock would explode from the sight.

Eric pulled back. Desire, along with love – the heart-wrenching, be-all, end-all kind of love – spilled from Lily's gaze. She then struck Zach just as hard with the exact same adoration and passion.

Paradise itself couldn't be this perfect.

"You ready for this, sugar?" Zach pressed his lips to the back of her hand, grazed the edge of her bra with an inquisitive finger. "Ready to take all of us to that next level?"

The tip of her wet, pink tongue glossed her bottom lip. Her hips circled under Eric.

"Oh God, yes. More than either of you could know."

Yeah, Zach seriously doubted that. He had a fairly good idea of how ready she really was.

Of how ready they all were.

Chapter Seven

Lily's body hummed while her heart soared. She knew she'd start sobbing from their heartfelt words if Eric hadn't slid to his side and gathered her in his arms. The pressure of him at her front and Zach against her back lifted her to new heights. The hot kisses they trailed on either side of her neck thrilled her beyond reason.

After everything that happened earlier, she couldn't believe she now lay between the two men she loved more than anything. Their searing heat, along with their solid walls of muscles, surrounded her. The overwhelming love coming from each of them made that Texas-sized knot in her throat return, but for an entirely different reason this time.

She wasn't so sure she hadn't died and gone to heaven.

But when Zach skimmed her bra strap down her shoulder and scraped his teeth along the tender skin there, she knew this was more than real. The undeniable certainty of what they were about to do heated her from the inside out.

Eric possessed her mouth again, consumed her in another devastating kiss. When he ran his tongue over hers, the smoky flavor of the whiskey from earlier tingled along her taste buds. She cradled his head in one hand to bring him closer as the other wrapped around Zach's at her shoulder. A low moan escaped her throat at the combination of nonstop sensations.

She tangled her fingers in Zach's hair and gave a tug. When he chuckled, the vibration danced along the skin on her back. "Naughty, naughty, love. I'll have to get you back for that."

Eric broke free of her mouth, only to move lower to her chin and neck. The wicked little bites he bombarded her with had her sex clenching in need.

"Can't wait," she replied, more than a bit breathless.

She felt Zach's grin on her shoulder. "I'll just bet you can't."

He shifted and moved her so she lay on her back. Eric never stopped his torturous kisses, only now he worked his way past her collarbone to the rise of her breast. Zach snaked his hand under her and with an expert flick of his fingers, unclasped her bra. With coordinated moves, each man pulled a strap off her arm until she was bared to their stares. Then their mouths—oh, their sinful mouths—covered her, right where she needed them most. Rough tongues flicked both nipples, sharp teeth bit before heated lips covered the sting.

They sucked. They licked. They drove her completely mad.

One unbuttoned her jeans. The other lowered the zipper. Together they drew the pants over her hips and down her thighs. Zach left her breast, kissed along her quivering stomach until he came to the edge of the lace thong she wore. He pushed her jeans the rest of the way off, let them fall to the floor and continued the sweet torture of his mouth.

She could barely hold a complete thought, her mind whirled. But one thing she knew for certain, she wanted to touch them. Needed to touch them. She yanked at Eric's camouflage shirt, pulled it and the beige t-shirt underneath off together in one swift motion.

Eric pushed himself to his knees. His hands went to his belt buckle and Lily swallowed. Zach was wreaking havoc on the inside of her thighs with his sinful mouth, but she couldn't help but stare at Eric as he unbuckled, unbuttoned and slowly—God, too slowly—drew his own zipper down.

"Eighteen months without you, Lil. A fucking year and a half." He slid backward off the bed. His feet hit the floor and he stood at the edge. "The one thing I fantasized about most on those long nights alone? Your mouth. On me."

Lily groaned and grabbed her breast with one hand, pinched her nipple until a sweet, erotic pain shot through her while the other clenched again between her legs, twisted in Zach's hair.

Eric peeled his Marine-issued camos open and pushed them past a pair of plain boxer briefs. The low-rise waistband showed off the sexy cut of his sculpted abs, the front panel not standing a chance at concealing the impressive erection hidden behind it.

Zach picked that moment to kiss her through the lace of her panties. She sucked in a quick breath, ground against his mouth, but never broke eye contact with Eric. Her heart beat so fast. Her mouth watered at what she knew Eric wanted, at what Zach was already doing.

Eric stepped out of his pants and stuffed his hand inside his boxers. He gripped himself, stroked slow and licked his lips.

God, she wanted to be the one doing that to him. "Don't tease me, Eric. I can't take it. Please..." The words no sooner left her lips when Zach pushed aside her thong and dipped his tongue inside her. Her hips bucked off the bed. "Ah...yes..."

Her breath got stuck somewhere in her lungs as Zach drew his tongue through her sex to settle on her clit. Her head spun, her blood raced. She fisted Zach's hair tighter and leaned up on one elbow. Breathily, she said to Eric, "Come here, baby. Let's make this reality kick ass against all those fantasies."

He smiled and she got a thrill at knowing she lightened his heart some. He shucked his boxers and knelt next to her on the bed.

He was so beautiful. Tight, tanned skin covered hard, warrior muscles.

Her soldier, her hero.

With a hand holding the base of his shaft, his other shakily caressed her cheek. She inched forward and circled the head of his cock with her tongue before taking him fully in her mouth. He groaned and lifted his face to the ceiling. She stilled for a moment and then withdrew to suck gently on the tip. On a hiss between clenched teeth, he lowered his head and blasted her with a stare that all but screamed his hot, heavy desire. When he threaded his fingers through her hair to hold her nape, she eased even more, let him take full control.

He fucked her mouth, slow and easy as Zach's in turn shattered every dream she'd held about this moment. It was more, oh so much more than she ever imagined. Zach danced his tongue over her clit as she moaned around Eric's engorged cock.

Close, yes...yes...so close.

"That's it, Lily-sweet," Eric panted on a quicker thrust. "Let's do this together. You ready to come with me? It's been so damn long. Too damn long. I can't last..."

As he said the words, Zach shifted, pulled her thong off, then returned his mouth to her and thrust a finger hard inside her. Fire raced up her spine, tremors shook her thighs. She relaxed her throat as every other muscle in her body tightened, and took Eric even deeper.

"Ahh...yes... Just like that, sweetheart." Another firm lunge in her mouth. Another low groan. Eric clenched his jaw and fisted her hair, pulled it. She had always reveled in his rawness, his stark masculinity. But this...this rough but contrastingly tender way he was taking her... God, she loved it.

"Now, baby. Christ, now."

The pulsations from Eric's cock as he slid down her throat and the provocative sting from the grip he had on her hair, mixed with Zach's expert touches, sent her flying over the edge. She bucked against Zach's mouth in an attempt to deepen his fingers as she swallowed every bit of Eric's release.

He shouted her name, an anguished cry of desperation and need as he stilled inside her mouth. Lily came with a charge as fierce as any lightening bolt. Pleasure slammed into every cell of her body while Zach continued to wring out the jolts her climax created.

Eric slipped from her mouth and flopped back on the bed. Zach crawled up her body with tiny kisses and nips. Still breathing hard, she mewled when Zach placed his lips over hers. The taste of herself on his tongue renewed the tingle in her belly and she suddenly realized he'd shed his pants at some point. He covered her sweat-damp body, his heated skin adhering to hers, his hard cock like a steel rod against her thigh.

"That was so fucking hot, babe," he whispered, then licked along her earlobe. "But I think you killed the poor guy."

She giggled, light and free, and glanced at Eric. He lay next to them with one arm over his eyes, his chest rising and falling in short breaths. When the edge of his lip quirked, his devilish dimple gleamed at her.

"Damn near. To think I lived through mortar attacks only to be taken out by a blow job." He lifted his arm and looked at them. "A perfect blow job, I have to add."

Zach nuzzled under her ear. "Perfect, huh?" He licked down the hollow of her neck, then nibbled over her shoulder as his hands stroked along her sides. "I'd love to feel some of that perfection, too, babe. Like now."

"Now, hmm?" she teased.

"Oh, yeah. I'm dying here."

"Well, never let it be said I wouldn't accommodate a dying man." She shoved at his shoulders until he rolled onto his back. Straddling his narrow hips, she caressed his rough jaw and leaned down for a quick kiss before creating a trail of nips and licks over his chest. She paid special attention to his peaked nipples, and then went lower to scrape her teeth along his ribs. The muscles of his six-pack tightened as she brushed her tongue across the hard ridges. She grasped his swollen shaft in her right hand, stroked it once as she lowered further to enclose the near-purple head in her mouth. Zach's hips lifted and his hand pushed on the crown of her head.

"Fuck, yes..."

She grinned to herself as she took as much of his length as she could. The width stretched her lips just as Eric's had, the thick vein along the underside pulsed against her tongue. She reached down, grabbed his sac and pulled gently.

"Oh hell, Lil," he groaned. He thrust upward in time with her down strokes, and glanced to Eric. "Yeah, man. Perfect. Absolutely perfect."

The bed shifted when Eric moved closer. While on her hands and knees over Zach's legs, Eric twisted until his face came even with her ass, his knees next to Zach's trim waist.

"Looks pretty damn perfect from back here, too," he said. Warm lips nudged her left cheek, a hot hand rose between her thighs.

Zach lifted his head at the same time Eric brushed his fingers over the short, trimmed hairs of her mound. Easing higher, he slipped a finger inside her. She tightened around it and groaned.

While lifting his free hand behind his head, Zach drew her into his stare. Eyes hooded, the deep brown shade of his irises had darkened to nearly coal black. His bicep bulged beside his temple, his pecs flexed over his chest with power and strength.

"What's he doing there, babe? Are his fingers inside your sweet body? God, I know he can feel how tight you are, how wet."

At his words, Eric thrust again, the first finger joined by another, his mouth moving closer to her core.

She arched her back and tingles spread throughout her womb. With a moan she took Zach faster, and her world began to spin off its axis. A muscle jumped in his jaw when she slowed to scrape her teeth gently upward, ending with little bites on the velvet-soft tip, only to delve deeper once more.

"That's good, baby. So damn good..." He thrust harder, somehow in time with Eric's fingers as he buried them inside her, retreated, and then plunged all over again. She couldn't stand it, she needed to come again. Desperately.

She snuck her hand through her legs, under Eric's, to find the hard nub of her over-sensitive clit. Eric had her juices flowing from the attention of his skilled fingers, she was completely soaked. She stroked herself once, twice. All the while, Zach watched her with an expression of passion and love.

“Oh yeah, Lil. Touch yourself... I want you to come with me, too.” All she could manage in answer was a strangled moan. “Do this for me, sweetheart. Oh God... Come with me...”

At that moment, Eric twisted his hand. Her sex clenched as he stroked her G-spot over and over while she rubbed furiously on her clit. But when he leaned closer to her ass, pressed a kiss on her lower back, then drew his tongue lower...and then lower still...down the crevice until his hot tongue rimmed the tender skin around her anus...

Oh God...

She groaned with a jagged cry around Zach’s cock.

The unexpected erotic sensation, so different from anything she’d ever experienced before, sent her spinning off into sheer oblivion. When her body shook, then tensed in a fierce orgasm, she squeezed her eyes shut, locked her jaw and sucked on Zach harder. She opened her eyes a moment later, uneven breaths rasping through her nose as Zach’s abs and legs tightened under her. He caught her gaze and growled—a guttural, almost carnal sound—before bringing the hand from behind his head. He grabbed onto Eric’s thigh at his side in a brutal grip. His hips bucked, his cock jerked inside her mouth. spurts of his salty release shot down her throat, and she greedily swallowed all she could.

She shuddered with her own sweet tremors as Eric slowed the pace of his fingers and nuzzled her rear with a scratchy cheek. She gave Zach’s cock one final lick, and then dropped to her side between the two hard men. Zach released Eric’s thigh, wrapped that arm tight around her waist and squeezed. Eric spun to snuggle up behind her, all the while raining kisses along her upper arm.

“Somebody said something before about dying?” she gasped.

Both men chuckled, but Zach spoke first. “Oh, no, sweetness. We’re not letting you off that easy.”

She playfully bit his shoulder. “Not what I meant. I just feel... This is heaven for me.”

Eric whispered in her ear as he stroked her hip. "Let us take you higher..."

She shivered at his simple words, at his erotic touches.

"Stratosphere awaits, babe," Zach added, his lips gentle on her forehead, his still-raspy breaths warm across her skin.

They rolled her within their arms so she faced Eric and Zach lay behind her. He pressed his mouth to her shoulder, got up from the bed and picked up his pants. As he dug in the pocket and pulled out a couple condoms, he headed to her nightstand and opened the drawer. He smiled at her then, a bottle of lubricant in hand.

"As I suspected," he said on a chuckle. "Every woman's hiding place."

She squirmed a bit within Eric's grasp, knowing exactly why Zach would need the lube.

Eric whispered in her ear. "We'll take it slow, just to make sure you're ready. The last thing either of us wants is to hurt you."

She licked her lips as Zach tossed his pants aside and crawled back on the bed.

"I know," she answered. "But I'm so ready. I've waited for this, for both of you, for so long."

Eric kissed her, slow and sensual. With a lick to her bottom lip, he said, "Lie on top of me, Lil. Take me inside you."

Her belly fluttered along with her heart at the words. He held her tight, rocked them until he lay on his back. With her legs arranged at his sides, he pushed on her shoulders for her to sit upright. His cock, hard and long once again, rubbed against her clit as she sat astride him.

"Go ahead," he said, eyes blazing into hers, hands stroking her thighs. "Take me in your hand. Put me inside you."

Zach came up behind her. His knees straddled Eric's legs, his hands gripped her hips. He licked up her neck and brushed his chest against her back, his cock against her rear. When she paused for a split second, Zach took her hand in his and brought it

between her legs. Together they rolled a condom on Eric, and then wrapped their fingers around his sheathed cock. She lifted up and they placed him at the entrance to her body. Zach pushed down on her hip with his free hand and all three groaned in unison as she impaled herself on Eric.

"I love you," Zach whispered in her ear. She lifted her arm behind her head, cupped his nape and turned into his kiss. She stayed like that for several moments, moving leisurely to adjust her body to Eric's width, kissing Zach slow and easy. Loving every second of it.

Breathless, Zach broke the kiss. "Don't get too far ahead of me, babe." He pulled her hand from his neck and gently eased her down until she lay on Eric's chest. The light hairs on his hard pecs brushed along her nipples. Tingles soared through her breasts at the ticklish sensation.

Eric took his turn at her mouth with a kiss so hot her toes curled. He lifted his hips, drove harder inside her. But when Zach's finger, coated with the cool, thick jelly, delved down the crevice of her ass, she nearly came undone.

He circled her anus, lubricating her gently, and then slid the tip of one finger past the tight ring of muscles. At first reaction, her body wanted to refuse him. He caressed her ass cheek, soothed her with a quiet, "Easy now..."

After another quick thrust, Eric held her hips still. Every muscle in her body screamed to move against them.

"Hold on a sec, Lil. Let him do this. We don't want to hurt you. Just relax and feel."

She held his gaze, so full of love her heart ached, and breathed through Zach deepening his finger.

"That's my girl. You can do this, Lil. Breathe again..."

She moaned as Zach added another finger, her body accepting him more easily now. Eric closed his eyes and swallowed. She passed her lips gently over his. "You feel him, too. Don't you?"

He nodded and opened his eyes. "Yeah, babe. I do."

She bit her lower lip and squeezed her eyes as another rush of cold lubricant accompanied yet another finger. She burned inside, the slight pain a heady contrast to the overwhelming pleasure of Zach's fingers.

Eric held her cheek in his palm. "Open your eyes, sweetheart. Tell me what you feel."

She couldn't. It was too much, she felt too much. The fullness of Eric, the bite from Zach. She reared back with a sudden urgent need to move against them both.

More...she had to have more...

Zach held her down with a hot hand between her shoulder blades. "Lil. Give me another second..."

"No! Now, Zach. God, please, now..."

"Take her..." Eric added with a growl through clenched teeth.

She glanced over her shoulder, breathless and on the verge of tears. Zach ripped the condom wrapper open with his teeth, sheathed himself in a heartbeat. He coated himself with the lubricant and edged forward.

She laid her head on Eric's shoulder as Zach prodded her rear entrance. "Push against me. Easy..."

Following his instructions, she opened herself to him. When the head of his cock slipped in, she grabbed Eric's biceps in a death hold. Zach retreated, thrust again. She bit Eric's shoulder as both men groaned.

Zach wrapped a hand over her shoulder. His strong fingers dug into the muscles at the side of her neck. "God, you're so fucking tight." Another few inches eased inside her. "Holy hell, love."

Eric moved then, and she nearly fell apart. The dual sensations were more than she could've ever prepared for. The heat from their bodies and the love pouring from each of them only added to the rush of the moment.

This was what she wanted.

As the men found their rhythm, she knew she could never go back to the way things were before. Eric and Zach – together – were her future. Her home. Her life.

“You okay?” Eric asked.

Cocooned between the two men she loved? How could she not be okay? “Oh, Eric, it’s so much more...”

She braced her hands on his chest, lifted up and thrust back. Every nerve ending blazed, every cell inside her shattered.

“You’re so beautiful like this, Lil...” Eric stroked her breasts, and then pinched her nipples as Zach kissed her shoulder. Their speed increased, their bodies glistened with a fine sheen of sweat.

Lily’s head spun. She tightened on them both. When she moaned and tossed her head back, Eric followed suit. He left her breasts, reached behind her and grabbed onto Zach. Holding his ass, Eric pulled him hard. The action pushed Zach further into her and her clit rubbed over the base of Eric’s cock.

Again and again...over and over. She was coming apart, drowning in a pool of raw power and heated flesh. Her legs began to tremble as the familiar tingle of her orgasm took root.

Eric groaned. “She’s coming... Ah fuck, I can feel her coming...”

“Let loose, babe,” Zach said. We’re with you...right here with you.”

Her entire body lit in a carnal explosion. Every sensation enhanced with a gleaming clarity. She felt them come inside her, the jolt from Eric, the pulsation of Zach behind her.

She never imagined it would be like this.

“God, I love you, Lil.” Eric’s voice was low, raw, as Zach breathed his own words into her ear.

“Love you so much, Lily.”

Through the moans, the fierce grips and the heat of wandering lips, Lily's love grew to a level she'd only dreamed of. These were her men. They belonged to her and her to them. Nothing would change that.

Nothing ever could.

They collapsed into a heap of sticky skin and tangled limbs. Her muscles turned to liquid, her mind to mush. Zach left from behind her and padded to the bathroom. He returned with a warm towel, cleaned her quickly before tossing the cloth into her hamper and snuggling under the covers with her and Eric.

Eric stifled a yawn and Lily chuckled. "Tired?"

Her front to his, he tucked her head under his chin as Zach settled in behind her. "It's been a long day, and you two just kicked my ass, big time." He stroked his thumb over her hip. "I've got to wonder, though, is this what we can always expect?"

She smiled and little tingles danced under his touch. "I hope so. All I know is I'm never happier than when I'm with the two of you. I love both of you so much for trusting in me, for trusting in the love I have for each of you."

She shifted a little to look at Zach over her shoulder. "I love you, Zach. You've been my rock these last few months. That means more to me than I could ever put into words."

"Ah, Lil, you know I love you." He quirked his lip. "Something in me always has. I'm addicted to everything about you."

The comment had her glowing from the inside out. She then cupped Eric's cheek.

"I love you so much, Eric. My heart's complete now that you're back home, safe and sound."

"Lily, babe. It's always been you. I've been in love with you forever."

If possible, she lit up inside even more. "I want this to work more than anything. I know in my heart we can make a life together, just like this."

Zach spoke up then. "As long as we're honest and never hold back what we're feeling, we can. I'm talking forever here, guys. You two are everything to me. My love, my family."

Her heart melted. "Family. I love the sound of that."

Eric brushed the hair from her shoulder. "Me too, Lil. Me too. You've won your war. We're here, and we're all yours."

About the Author

Kristin Daniels has always been a reader of romance, but it wasn't until she discovered the *erotic* romance genre that she finally figured out what had been missing from all the books she'd read before. The heat, the passion...that was it! Her love of reading (any genre, any format...really just anything) led to her taking a chance on writing something of her own, and she's been hooked ever since.

Kristin calls the suburbs of Chicago home, where she lives with a hero of her very own and their three great kids.

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