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Heat of Passion

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uniform

Elle Kennedy

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Dedication

To all the readers who demanded Carson needed his own story!

Prologue

As far as bachelor parties went, this one fucking sucked. Normally it was the best man's job to organize the stag, and Carson Scott had been tossing around wild and kinky ideas in his head ever since his best friend got engaged. But had any of those wild and kinky ideas seen the light of day? Nope. Because Garrett and Shelby wanted to plan it themselves—and make it a joint shindig.

Spending time with Shelby's hot friends might've been fun, except they were all married, engaged or attached. *All* of them. And since almost every guy on Garrett's SEAL team, including Carson, was single, the chances of hooking up with a female member of the bridal party were zero.

Fortunately, the bachelor/bachelorette party was being held at Hot Zone, the newest nightclub in San Diego, so the chances of hooking up with a non-wedding-related chick were looking pretty good.

Carson lifted his beer to his lips and stepped closer to the second-floor railing that overlooked the crowded dance floor below. Hot Zone was one of those establishments that didn't care much for lighting. Darkness fell over the entire club, broken only by the bright flashes of the strobe lights. A sultry salsa beat pounded out of the speaker system, the heavy bass making the floor beneath his feet vibrate, and down on the dance floor, couples grinded together to the music. One of the couples was Garrett and Shelby, only they weren't doing much dancing. Just standing in the middle of the floor, making out as if they were the only two people in the room.

Next to Carson, fellow SEAL Ryan Evans tapped one hand on the iron railing and frowned at the display of vertical sex happening below. "Shit, I really need to get laid," Ryan grumbled. He took a swig of beer then slammed the bottle back on the table they'd been standing around for the past hour. Glancing over at the long chrome bar counter

behind them, he frowned again and added, “And if anyone fucking suggests I hop into bed with one of those old dudes by the bar, I’ll kick your ass.”

Matt O’Connor laughed. “The bald one’s kinda cute. I bet he’d do you.”

“The only person I want to do is the maid of honor,” Ryan said with a sigh. “Man, I’d give up my favorite rifle for a chance with her.”

All the guys nodded, their gazes glumly moving in the direction of the sexy woman who was chatting with her husband near the bar. Brianna Holliday, the maid of honor, was the stuff of wet dreams. Tall, blonde and stacked. Her blue dress was knee-length, with a modest neckline, yet it just screamed “Fuck Me Now”. No doubt that’s what her husband was gonna do the second he got her home tonight. If Carson had a woman like that, he’d never let her get out of bed.

He turned back to his teammates. “Isn’t it the duty of the best man to screw the maid of honor? Why am I deprived of the privilege?”

“Because you’ve already screwed the bride,” Junior Lieutenant Will Charleston pointed out, finally joining the conversation.

Carson stifled a groan. Why wasn’t he surprised that Will knew about his romp with Shelby and Garrett? He’d only told Matt, but when you spent all your time with the same five guys, secrets didn’t stay secret for long.

“I wish I screwed the bride,” Ryan said, staring longingly at Shelby.

Carson followed the other man’s gaze, and couldn’t help admiring Shelby himself. Shel was the epitome of a California girl—blonde hair, blue eyes, toned bod. And she’d been a wildcat in bed, made him come so hard he could barely walk afterwards. Alas, thinking about the threesome he’d had with Shelby and Garrett in that heat wave six months ago was a no-no. Now that the couple was getting married, Carson knew it wasn’t appropriate to picture his best friend’s future wife naked.

“Quit acting like you’re starved for sex,” Matt said to Ryan. “Didn’t you go home with that redhead from the bar last weekend?”

Ryan groaned. “Unfortunately. We went back to her place, and I was on the receiving end of a pretty awesome blowjob—and then her husband came home. I barely got out of there with my skin intact.”

Matt hooted, Carson chuckled, and even Will, who rarely smiled, looked like he was fighting back laughter. Ry’s story didn’t come as a surprise to anyone, though. One of these days Ryan Evans was going to find himself on the receiving end of an ass kicking. He seemed to attract the married ones like flies to a corpse.

“Your dick’s really going to get you in trouble, you know that?” Matt said, voicing Carson’s thoughts.

“At least I’m using my dick. Unlike you monks over here.” He gestured to Will and Carson.

Carson raised a brow. “Don’t go dragging me into this. My dick’s doing fine, thank you very much.”

“Good to hear,” a throaty female voice remarked.

Carson swiveled his head in the direction of the voice, just in time to see a petite brunette in a yellow halter-top emerge from the shadows. The second floor of the club had a loft feel to it, a huge open space with a handful of floor-to-ceiling beams, and the brunette must have been leaning against one of those pillars, because Carson hadn’t even seen her approach. Which raised the question, just how long had she been lurking in the darkness, eavesdropping on them?

The others looked as startled as he felt to see her standing there. “So, which one of you is going to dance with me?” she asked in that husky voice.

Man, how did a tiny thing like her have such a sexy, fuck-me voice? Carson studied her, waiting for flashes from the strobe to illuminate her face so he could get a better look. Each time a streak of light lit up her face, Carson liked what he saw. She had one of those faces you saw in makeup ads—smooth creamy skin, a small upturned nose, and naturally red lips that were lush and sensual and ridiculously kissable. He lowered his gaze and liked what he saw there too. Perky breasts, small but in proportion to her petite

frame. She couldn't have been taller than five feet, but her sexy little body was a total turn-on.

The biggest turn-on about her was that he could see her nipples poking against her halter. Yup, she wasn't wearing a bra.

He noticed his teammates checking her out as well, saw their appreciation, and an odd pang of possessiveness gripped his insides.

"Well?" she prompted, her voice barely audible over the music.

Well, what? Right, the dance. Carson quickly moved his gaze away from those small, tantalizing breasts and took a step forward before any of his friends—mainly Ryan—snatched up this hot little pixie.

"Sweetheart, I would love to dance with you," he drawled, shooting her his trademark ladies' man grin.

Women always told him that grin of his was hot enough to melt a glacier, and sure enough, he saw the brunette's cheeks redden a little. It could've been the shadows making her look flushed, but he preferred to think the grin had done it.

A pair of catlike green eyes focused on Carson. Shit, she had nice eyes. They tilted up just slightly at the corners, giving her a very exotic air. "Let's do it then."

Oh, he wanted to do it all right. Although he'd never admit it to Ryan I-Need-To-Get-Laid Evans, it had been way too long since Carson had slept with anyone. Five weeks, to be exact, and he was getting real tired of flying solo. That three-week mission in Colombia played a part in his current celibate status, but after that he had no excuse other than he simply hadn't encountered a woman who set him on fire. Six months ago, he might've settled for the first available warm body, but ever since his best friend had fallen for Shelby, Carson found it was getting harder to justify screwing random chicks. Garrett and Shelby were so disgustingly in love, they made him feel sleazy about his casual lifestyle. Not that he was looking for love or anything, but lately he was pickier about who he fell into bed with.

He might, however, make an exception for the woman who'd just asked him to dance.

She walked ahead of him, and Carson took the opportunity to admire the way her short black skirt hugged her firm little bottom. He usually went for curvy and leggy, but something about this woman's fragile figure made his blood heat up.

He tore his eyes away from that delectable ass and followed her down the open spiral staircase leading to the main floor. When she reached the bottom step, she cocked her head as if to check if he was still there, and when their gazes connected, he saw a sensual smile tug on her pouty mouth. Damn, those lips belonged in an X-rated video. Preferably one that featured him and the lips in question wrapped around his dick.

Amusement danced in her green eyes. "You're staring at my mouth."

"You've got a nice mouth," he answered glibly.

"So do you." She studied him. "In fact, you've got a nice everything. Are you an actor?"

"Male model," he lied, only because he didn't feel like telling her he was a SEAL. Women had a tendency to go a little nutty when they found out what he did, got all wide-eyed as fantasies of being swept off their feet by a real-life hero filled their pretty heads. And Carson had no desire to sweep anyone off her feet tonight, unless it involved sweeping this appealing brunette to the nearest bed.

She smiled again, but the look on her face said she didn't quite believe him. "Interesting. Do you pose in the nude?"

"All the time." He curled his fingers over her arm and led her toward the packed dance floor. The music was a lot louder down here, so he dipped his head to her ear and added, "I could give you a private show if you'd like."

She laughed, the sound quickly swallowed by the reggae song that pounded out of the speakers. Leaning up on her tiptoes, she brushed her lips over his ear as she said, "First you can dance with me, then I'll decide if I want to see you naked."

Carson grinned and pulled her into the throng of people. She immediately pressed her body to his and started to move. Those curvy breasts teased his chest, sending sparks of heat to his cock every time her small, erect nipples pushed against him. The top of her head barely reached his chin, and her soft wavy hair tickled his neck. She smelled like

flowers and honey, the aroma filling his nostrils, subtle and yet far more potent than the scent of sweat, perfume and aftershave mingling in the hot air of the club.

He rested his hands on her tucked-in waist, slipping them under the hem of her halter-top so he could feel her bare skin. As he moved his body to the rhythm, he slid his fingers over her warm flesh, enjoying the silky feel of it. She sighed, her breath tickling his collarbone and searing right through his black T-shirt.

“How am I doing so far?” he asked.

She tilted her head up to look at him, an enticing smile playing on her lips. “So far, so good.” She punctuated the words by rubbing her lower body against his pelvis.

His cock rose to attention, thickening to a long ridge that strained against the zipper of his jeans. Never missing a beat, he spun her around then pressed his erection against her ass, running his hands up and down her bare arms. He lowered his head to her ear again. “What’s your name, sweetheart?”

A beat of silence. “Jessica.”

“I’m Carson.” Then, unable to help it, he slid his tongue over the shell of her ear before sucking on the delicate lobe. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Jessica.”

She pushed her butt out and rubbed it over his erection before spinning back around and wrapping her arms around his neck. Their gazes locked, and the hint of sex sizzled in the air between them. Actually, scratch that. He would definitely be having sex with this green-eyed seductress tonight, no *hint* about it.

She obviously shared the same sentiment, because the next thing he knew she was kissing him.

Her hot mouth latched onto his, her eager little tongue darting out and filling his mouth.

Oh *yeah*.

Carson didn’t care that they were in the middle of a crowded dance floor, didn’t care that this was his best friend’s stag or that his SEAL buddies were probably getting a kick out of watching him from the second-floor railing. All he cared about was devouring every inch of sweet Jessica’s mouth. And devour he did.

He thrust one hand into her long, wavy hair and angled her head for better access, shoving his tongue deep in her mouth. She tasted like alcohol and sex. His erection pulsed as she flicked her tongue over his, over and over again, and then she nibbled on his bottom lip and his cock damn well near exploded. *Jesus*. He was harder than a slab of marble, and in serious danger of coming in his pants from one—albeit very erotic—kiss.

“Let’s get out of here,” he muttered against her lips, shaping her ass with his hands and thrusting his aching groin against her belly.

“No, I want you now.” She kissed him again, long and hard, moving one hand down his chest and palming the bulge in his jeans.

He almost keeled over backwards. A groan rose in his throat and it took all his willpower to move her hand away. “We’re on the dance floor, sweetheart,” he pointed out.

She shot him a wicked smile. “So?”

Christ, this woman was going to kill him. He’d never been more turned on in his entire twenty-nine years, and he suddenly knew that if he didn’t fuck her—*now*—he really would explode in his pants.

“C’mere,” he ordered gruffly, grabbing her hand and leading her out of the mob of dancers.

He had no fucking clue where he was taking her. He just walked as fast as he could—difficult seeing as the Erection of the Year was dominating his lower body. He shoved random people out of his way, not bothering with *excuse me*, just pushing forward. In the darkness, he caught sight of a corridor leading toward the restrooms. Both the men’s and ladies’ washrooms had a line. Goddammit.

Still gripping Jessica’s hand, he glanced around, spotted a door marked Supplies and pushed at the handle with his other hand.

A dark closet welcomed them, lined with cleaning items and toilet paper and smelling of pine, lemon and rubbing alcohol.

Carson barely noticed his surroundings. He locked the door behind them, promptly shoved Jessica against the wall, and kissed her again. She instantly parted her lips and

sought out his tongue, lapping at it like an impatient kitten in front of a saucer of milk. There was something desperate about her kiss, and when he pulled back and looked into her eyes, he saw a flicker of desperation there too.

“You okay?” he murmured, caressing her lower back with one hand. The heat of her skin was driving him crazy, making it difficult to think, let alone talk.

“I’m fine. Great, actually. No, better than great.” Her voice trembled slightly, but her gaze now shone with passion and determination. She wrapped her arms around his neck and ran her fingers along his jaw. “I need you to do something for me, Carson.”

It was hard to concentrate with her stroking his face like that, but he managed to ask, “What is it?”

“I need you to rock my world. Can you do that for me?”

The words were laced with steely fortitude and teasing challenge, and again, that twinge of desperation. He got the feeling something was up with her. That she was upset, or pissed off—trying to get back at an ex perhaps? Maybe, but at this point, he didn’t care. She wanted her world rocked? Well, he was definitely the man for that job.

He pulled his wallet from his pocket and retrieved the condom he kept there. Jessica’s eyes darkened with passion when she saw the foil wrapper. While he unwrapped it, she rubbed the front of his jeans, up and down, down and up, until his cock ached so badly he could barely suck in a breath. Then she unzipped his pants and wrapped her fingers around his erection.

“You’re so hard,” she whispered as she stroked him, swirling one finger over his swollen tip.

“All because of you, sweetheart,” he rasped out, finally managing to roll the damn condom onto his throbbing shaft. “Take your panties off.”

For a second she looked nervous, and then she slipped her hands underneath her skirt and slowly peeled her silky black underwear down her legs. She kicked them aside, watching him expectantly. “Any more demands?” she asked with a tiny grin.

“Just one.” He moved closer and gripped her hips with both hands. “Wrap your legs around me.”

She did as she was told, and a second later he was cupping her warm little ass in his hands and lifting her up. He would've liked to drop to his knees and lick her up like an ice cream cone, get her nice and wet for him, but she didn't seem interested in foreplay. And it wasn't necessary, he soon learned, as he slid his cock deep inside her and found himself surrounded by her tight, soaked pussy. He nearly keeled over backwards, relying on all his strength to keep them both upright and not pass out from the incredible sensations all that warmth and moisture elicited inside him.

"God, you feel good," he choked out, burying his face in the crook of her neck.

She responded by clasp her legs tighter around him and squeezing his cock with her inner muscles. And just like that, he lost control. Not that he'd been in control to begin with. Oh no, he'd said goodbye to his control the second this woman walked up to him, the second she'd latched her mouth on his and asked him to rock her world.

"Fuck me, damn it," she moaned, pressing her lips to his shoulder and beginning to move.

There it was, that desperation again. And yet again, he didn't care. Instead, he started to thrust, plunging his cock into her as hard as he could, as fast as he could. There was no stopping this. Whatever this was. A sexual hurricane. A moment of crazy, blind, uncontrollable lust. He fucked her against the wall, rough and wild, and she loved every minute of it.

"Yes, oh God, yes."

Her soft cries, mingled in with dirty commands and breathy moans, drove him out of his mind. He dug his fingers into her ass, pumping in and out of that sweet, sopping-wet paradise, unable to slow down, not even for a second.

"More," she said between moans, rocking hard against him.

He bent down and shoved his tongue in her mouth, kissing her senseless while he continued thrusting into her as deep as he could go. Her lips trembled beneath his, her fingers curled around his neck, and when he angled her body so that his cock brushed over her clit each time he withdrew, she gave a wild cry and exploded against him.

Her orgasm was too much for him. The way her pussy clamped around his cock, her sexy moans, the sheer bliss in her green eyes—he toppled right over the edge with her, coming so hard his balls burned with the agonizing force of the pleasure. His breath came out ragged, his heart pounding so hard he could hear nothing but the sound it made as it thudded against his ribcage.

They stayed there for a moment, leaning against the wall, breathing hard, their bodies joined together, until finally she slid off him without a word.

Carson swallowed, unable to comprehend what had happened. He'd just had the best sex of his life, in a supply closet of a nightclub, with a woman he'd known for all of five minutes. What the hell was up with that?

He reached down and removed the condom from his still aching erection, watching as Jessica bent to pick up her panties. She quickly put them on, smoothed out the front of her skirt and reached up to run her shaky hands through her dark hair.

“So...” he began then trailed off, unsure of what to say.

She gazed up at him with a strange little smile, her green eyes flickering with dazed pleasure and what looked like a touch of uncertainty.

“Thank you,” she finally said.

And before he could tell her she had absolutely nothing to thank him for—hell, he should be thanking *her*—she unlocked the door and walked right out of the supply closet.

He stared at the door, stupefied. What the hell just happened?

Chapter One

One Month Later

Although he truly hated weddings, Carson had to admit that Garrett and Shelby had done a pretty good job with theirs. The altar had been set up only a few yards from the shoreline of Coronado Beach, white roses twining around the little structure's intricate cedar frame. The bride looked like an angel sent from heaven, her blonde hair a halo illuminated by the setting sun. The groom wore his pristine Navy dress whites, and the happy couple only had eyes for each other as the preacher spoke in an easy, jovial tone that added some liveliness to the ceremony.

Carson wondered if the preacher would still feel jovial if he knew the best man had slept with the bride. While the groom watched.

Probably not a tidbit he should mention at the reception, he decided as he smothered a grin and handed the silver wedding band to Garrett.

Garrett accepted the ring with visibly trembling fingers and Carson tried not to raise a brow. He'd never seen his best friend's hands shake. Ever. The two men had been part of the same SEAL team for four years now, and in the life of a Navy SEAL, shaky hands usually equaled instant death. Good thing Garrett was steadier with a weapon than he was with a wedding ring.

"I, John, take you, Shelby..."

Shit, how was it possible that his best friend was getting married? Garrett had proposed to Shelby months ago, they'd been planning the wedding for ages, yet it hadn't seemed real to Carson until just now. And the realization brought with it a wave of unease. He and Garrett had always been the ultimate bachelors. Whenever they weren't on assignment, they'd painted the town every color known to man. Scored with numerous chicks. Engaged in some wild threesomes.

Who'd he do that with now?

And did he even *want* to?

Ever since that night at the Hot Zone, he'd been wondering if maybe it was time to say goodbye to the casual lifestyle. And he had the mysterious Jessica to thank for that, of course. She'd left him in that closet, harder than ever, and wondering if he'd dreamed it all—something he still wasn't entirely sure of, seeing as he'd searched the entire nightclub for her and come up empty-handed. At first he'd been upset to discover she was really gone, but after a while he'd grown angry. At himself.

When had he become such a sleaze? It was one thing to have casual affairs with women he knew, but to fuck a complete stranger in a supply closet? When had he become *that guy*, the one who didn't care about anything but sticking his dick in the first available pussy?

The encounter had forced him to take a good look at himself, and his lifestyle. And now, watching Garrett and Shelby exchange their vows with such unadulterated love in their eyes, he suspected it might really be time to retire from the random sex scene and look for something more meaningful. He was twenty-nine years old, for Christ's sake. Wasn't it time to grow up? Have a relationship that lasted more than five minutes in the closet of a nightclub?

"I, Shelby, take you, John, to be my lawfully wedded husband..."

Carson lifted his head, forcing himself to quit wallowing and focus on the vows being exchanged, but a second later his peripheral vision caught a flash of movement and he became distracted again. He shifted his head ever so slightly, seeking out what had snagged his attention. A short brunette stood a few yards away, next to the long buffet table that had been set up for the reception. Her back was half turned, so he only caught a glimpse of her profile, but the black skirt and white blouse she wore told him she was part of the catering staff.

Question was—why did one of the catering staff have her hand down her own shirt?

And was that fondling going on under there?

Carson studied the strange display. No, not fondling. Looked like she was fumbling with...a bra strap? Her hair fell onto her face like a curtain, further shielding her features from him, as she fiddled with the bra in determination.

He squinted. Then choked back a laugh when he realized what was happening. The girl's bra strap had ripped—and she was attempting to tie the two ends together.

Priceless.

He couldn't help it. A chuckle slid out of his throat.

Unfortunately, the chuckle came out at the exact moment the preacher demanded to know if anyone had a reason why the bride and groom shouldn't be together.

Garrett and Shelby instantly swiveled their heads in his direction, shock clearly etched in their faces.

"What? No," Carson said quickly, keeping his voice low. He turned to the preacher. "No. I'm not speaking. I'm forever holding my peace. These two belong together. Please, just go on."

"I'm going to kick your ass for this," Garrett muttered before turning his attention back to the ceremony.

Shelby just glared at him.

Fuck. Wonderful. Now everyone and their mother would think Carson objected to this union. Damn caterer and her broken bra.

He forced himself not to glance in that direction again, instead concentrating on the end of the ceremony and then applauding after Garrett and Shelby locked lips. The newly married couple walked down the sandy aisle, hand-in-hand, immediately swarmed by well-wishers and teary-eyed relatives.

Carson shoved his hands in the pockets of his crisp white Navy uniform and followed the rest of the wedding party down the aisle. As they headed for the reception area, he glanced over at the buffet and sought out the bra-challenged waitress.

There she was. Talking to a curly-haired blonde and gesturing wildly.

His eyes suddenly narrowed as she turned her head. That face...green eyes...pouty lips...Jesus, he *knew* that face.

He took a few steps closer, bewildered, a tad angry, still focused on the familiar pixie-esque features, the long brown hair, the round little bottom...

The brunette latched her hand on the other waitress's arm and proceeded to drag her toward the steps leading away from the beach. A second later, the two were out of sight.

But not before Carson caught another glimpse of her face, which confirmed what he already knew.

The mysterious Jessica had made another appearance.

And this time, there was no damn way he was letting her get away from him again.

"What am I going to do?" Holly Lawson wailed, waving her ripped bra around like a matador taunting an irate bull.

Zoe Shickler grinned. "You go without, that's what you do."

"This shirt is white, Zoe. And it's see-through. Vanessa will freak."

"Vanessa will be too busy bustling around and making sure the guests are enjoying themselves to notice her assistant's tits," Zoe answered.

"I'll notice! And so will all those Navy SEALS. In an hour or so they'll all be plastered and making cracks about my nipples."

"So? If you're lucky, maybe one of them will offer to suckle you for a bit." Zoe's grin widened. "Did you see the best man?" She promptly began fanning herself.

"I've been too busy setting up the buffet to notice the best man, Zoe. And this isn't a joke," Holly grumbled. "I can't serve drinks topless."

"You're wearing a shirt, for God's sake." Zoe rolled her eyes and rose from the cab of the pickup truck she'd been sitting on. "Come on, we should head back. I shouldn't have let you drag me here to begin with. *That* Vanessa will freak about."

Holly sighed. "You go ahead. I need time to gather my courage."

She watched as the other waitress crossed the gravel parking lot and headed for the narrow concrete staircase that led down to the beach. The lot was crammed with cars, all belonging to the sixty or so people who would soon get a very candid eyeful of Holly Lawson's braless breasts.

God, this entire day had been a disaster from the second she'd opened her eyes. She'd woken up to the shrill ringing of her telephone, answered it to hear the shrill voice of her older sister, and proceeded to spend the morning re-dyeing Caroline's hair after her sister had *accidentally* dyed it purple the night before. Apparently there had been some sort of communication breakdown between Caroline and her Korean hairdresser, but who the hell knew. Despite the fact that she was twenty-nine—*five* years older than Holly—Caroline always seemed to get herself in one mess after the other. Somehow Holly was the one who got stuck cleaning it.

And she didn't even want to get started on the rest of her siblings. Twenty-five-year-old Todd was as scatterbrained as Caroline, as well as the other reason she'd had such a crappy day—he'd forgotten he had a college exam to write tomorrow morning and coerced Holly into spending the afternoon quizzing him. And after she'd left Todd's dorm, her eldest brother Kyle called with an emergency of his own. He'd locked himself out of his car and needed her to drive over with the spare keys. Her keychain was heavier than a brick, thanks to all the spare keys she had clipped to it, all belonging to her idiot brothers and sister who couldn't seem to do anything for themselves.

Holly was the baby of the family. She was only twenty-four, damn it! How had she been dubbed the Lawson family janitor?

Now, thanks to her siblings' crisis, she was going to have to waitress an entire wedding without a bra. When she'd been getting dressed, she'd noticed that the bra strap was fraying a little, but she hadn't had time to change because she'd already been running late. So she'd hightailed it out of her apartment, sped over to this wedding, and what happened twenty minutes into it? Her bra broke.

She hated her life. She really, truly did. She was sick of taking care of everyone in her family, sick of working as a waitress when what she really wanted to do was have a restaurant of her own, and sick of getting dumped.

Oh no, change brain direction now, Holly, before you think about—

Steve.

And yep, she was thinking about Steve,

She'd told herself she wasn't allowed to anymore, but for the past month, thoughts of her ex had constantly floated into her head. It truly sucked when the person you were madly in love with broke your heart. She'd thought he was her soul mate, damn it! He worked as a sous-chef at an Italian restaurant, created his own recipes in his spare time, and rode a seriously sexy Harley. She'd envisioned the two of them working together, owning a restaurant, having sex on the back of his motorcycle, getting married, moving out of state so she didn't have to see her family.

But instead, she'd gotten dumped. And why? Because Steve didn't like the fact that she had other responsibilities that didn't involve, well, fucking on the back of his Harley. In no uncertain terms, he'd told her to choose—him or everything else in her life. The selfishness of his demand still grated. How could she have been so wrong about him?

Of course, one good thing had come out of the break-up, but she wasn't allowed to think about *that* either.

Nope. Because then she'd have to accept that the highlight of her sad, pathetic little life had been wild, sweaty sex in a supply closet with a complete stranger. And if that's all a girl had to be proud of, she seriously needed a new life.

Straightening her shoulders, Holly finally forced herself to quit sulking. She glanced ruefully at the bra in her hand before stuffing it in the wide front pocket of her black apron. Then she sighed again, pushed her hair behind her ears, and headed back to the beach.

When she stepped onto the sand, she saw the reception was already in full swing. Tables had been set up on the beach, the chairs occupied by wedding guests digging into the seafood spread Holly had spent most of last night preparing. Since it was a buffet, the guests were in charge of getting their own food, but the catering staff was responsible for serving drinks, so Holly quickly headed for the bar area.

The sun was only a sliver of pink and yellow in the horizon, but it was still hot out, hot enough to make her white shirt cling to her skin. Great, she'd soon look like a contestant in a wet T-shirt contest. The bride and groom would be thrilled.

“So, did you calm down?” Zoe asked, strolling up to the bar and loading her tray with glasses of champagne.

“If you mean am I happy about the fact that you can see my nipples through this shirt, then no, I haven’t calmed down,” she replied. “But I’ll deal with it, don’t worry.”

“Good.” Zoe grinned. “And you get to deal with it while bringing some beers over to the hottie table. Vanessa said I can’t serve them anymore, because apparently I spend too much time flirting.”

“Where exactly is the hottie table?”

Zoe’s blue eyes twinkled as she slanted her head to the left. Holly followed her coworker’s gaze. The hottie table *indeed*. Four ridiculously attractive men in Navy dress whites sat there, each one more handsome than the next. Like that blond one. Man, there was something unbelievably appealing about that chiseled, GQ face and broad shoulders and—

The color drained from her face.

“Oh my God,” she blurted out, nearly dropping the tray she’d just stacked with beer bottles.

Zoe giggled and tossed her curly hair over her shoulder. “I know, huh? It’s like an orgasmic feast over there!”

Holly’s cheeks went from white to red. Oh *shit*. Was it actually him or was she conjuring up the sight? Because what were the odds of running into her one-night-stand here, at a wedding she was waitressing?

Obviously pretty good, because the guy’s head suddenly swiveled in her direction as if he sensed her presence, and then those deep blue eyes were fixed on her. All doubts drained from her mind. It was him. Her hunk from the Hot Zone. The guy she’d jumped four hours after Steve had dumped her.

“Male model, my ass,” she muttered, though a part of her wasn’t surprised to see he was in the Navy. She hadn’t quite bought his model story anyway.

Zoe gave her a blank look. “Huh?”

“The guy. The blond.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Remember I told you about the guy I hooked up with a month ago, at the club? Well, that’s *him*.”

Delight lit up Zoe’s eyes. “Seriously?”

“Yep.”

Embarrassment heated her face as she thought about that night. She’d gone to the Hot Zone with Caroline, who’d dragged Holly out after finding her in her apartment crying over Steve. Holly hadn’t wanted to go, yet somehow her sister had convinced her they’d have a good time. But ten minutes after they walked into the club, Caroline disappeared with a tall, Latin heartthrob and Holly had found herself alone.

She’d stood in the shadows, trying not to think about Steve, trying not to cry, and that’s when she’d overheard those guys talking. About sex. About needing to get laid. Normally she thought those types of men were sleazy, but at that moment, something inside her snapped. Suddenly she’d found herself wondering, what would be so bad about sleeping with someone she didn’t know? What would be so terrible about using another man to distract herself from how much Steve had hurt her?

Never in her life had she had a one-night-stand, and if Steve hadn’t ended things so abruptly and left her so distraught, she might not have even considered it. But that night, it seemed like a good idea. So she’d walked up to the guys, asked one to dance, and before she knew it, she’d transformed into someone else. She wasn’t responsible, stressed out Holly Lawson anymore. She was *Jessica*. Jessica, who didn’t clean up her family’s messes or work too hard or get dumped. Jessica did whatever the hell she wanted, *whoever* the hell she wanted, and consequences be damned.

Unfortunately, she wasn’t Jessica, was she? Nope, she was Holly. And in Holly’s life, there were always consequences.

Case in point—the man staring at her from across the sand.

“Holly, this is awesome,” Zoe gushed, jerking her out of her thoughts. “He’s so freaking hot, I’m getting aroused just looking at him. I can’t believe the two of you hooked up! Give me details, girl!”

Holly had no intention of revealing anything, and fortunately she didn't have to, because Vanessa, the owner of the catering company, was signaling the two waitresses to get back to work.

Of course, getting back to work meant having to deliver the tray of beers to the hottie table, where she'd have to look into the eyes of the man she'd fucked in a closet and explain why she'd run out on him.

Which only confirmed what she'd already accepted years ago—when it came to her life, she could never catch a break.

Chapter Two

“Is it just me or can you totally see through that waitress’s shirt?” Ryan asked, his gaze glued to the brunette who approached their table with very reluctant steps.

Carson couldn’t tear his gaze from her either. He still couldn’t believe she was actually here. Obviously she worked for the catering company, but a part of him couldn’t help wondering if fate was responsible. Hadn’t he just decided that it was time to seek out something more meaningful when it came to women?

Well, who better to explore it with than the woman he’d had the best sex of his life with?

“Oh, I can definitely see through her shirt,” Matt agreed with a little grin. “And I most certainly like what I’m seeing.”

“Hey...” Ryan squinted. “Shit, that’s the girl from the club.” He immediately stared at Carson. “Didn’t you—” He stopped abruptly as Jessica finally reached the table.

Although she was as pretty as he remembered, she looked nothing like the sexy seductress who’d rubbed herself against him on that dance floor. This Jessica seemed shyer, more wholesome, and Carson’s curiosity instantly piqued.

“Hi,” she finally said, awkwardly standing in front of them with a tray full of beers in her hands. “Are you boys having a nice time?”

“We are now,” Ryan muttered, his eyes never leaving her chest.

Carson felt a spark of irritation. Yeah, you could see the outline of her nipples perfectly through that thin white blouse, but he didn’t like that Ryan was ogling her. Jessica deserved more respect than that.

He locked his gaze with hers and smiled faintly. “Good to see you again, Jessica.”

She swallowed, her cheeks reddening. “Um, yeah, you too...um...”

“Carson,” he filled in, bristling. She didn’t even remember his goddamn name?

“I remember,” she said, obviously reading his mind. Her hands trembled as she started lifting bottles off her tray and setting them down on the table.

Carson ignored the beer she placed in front of him, his eyes never leaving hers. Her nervousness practically radiated from her pores, and he could tell she was both embarrassed and uncomfortable. He wanted to say something, ask her why she’d hurried off that night, ask her if they could talk when the reception ended, but all of his friends were watching him curiously and he couldn’t seem to form any words.

A short silence fell, until Jessica finally cleared her throat and said, “Um, okay, so I’ll be back in a while to check on you guys.” And then she whisked off like a scared bunny.

Another silence.

“Well. That was awkward,” Will finally said, his voice dry. He reached for his beer and took a long sip. “What exactly happened at the club that night, man?”

“Nothing,” Carson muttered.

He hadn’t told any of the guys about the closet fuck. The encounter had totally messed him up, made him reevaluate his lifestyle, and he hadn’t wanted to talk about it with anyone, especially guys like Ryan and Matt, who were still so hooked on the notion of casual sex.

“Nothing?” Ryan echoed. “Then you won’t mind if I ask her out, right? Because, jeez, she is *hot*.”

Carson clenched his fists. “Don’t even think about it.”

Ryan nodded. “That’s what I thought.” He grinned. “Nothing, my ass.”

He was watching her again. Holly could feel his eyes on her as she handed a glass of red wine to the mother of the bride. She had to force herself not to turn her head. Lord, that gaze was burning her up. Her skin felt so hot she was tempted to sprint toward the waves and dive in, but she doubted the cold water would lower her body temperature. He’d been sending those sizzling glances her way for *three* hours and she was past the point of cooling down. She was so turned on she could barely breathe.

She knew he wanted to talk to her. She could see it every time she delivered another tray of beers to his table. But each time she walked over there he just stared at her with those killer blue eyes, a million questions on his face. Well, she didn't want to answer any questions. Wasn't the point of one-night-stands that you weren't supposed to make excuses? She'd been upset that night, she'd wanted to forget about Steve, so she'd propositioned a stranger and had sex with him in a closet. Then she'd crashed down to earth after a spectacular orgasm, realized what she'd done, become mortified and ran away. Why couldn't they just leave it at that?

And why wouldn't her clit stop throbbing, damn it? It was getting hard to walk with that ache between her legs.

Fortunately, the party was dwindling. Most of the guests had wished the bride and groom well and headed out. Even the happy couple had left. The only people who remained were a few couples laughing over wine, and the four SEALS.

Zoe walked over to her. "Vanessa said to start packing up."

"Thank God. My feet are killing me."

They headed over to the buffet area. Holly spent the next twenty minutes wrapping up the leftovers, gathering empty bottles, and making countless trips to and from the catering van. When she finally finished, she was relieved to find that everyone was gone. The tables on the beach had been folded up, the guests had taken off, and only catering staff remained.

Her sexy SEAL was nowhere to be seen, which obviously meant he didn't care enough to question *Jessica* and had decided to call it a night.

That should have been a relief, and yet a part of her was a little disappointed. Carson was probably the best-looking man she'd ever met in her life. Definitely the best lay of her life—not that she had a lot to compare him to. She'd only slept with two other men—Steve, and a boy she'd dated in her senior year of high school.

She shouldn't care that Carson had left. They were nothing more than a couple of strangers who'd happened to have sex one night. She didn't know him. He didn't know her.

But...

Darn it, she'd liked the way she'd felt that night with him. She'd liked being Jessica, not thinking about how much she disliked her life, not worrying about having to take care of anyone but herself. She'd been in control, lived for the moment, seized the pleasure. And tonight, with Carson sitting at that table watching her all night, she'd felt that way again. She'd forgotten about being late for work, about her stupid broken bra, about everything but the fact that a really sexy man was undressing her with his eyes.

Oh well. She was foolish to think he could actually have been interested in her. She was too short, her boobs too small, her personality too sarcastic. Normally it didn't bother her. Because along with all those other irritating *toos*, she was also too busy cleaning up her siblings' messes and helping them with their even messier love lives to care about her own.

"I'm heading out," Zoe called. "You coming?"

Holly walked over to her friend. "I think I'll stick around here for a bit longer. I have a feeling if I go home I'll find a dozen SOS messages on my machine from the delinquents."

Zoe sighed. "You've got to stop letting your family dominate your life, Hol. You're twenty-four. You should be having fun, enjoying your hotness and screwing tons of guys."

At the moment, everything Zoe said sounded like pure and total heaven. Too bad it wasn't going to happen. With her job, her family and the culinary course she was taking, it was tough enough finding time to eat, let alone screw.

"You going to be okay out here alone?" Zoe asked, gesturing to the deserted stretch of beach.

"I've got my cell and my pepper spray. I'll be fine."

Zoe leaned forward and gave her a quick hug. "I'll see you Sunday at the Grier wedding."

Holly watched her friend disappear up the steps leading to the lot, then turned around and walked toward the shoreline. She kicked off her sandals, dug her toes into the sand

and breathed in the warm night air. God, she loved the ocean. Nothing relaxed her more than the sight of the waves lapping against the shore, and the sound of gulls squawking as they soared over the calm turquoise water.

But tonight, not even her favorite view could make her feel better. She should've pulled Carson aside and talked to him. She'd served his table all evening. She'd seen him staring at her. Seen the undisguised interest and curiosity in his eyes. The *lust*. And instead of doing something about it, she'd kept walking up to him like a robot, handing him a beer and hurrying away. No wonder she had no luck with men. These days a woman needed to be proactive, not scurry away like a skittish animal whenever a hot guy looked at her.

The sound of footsteps put an end to her self-pity party. She figured it was someone from the catering company who'd forgotten something, but when she turned around, her gaze collided with a pair of sexy blue eyes. Carson was back.

He strode up to her, his muscles rippling beneath the dress whites he wore. What was it about a man in uniform that never failed to make a woman's heart pound?

"You're still here," he said then winced as if he hated that he'd just stated the obvious. "I was waiting for you in the parking lot. I got worried when you didn't show."

Holly's pulse sped up. "You were waiting for me?"

He nodded then raked a hand through his dirty-blond hair. "We never got a chance to, um, catch up. And I was going to offer you a ride home."

"I have a car." *I have a car?* That's all she could come up with? How about, *I'm sorry I left you in a supply closet after you gave me the best orgasm of my life?*

"Okay. Then let's just do the catching up then." He offered a small smile. "So how've you been, Jessica?"

Jessica. Now there was a nice splash of reality if she'd ever heard one.

"That's...um...kind of not my name," she confessed.

"It's not your name," he repeated flatly.

"No."

"You lied?"

“Yes.”

“Why?” he finally demanded.

“I...” She released a long breath. “I wasn’t in the best state of mind that night. See, I’d just gotten dumped by my boyfriend, and then my sister dragged me to a club, and I was upset and tired of my life, tired of *me*.” She finished with a rueful shrug. “I guess I just wanted to be someone else for the night.”

“Do you do that often, pretend to be someone else?” There was a touch of sarcasm to his husky voice. “How many other guys have you seduced and then deserted?”

She sighed. “You were the first.”

“I see.”

It was obvious from the skeptical look in his blue eyes that he totally *didn’t* see, but she didn’t feel like explaining herself further. Yes, she’d lied. Yes, she’d seduced him. But he sure hadn’t been complaining when she’d thrown herself at him, had he? Oh no. He’d been right there with her, groping her ass and dragging her into the supply closet for a sexual tryst. He hadn’t even known her, for Pete’s sake. Any guy who had sex with a random stranger wasn’t one to judge.

Carson must have reached the same conclusion as her, because the sarcastic glint left his eyes and suddenly he cast her a sexy little grin. “It was a pretty fun time, wasn’t it?”

Fun? Talk about the understatement of the year. Before she could stop it, memories of that night rushed back to her. How warm and firm Carson’s lips had felt pressed against her own, the hardness of his chest under her fingers, his thick cock sliding deep inside her, making her cry out with pleasure. She’d never come so hard in her life, and just thinking about the orgasm caused her thighs to tremble.

God, she wanted to feel that way again. Wild and free and desirable.

“It was amazing,” she corrected.

He smiled again, his eyes filling with desire and darkening to a sensual tint. “Definitely.”

“Want to do it again?”

Oh boy—where had *that* come from? She immediately slammed her mouth closed, her cheeks heating with embarrassment.

Carson slanted his head, looking both intrigued and baffled, but he didn't respond, just stared at her for a moment as if trying to figure out if she was serious. She took his silence as an opportunity to stare at *him*, and she liked everything she saw. He was so unbelievably attractive in that Navy uniform. The white shirt molded to his broad, rippled chest, and the pants clung to his trim hips and long muscular legs, hugging his crotch in a way that revealed he was very much aroused.

She couldn't help it—she fixated on that long, thick ridge. She remembered how perfectly he'd fit inside her, how well they'd moved together, and the craziest urge overtook her. She wanted to touch him and stroke him and—

Her hand clearly had a mind of its own.

"Whoa," Carson murmured, his gaze instantly dropping south.

Holly ran her fingers over his tantalizing erection, lightly applying pressure with her palm and rubbing.

"You do realize that—" he sucked in a breath, "—you're, uh, you know, you're doing *that*."

She blinked, suddenly snapping out of whatever sexual trance she'd gone into and realizing what she was doing. She quickly withdrew her hand, her face scorching. "Oh gosh, I'm sorry. I just..." There were no words. No matter what she said, this man was going to think she was a sex-crazed psycho.

He released a choked laugh. "Is this a habit, touching men you hardly know?"

She turned away, so mortified she could barely breathe. What was the *matter* with her? She didn't normally behave this way with guys. Truth be told, she didn't have much experience with initiating sexual encounters. She didn't have much experience, period. Her life was too chaotic, and since she was always in control when it came to work and family, she'd always been happy letting the men in her life take control in the bedroom.

"I'm sorry," she said again, keeping her gaze on the waves lapping against the shore.

She heard his pants rustle as he moved closer, and then his fingers were touching her chin, turning it so she had no choice but to look at him. He studied her carefully, assessed her, as if he were trying to peer right into her soul. “Who are you?” he finally asked, his voice laced with intrigue. “What’s your real name?”

She swallowed. “Holly. Holly Lawson.”

Carson’s mouth quirked. “Holly. Suits you better than Jessica.” He stroked her jaw, his fingers so warm and gentle she almost purred in pleasure. “Why did you sleep with me the night at the club?”

“I already told you, I was upset. I wanted to forget.”

“Forget what?”

“My ex.” She let out a shaky breath. “Myself.”

“Why on earth would you want to forget yourself?”

“Because...because...sometimes I get tired of myself,” she blurted out. “I’ve been such a good girl all my life, Carson. I’m the perfect, obedient daughter, the perfect sister. I take care of everyone in my family—my brothers and sister, my dad, who can’t even go grocery shopping on his own. My mom...she used to do everything, but...” She blinked back the tears stinging her eyelids. “She died two years ago.”

“I’m sorry,” Carson said softly, running his fingers along her cheek.

“Me too. I miss her. And after she died, I got cast into the Mom role. I’m the youngest, for God’s sake, and yet somehow I have to take care of everyone else. So *that’s* what I wanted to forget, okay? I just wanted one night where I didn’t have to think about my family, or work, or being responsible and good. I wanted to be selfish and wild and *bad*.”

Holly shook her head in irritation. “I still want that. And you being here makes me want it even more. The night with you was the best time I’ve had in so long.”

She couldn’t believe she was spilling her guts to him, but it felt good letting it all out. For two years she’d focused on making sure everyone in her family was happy, and she was tired of it. Why couldn’t she think about her own happiness for once? What *she* wanted?

And perplexing as it was, what she wanted at the moment was Carson. She didn't know anything about him, only that he was in the Navy, that he was drop-dead gorgeous, and that he had the power to set her body on fire. Did she really need to know anything more?

A strange sense of liberation flooded her body as her brain informed her that no, she didn't. She was twenty-four years old, damn it. She was allowed to have a casual fling that didn't lead to a relationship. Because at the moment, she didn't *want* a relationship. Her last one had scarred her pretty badly, and besides, she was busy with work, busy with culinary school, busy playing mother hen to her family.

But that didn't mean she had to be too busy for sex.

"I think..." She moistened her dry lips and met his gaze. "I think maybe we should have a fling."

He raised his eyebrows. "A fling?"

Uncertainty tugged at her belly. "An affair then? I'm not sure what people call it, you know, not dating, but, um, spending a couple of weeks having sex with someone..."

"So you want to have sex with me, but not date me?"

She nodded.

A pained expression creased his handsome face. "Well, then, that might be a problem."

She fought back disappointment. "Why?"

"Because I'm not really interested in flings anymore." Carson's jaw tensed. "After the night at the club, I decided I'm not that kind of guy anymore."

"What kind of guy?"

He frowned. "The kind who screws random strangers in closets." He shook his head, looking upset. "I've done the casual thing all my life and I think it's time to stop it." Something that resembled vulnerability flashed across his eyes. "I want to go on a date with you."

"What? Why?"

He shot her a cute grin and shrugged. "Because I like you. You're...well, you're kind of weird."

She bristled. "Thanks."

"In a good way," he added quickly. "I mean, you're gorgeous, sure, but there's something else that draws me to you. Maybe it's that good girl image you're determined to lose. And you're funny, and interesting, and...I don't know, I just wouldn't mind getting to know you."

She had no response. It was really sweet, everything he was saying, but she wasn't sure she wanted sweet right now. The night she'd slept with Carson, she hadn't been sweet. Naughty, maybe. Reckless, sure. But not sweet.

And a date? That was the last thing she wanted right now. She'd just gotten out of a six-month relationship, one she'd poured so much time and energy into—for nothing. At the moment, dating again sounded way too tiring, and she was tired enough as it was. Sex, she could handle. But not a new romance. Not when her heart was still recovering from Steve.

"So what do you say?" Carson asked, looking oddly nervous.

She felt awful, but she had to tell the truth. "I don't want to start dating anyone right now. I recently got out of a relationship. I'm swamped with work and the culinary course I'm taking. I just want...fun."

"You mean sex," he said flatly.

She sighed. "Yes."

He shoved his hands in his pockets and gave her a rueful look. "Then I'm sorry. I can't help you."

She rolled her eyes. "Sure you can. Just do me again."

A faint smile broke through the serious expression on his face, but it faded quickly. "I'm serious, Holly. I want something different this time around."

They'd reached an impasse. She could see it. But she could also see the glimmer of desire in his blue eyes.

Maybe if she gave him a tiny little push...

Licking her lips, she stepped forward and rested both palms on his impossibly broad shoulders. “Are you sure I can’t change your mind?”

He was a lot taller than her and she had to tilt her head fully to look into his eyes. The desire she’d seen there had deepened the moment she’d touched him. Fueled by the obvious attraction, she leaned up on her tiptoes and brushed her lips over his.

For a second he didn’t respond, but he evidently couldn’t hold back for long, because a moment later he parted her lips with his tongue and kissed the hell out of her. Heat rolled through her in waves, making her breasts tingle, her thighs ache. His mouth was warm and persuasive, his tongue so skilled she closed her eyes to savor each sensual stroke.

Carson’s hands slid down her back to her ass, cupping it, stroking it, and then he moved one hand to her front, inched it down to the juncture of her thighs...and pulled it away.

She swallowed back a groan of disappointment as he ended the incredible kiss.

“No.” His features strained. “I meant what I said. I want more this time.”

Holly could see that she’d lost the battle. Fortunately, the war was still up for grabs.

Sighing, she asked, “Do you have a cell phone?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Can I see it?”

Shooting her a quizzical look, he pulled a slender phone from his back pocket and handed it to her. Without giving him time to object, she quickly programmed in her phone number and handed him back the cell.

“My number’s in there now,” she said with a grin. “So if you change your mind, you know how to reach me.”

Carson looked pained. “You really want this fling, don’t you?”

“You bet I do. So don’t keep me waiting long, okay, Carson?”

Still grinning, she turned and walked away.

Chapter Three

“Can you tell me why the fuck we’re playing mini-golf?” Will asked as he awkwardly gripped his putter with two hands. Will, the SEAL who could jump off a helicopter with his eyes closed, stared at the hole in bewilderment, as if unable to comprehend why a fake mountain blocked his path.

“We’re playing mini-golf because it’s fun. And since you suck at pool, I figured there might be a shot of some real competition here,” Carson answered with a sigh. “Jesus, Lieutenant, just putt the fucking ball up that slope and gravity will bring it down to the other side.”

Will looked up with a glare he normally reserved for terrorists. “I know what to do, asshole. I’m just mentally preparing.”

Oh brother. Carson crossed his arms over his chest and waited. Impatiently. They were only on the fourth hole of this shitty nine-hole course and they’d been here for an hour already, all because Will Charleston had to mentally prepare every freaking time he putted.

Two minutes later, Will tapped the ball. It rolled up the little brown mountain slope, lost momentum, and rolled right back to his feet.

“Shit!” the Lieutenant exclaimed. “I swear, this course is defective.”

Carson couldn’t help it. He laughed. Really hard. And when his stomach started to hurt, he bent over and wheezed for a couple of seconds. After he’d recovered, he glanced up to see Will hopping over the three-foot mountain with the ball in his hand.

Carson walked around to the side just as Will was setting the ball down a foot from the hole.

“Hey, no cheating,” Carson objected, wiping tears of laughter from the corners of his eyes.

“This isn’t cheating. It’s effective problem solving. Got a problem with that, Ensign?”

Carson rolled his eyes. Will always resorted to calling Carson by his lower rank when he was feeling cranky. Ah well. He wasn’t one to judge—God knows Carson was feeling pretty cranky himself.

Fine, not cranky. More like ridiculously sexually frustrated.

He still felt like kicking himself for not taking Holly up on her offer Friday night. For passing up on what was guaranteed to be more of the best sex of his life. But he’d had no choice. He’d meant what he told her—he wasn’t interested in one-night stands or flings anymore. He wasn’t sure if he was ready for a serious relationship either, but he was willing to give it a shot.

And maybe he was crazy, but he wanted to try it with Holly. He barely knew her, but what he did know, he totally liked. She was gorgeous. Funny. A little quirky, but that only gave her character. Even her confession that she was a good girl hadn’t turned him off. Because, really, would a good girl have propositioned a stranger in a nightclub? Obviously Holly had a dark, wild side that was just begging to be explored...

Of course, if he weren’t such an idiot, he could be the one exploring it with her right now.

“Finally!”

Will’s exclamation jerked him back to the present. Forcing all thoughts of Holly out of his mind—he couldn’t very well play mini-golf while plagued with a monster boner—he turned his attention to Will, who’d successfully puttied his ball into the hole and was marking down his score on one of the little scorecards the kid at the main booth had given them.

It was a little weird, hanging out with just Will. Carson had never really spent much time alone with the quiet SEAL, but since Garrett was on his honeymoon, and the other guys had left for the desert this morning on a training op, Will had been the only one around.

“Now who’s slacking?” came Will’s voice.

Carson glanced down at the layout of the next hole and putted the ball into the mouth of a creepy-looking clown. It popped out the other side, an inch from the cup.

Will went next, and the clown spat the ball back out, a mechanical voice shrieking, “Try again, loser!”

And that was the end of the game. Very calmly, Will lifted his putter and whipped it at the clown’s smiling red mouth. “Never ask me to do this again,” Will growled as he walked off the green.

With a sigh, Carson retrieved the putter Will had thrown and headed for the booth. After handing the putters and balls back to the kid in charge, he walked toward the chain-link fence at the entrance of the mini-putt course, where the Lieutenant was lighting up a cigarette.

“Aw shit, you said you quit,” Carson said, frowning with disapproval.

A pair of brown-bordering-on-black eyes glared at him. “I don’t need another lecture about my bad habits.” Will took a deep, defiant drag of his smoke.

“*Another* lecture? Who else was giving you grief about it?”

“A friend.”

The two men left the course and strode in the direction of the gravel parking lot out front. It was just past three, and the sun was still high in the sky, a bright yellow canopy that warmed the air and made Carson squint as they walked to his Range Rover. Next to him, Will pulled out a pair of sunglasses from the front pocket of his golf shirt and slid them on. The mirrored shades made him look like the Terminator, or maybe a bad-ass cop. Carson always felt like a pretty boy next to the Lieutenant. He and Will both stood at six-three, but Carson’s dirty-blond hair and blue eyes had never seemed as macho as Will’s dark crew cut and that I’m-gonna-kick-your-ass black-eyed gaze he had going.

“A friend, huh,” Carson mused, focusing on Will’s last remark. “Would that friend be Melanie?”

“Mackenzie,” Will corrected, setting his square jaw. His eyes were covered, but his ragged sigh was clear confirmation that he still hadn’t managed to score with the mysterious woman he’d been hung up on for years. Carson didn’t know much about the

situation, but some of the cryptic comments Will had made over the years led Carson to believe he was disgustingly in love with this Mackenzie.

“So you two went to high school together, in that zero-population town you grew up in?” Carson asked, trying to pry out a few more details.

“Hunter Ridge. It’s a few hours east of San Diego, and it has a population of five thousand, asshole.”

“Gee, five thousand people. That’s like the seating of a Nickelback concert.” He paused. “Actually, I bet those concerts sell twice that, if not more.”

He jammed his finger on the electronic keypad and unlocked the Rover, then opened the driver’s side door. Will hopped in the passenger side, immediately rolling down the window. The car had air conditioning, but Will didn’t seem to care.

“So anyway, that’s the girl, right? The high-school sweetheart?” Carson prompted.

He wasn’t sure why he was pushing for details, but lately he’d come to realize he knew next to nothing about the other SEAL. He and Will had been part of Team Fourteen for four years now, and while Carson knew all the other guys better than his own family, Will remained a mystery. Garrett said some dudes were just like that, secretive to the death, but it didn’t seem right to Carson. Maybe it made him a pansy, this need to get to know another guy, but oh well.

“Best friend.” Will’s reply came out tense and strained, as if he’d rather pour hot wax over his body than say the words.

“Okay, best friend.” Carson started the car and reversed out of the parking spot. “So this best friend, what does she do, you know, for a living?”

“She makes jewelry.”

“Is she any good?”

To Carson’s extreme astonishment, Will let out a long, genuine laugh. “Actually, no. Her jewelry sucks. She knows it, everyone in town knows it, but people humor her because she won’t accept money for—” He halted instantly.

Curiosity trickled through him. “She won’t accept money for what? Oh man, is she a hooker?”

“She’s not a fucking hooker,” Will shot back, his features twisting with fury. “Jesus.”

“Then what does she do, aside from making bad jewelry?”

Silence stretched between them and Carson’s curiosity transformed into a spark of concern. Maybe this was why Will was so serious all the time. Maybe he was hung up on some nut job.

“She’s a psychic,” Will finally admitted, his voice rough. He glanced over at Carson as if gauging his reaction.

Having never been a big believer of paranormal junk like psychics, Carson had to swallow back his incredulity. This woman was obviously important to Will, and he didn’t want to step on any toes. So instead he kept his eyes on the road and said, “Is she the real thing?”

“Unfortunately. So what’s the deal with you and the waitress from the wedding?” And that was it. Subject dropped. Will was very good at that, changing topics before you could blink.

Carson turned on Harbor and onto the Coronado Bay Bridge, driving in the direction of Will’s house. Will was the only member of the team who lived near the base. All the other guys lived in San Diego. Well, except for Garrett, who’d been spending every night at Shelby’s Coronado apartment ever since the two had fallen madly in love.

“There’s no deal,” Carson said as he came to a halt in front of a stop sign.

Will grinned. “She refused to go home with you, huh?”

He bristled. “Actually, I refused to go home with *her*.”

“Why’d you do that?”

“Because...” Before he could stop it, the truth rolled right out of his mouth. “Because I want to date her and she just wants a fling.”

Will laughed. Jeez, two laughs in the span of ten minutes. Maybe he was drunk. “Since when do you date?”

“Since now.”

The other man nodded wisely. “Ah, so you realized it’s time to grow up.”

“Something like that.”

“And you like this girl?”

“From what I know so far, yeah,” he admitted.

Will gave a careless shrug. “Then have sex with her.”

“Did you not just hear a word I said?” Carson said in frustration.

“Sure I did. But the way I see it, it’s your in. Call her up, tell her you’re up for a fling, and then slowly work on her to try the dating thing.”

“She was pretty determined to do the fling thing, man.”

“Then change her mind. You’re a SEAL, she’s a cute little waif. How hard could it be?”

Carson paused. Will did have a point. He wanted Holly, and he wasn’t going to get her standing around playing mini-golf. Maybe he *should* call her. Agree to sleep together for a while, and then turn up the seductive charm and convince her to give him a serious shot...

“Definitely an idea worth considering,” he finally admitted as he pulled up in front of Will’s small, non-descript bungalow. He put the car in park, turned to the other man and, very sarcastically, said, “Well, I’d like to say thanks for a good game of golf, but I can’t. Why? Because you hurled your putter at a clown and threw a hissy fit.”

“I didn’t throw a hissy fit. I was only displaying my dislike for that sad excuse of a course. Next time you want to play mini-golf, call a third-grader. I only play adult golf.”

“Adult golf? So you play naked while someone films you? Thanks, but I’ll pass.”

Will gave him the finger and got out of the car.

Holly didn’t get home from the Grier wedding until past midnight, after spending the entire night serving drinks and fighting off the advances of the very drunk uncle of the bride. Her temples were throbbing as she got out of her bright yellow VW Beetle and headed up the flower-lined path leading to her building.

Shoving her hand in her black leather purse, she fiddled around for her keys, found them and stepped toward the lobby door.

“You’re home late,” a male voice drawled.

She jumped, startled, searching the darkness. She finally spotted him leaning against one of the pillars near the entrance.

“What on earth are you doing here?” she asked, gaping.

Carson shot her a charming grin. “You’re not in the least bit happy to see me?”

Happy? Try overjoyed. Just the sight of him, in faded blue jeans that hugged his muscular legs and a blue sweatshirt the same color as his eyes, made her pulse race. She’d been thinking about him ever since the wedding, hoping he’d call. She couldn’t even count how many times she’d stared at the phone last night, willing for it to ring, but it hadn’t, and she’d forced herself to accept that Carson had meant what he said. He wasn’t interested in having sex with her again.

But obviously he’d changed his mind.

“How did you know where I live?”

He shrugged. “Called the catering company and told the woman who answered that I’d found your cell phone and wanted to return it.”

“And she gave you my address? What if you were a serial killer?”

There was a twinkle in those ocean blue eyes. “Do you really want to stand out here and talk about your company’s irresponsible receptionist, or are you going to invite me up?”

Her pulse took off in a gallop. “You want to come up? I thought you didn’t do this kind of thing anymore.”

“I had a change of heart.” He slanted his head. “Unless the offer’s off the table, of course...”

Holly grinned. “Oh, the offer is definitely still on the table.”

“Good.” He grinned back. “So why are we still out here?”

With a laugh, she unlocked the door to the lobby and led Carson to the elevator. Her apartment was on the second floor, but the elevator ride seemed to take hours. Carson

edged close to her in the car, sliding his hand down to fondle her ass while he bent his head and lightly nibbled her earlobe. She bit back a moan, enjoying the way he squeezed her cheeks and then dragged his finger up and down her crease. God, she couldn't wait to get naked with this man.

Finally the elevator doors opened. Impatiently, she pushed forward and practically sprinted to her door, unlocking it with shaky fingers.

Carson stood behind her as she fumbled with the handle, chuckling as she struggled, then giving her ass a quick spank when she finally got the door open. The apartment was dark when they walked in, and Holly made no move to turn on the lights. Instead, she grabbed his hand and started to lead him toward the hallway. "Bedroom," she choked out.

"Someone's a little eager," he teased.

"A little? Try a lot. I've been fantasizing about being with you again for an entire month."

"Fantasizing, huh?" His lips were suddenly on her neck, kissing the sensitive skin, sucking it gently. "Did you lie in bed at night and touch yourself while thinking about me?"

"Yes."

He groaned against her skin. "That's hot."

"I'm glad you approve." She shuddered when his teeth nipped at her jaw. "Can we go the bedroom now?"

"It's too far away," he said huskily, then pulled her toward him and captured her mouth with his.

She didn't know how long they stood there kissing. And she definitely had no idea how they ended up in the kitchen, the closest room to the front hall. But suddenly they were there, and Carson had dragged her toward the small island in the center of the room.

His warm hands gripped her ass and then he was lifting her up onto the counter.

"Ever done it on this counter?" he teased, stepping closer and toying with the side zipper of her black skirt.

"Can't say I have."

Her thighs shook when she saw him lick his lips. Oh God. He looked about ready to devour her. “Can I be honest?” he asked.

“Are you ever anything but?”

“No, not really.” He smiled wolfishly. “And right now I honestly need to tell you that I’ve been dying to lick your pussy since the moment I met you.”

A jolt of arousal thudded between her legs. God, if he kept talking like that, she’d probably end up coming before he even touched her.

With a grin, he unzipped her skirt and slowly peeled the material down her legs, leaving her in a pair of white bikini panties. His grin widened when he saw the damp spot on her underwear, indisputable evidence that she was extremely turned on.

He dragged his index finger along the crotch of her panties, brushing over her swollen sex, and she experienced a burst of pleasure. “S-stop,” she managed to squeeze out, and his finger froze.

“You okay?” he murmured.

She squeezed her eyes shut. “No. I’m seriously seconds away from coming, Carson.”

Carson burst out laughing. “And that’s a bad thing?” Without waiting for her to respond, he stuck his fingers under the waistband of her panties, lifted her ass and shoved the underwear down.

“I want it to last,” she protested.

Another chuckle slid out of his throat. “Don’t worry, I’ll go slow. Now be a good girl and spread your legs for me, Holly.”

She swallowed. Then spread.

The heat of his gaze slammed into her and pulsed through her body. He stared at her exposed sex with those piercing blue eyes, his gaze roaming over every hot, damp inch. A rush of vulnerability welled up inside her. She almost closed her legs, wanting to stop the moisture that seeped between them, wanting to put an end to the crazy shockwaves of arousal that made her clit throb. But she didn’t close her legs. No. Because Carson had stepped toward her again, and he was licking his lips again, and his eyes glittered with raw, unadulterated lust, and...oh God he was touching her.

He moved his finger along her folds, up and down, the gentle, teasing caress nearly causing her to topple off the counter. “Tell me what you like,” he said roughly.

“I like everything you’re doing so far.”

Sliding over her clit, he rubbed the swollen nub for a few moments before moving lower and toying with her wet opening with the tip of his finger. “And this?” he prompted.

“Also good,” she choked out.

Before she could blink, that talented finger pushed into her, deep inside, drawing a moan from her throat.

Carson grinned and then she blinked again and he wasn’t looming over her anymore. He’d sunk to his knees, his finger still buried in her wet pussy, his gorgeous mouth now inches from her thighs.

“So,” he said thoughtfully. He moved his finger, in and out, a slow torturous rhythm that had her squirming on the counter. “How close *are* you?”

“Um, really close.”

“Yeah? So if I put my tongue *here*...” she gasped as he lightly flicked his tongue over her clit, “...you’ll explode?”

“Any fucking second,” she said hoarsely.

He laughed again, and she felt a flicker of annoyance at his amusement over his situation. Didn’t he realize she wasn’t kidding? Little flutters of orgasm were already floating through her body, waiting to crash to the surface, her clit ached so badly it hurt, and he was *laughing* at her.

She opened her mouth. “It’s really not fun—”

He withdrew his finger and replaced it with his tongue.

She closed her mouth.

Pleasure swarmed her body like a herd of excited butterflies. Carson’s beard stubble scraped against her hyper-sensitized thighs, his mouth hot and eager as he pressed it to her aching pussy. And his tongue...oh lord. His tongue lapped her up, long sensual

strokes that stoked the fire building in her belly and made her toes curl and—yup, she was going to come.

She bit her lip, closed her eyes, and desperately tried to tamp down the rising orgasm. But his mouth felt so good and...*oh yes!* The orgasm ripped through her like a tornado, stealing the breath right out of her lungs while shards of vivid colors and bright light distorted her vision. She gave a desperate moan, pressed her hands to Carson's head and brought him closer, milking all the pleasure she could, drowning in it, consumed by it.

When the agonizing ecstasy finally abated, she opened her eyes to find Carson grinning at her again. He wiped his chin and gave a small chuckle. "Um, okay, so you weren't bluffing," he said ruefully.

"I told you." She cleared her throat when she realized how husky her voice sounded. "I couldn't help it...it was...too good."

"Don't apologize for coming, sweetheart."

She started to shift off the counter, but he quickly reached up with two large hands and kept her in place. "And don't even think about getting up. That orgasm was just to take the edge off. Now I can *really* get started."

Huh? Before she could ask what his definition of getting started was he'd already pressed his lips back to her clit.

"Carson, you already—" Her voice died in her throat as he swirled his tongue over her.

Okay, so this man was obviously more than just a skilled soldier. As his mouth worked its magic on her again, Holly decided Carson Scott was her new hero. She also decided she would be a complete moron if she argued with him about this.

So she simply leaned back on her elbows, closed her eyes and lost herself in his sexual ministrations.

"You taste like heaven, sweetheart," he murmured. He slid his tongue over her pussy and groaned. "I could stay here for the rest of my life and never get bored with this sweet cunt of yours."

She added *extremely good dirty talker* to the growing list of *Things Carson Excels At*.

Another moan slipped out of her mouth as he suckled her clit between his warm lips. Her entire body throbbed with restless arousal, as if the violent orgasm he'd just given it wasn't enough. And no, it wasn't enough. She wanted more.

Her nipples pebbled against her bra, demanding some attention of their own. She reached up to touch her breasts, then lowered her hands, feeling embarrassed.

Carson lifted his head and rolled his eyes. "I saw that. Now bring those hands right back to those gorgeous tits of yours and make yourself feel good."

"Do it for me," she replied with a tiny smile.

"I'm busy." And then his head dipped between her thighs again and his mouth resumed feasting.

Shockwaves of pleasure rocketed through her. His tongue flicked over her clit, with just enough pressure that she could feel the faint quivers of another orgasm. Her hands trembled as she reached for her breasts again, but this time there was no hesitation. So what if she fondled her own breasts? Carson obviously enjoyed it.

She pulled her shirt over her head and unclasped her bra, tossing both garments aside. Her nipples were painfully hard when she touched them. She'd always had sensitive breasts, but Steve never seemed to give them the attention they craved. God, she wanted Carson's tongue on them, wanted him to suck each rigid bud deep in his mouth, to lick her and bite her and make her scream with pleasure. But like he said, he was busy, and she was definitely enjoying his other task.

He sucked on her clit again then shoved two long fingers inside her. She was so wet she could feel her own juices trickling down her thighs. How was that possible? She and Steve had always needed a tube of lubrication when they'd had sex.

Don't think about Steve.

Right. She seriously needed to quit comparing her ex to the man between her legs.

Not that there was even a comparison to be made.

“Are you going to come for me again?” Carson muttered, adding a third finger into the mix.

She whimpered and managed a strained, “yes.” Then she pinched her nipples and the whimper became a moan. God, she was close. Pleasure built up inside her like water against a dam. All it would take was one more stroke of his tongue, one more thrust of his fingers...a little more...so close...Carson pressed his fingers hard against her G-spot, sucked even harder on her clit, and she exploded.

The climax was just as intense as the first, just as fierce and all-consuming, and this one didn’t end. It just roared on, tearing through her body like a wildfire while bursts of bliss sparked her nerve endings.

“Carson,” she moaned, fighting for breath. “It’s too much...it’s...I can’t take it...oh God.”

Rather than release her, he continued to tongue her, his fingers sliding in and out with long, deep thrusts until she was coming again. Or maybe she’d never stopped coming the first time. Who knew. Who cared. Holly’s pulse shrieked in her ears, her breasts throbbed beneath her trembling fingers. And the pleasure...it never ended. The dam had broken and a rush of pure rapture poured through her in uncontrollable waves.

“Oh yeah,” Carson groaned, lifting his head after planting one last soft kiss to her clit.

She gasped for air, her body so sated and numb she couldn’t move a single limb or muscle.

He rose to his feet and pushed her hands off her breasts, quickly replacing them with his own. His warm palms cupped each mound, his fingers stroking. Bending his head, he tasted her, covering one nipple with his mouth and sucking gently. He groaned again, then moved away from her breast and captured her lips in a hot kiss.

She kissed him back eagerly, enjoying the warmth of his mouth, the taste of herself on his tongue. Lifting her arms, she twined them around his strong, corded neck and pulled him closer, needing to feel that rock-hard body pressed against her. He stepped

closer and she widened her legs, allowing him to push his jean-clad lower body into the junction of her thighs.

“You’re so hard,” she whispered into his mouth, rubbing herself against the long erection bulging at his crotch. The denim scraped over her naked sex, but the slight abrasion only turned her on even more.

“Hold on a second,” he choked out. “All that rubbing is too damn distracting.”

She quit moving and waited for him to grab a condom from his pocket. Shoving his jeans down, he sheathed his thick cock and offered a faint smile. “Okay, do your worst. Or best, actually.”

Holly laughed, then circled his heavy erection with her fingers and guided him to her opening. They released simultaneous moans as he slid his entire length into her wetness. The feel of him inside her was so good she almost fell off the counter, but Carson grabbed her hips and steadied her, thrusting a couple of times before letting out another groan.

“Damn. I won’t last long,” he admitted in a raspy voice.

“Then come. You know, to take the edge off,” she said, mimicking his earlier words. “But next time, I expect at least a full hour of serious thrusting and pumping to make up for this debacle.”

Laughing, he bent down to kiss her, then set out in a fast, hard pace that had her gasping into his lips. He pounded into her with his cock, all the way to the hilt, and each stroke brought her closer and closer to the edge again. When she heard Carson’s low groan of pleasure, she let herself go, squeezing her inner muscles against him as his cock pulsed with release inside her.

When the waves of orgasm finally subsided, she saw Carson watching her with something that resembled awe.

“What?” she asked self-consciously.

He shook his head, looking a bit stunned. “How are we this good together? The only time I’ve ever come this hard is when we did it in that closet.”

She managed a small laugh. “Are you just trying to be nice?”

He snorted. “I just fucked you on your kitchen counter. Does a nice guy really do that?”

“Hmmm, I guess not.” She tilted her head. “So...just to clarify...are you officially agreeing to fling with me?”

“I guess I am.”

Wariness crept up her body. “Because I meant what I said on Friday, I don’t really have the time for a relationship right now.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

He rolled his eyes. “Yes, okay. If you want sex, I’ll give you sex.”

“*Just* sex,” she prompted.

An indefinable expression flickered in his eyes, and then he smiled. “Whatever you say, sweetheart.”

Chapter Four

“Your plan isn’t working,” Carson said as he sank into the chair in front of Will and handed the other man a beer.

It was Monday night and Carson had dragged Will to the Sand Hole, one of his favorite bars in San Diego. A few yards from the pier, the bar offered an outdoor patio that overlooked the ocean, and the two men were sitting at a table by the railing, while the balmy evening breeze tried to claim the napkins on the tabletop. Carson finally set his beer bottle on the napkins, so the damn things would quit fluttering around. It was just Will and him tonight, something that was becoming a habit. Garrett and Shelby were still away, and Ryan and Matt had hit a nightclub across town, but Carson hadn’t felt like clubbing tonight. He was in a seriously foul mood, despite the incredible sex he’d been having for the past week.

“She still wants a fling, huh?” Will said, slowly sipping his beer.

“Yep.” Carson groaned. “Don’t get me wrong—the sex is unbelievable. But every time I even bring up the subject of going out to dinner, or catching a movie, she tries to distract me with sex.”

Will laughed. “Does it work?”

“Every fucking time, man.” He was almost a little ashamed of how badly he craved Holly’s lithe little body. Every time she was naked, he couldn’t think. Or breathe. Or do anything that didn’t involve running his tongue over every inch of her nakedness.

It was like an addiction, and one he could spend the rest of his life enslaved to. But that was the problem—he wasn’t going to have Holly for the rest of his life. Hell, if she had her way, he wouldn’t have her for much longer.

“She’s got midterm exams coming up, and she keeps hinting that we need to take a breather,” he said with a sigh.

“Culinary school has exams?”

“Kind of. She’s got to prepare all these fancy dishes for her teacher, and then work in a restaurant for a couple of nights to show she’s capable of working under pressure and all that crap.”

“Bring her on our next assignment.” Will snorted. “She’ll definitely learn how to work under pressure then.”

Carson lifted his beer to his lips, suddenly sidetracked. “Speaking of assignments, what’s this I’ve been hearing about us going to the jungle?” The idea of hopping in a chopper and going somewhere—even the freaking jungle—wasn’t all that unappealing. The team hadn’t been out of the country since that stint in Colombia, and Carson was itching for an adventure. He hated sitting around and waiting to be paged.

“Not for sure yet,” Will replied. “But I’ve been hearing rumors about some trouble happening at a plant in Brazil. A few workers were killed by some rebels, I think, and there’s a chance we might need to go in and extract the CEO. He refuses to leave, but there have been a few threats to his life, so we’ll see.” Will put down his beer bottle. “You’re feeling stir crazy too, eh? Thought you were too busy wooing the waitress to remember what you do for a living.”

“Well, maybe the best way to change her mind is to leave,” he said with a shrug. “You know, absence makes the heart grow fonder, and all that? I swear, she’s got so much shit on her plate, I’m starting to think she’s Superwoman.”

Will looked curious. “Yeah? Like what?”

“Work, this culinary class, and don’t get me started on her incompetent family. I can’t count how many times she’s left me in her bed this week so she could rush off and save someone from themselves.” Carson shook his head, baffled. “Her father calls her to come over and help him check his email! And her sister Caroline is a total space cadet. She locked her keys in the car every day this week.”

And when they said jump, Holly jumped. That’s what Carson didn’t get. His sister Jenny was constantly getting into jams, but she only called Carson when something bad was going down. Holly’s family, however, called for everything. Every goddamn

miniscule problem that they could probably handle all on their own, if Holly would just let them.

He knew her mother had died, and that sucked, but he didn't think it was reason enough for Holly to drop everything and play mother hen to everyone. Especially when all the responsibilities—which she could easily rid herself of—constantly got in the way of their relationship.

Sorry, their *fling*. Because no matter how much fun they had together, how many times they laughed over pizza or cuddled in front of the television or had wild sex on every surface of Holly's apartment, she still refused to call it anything other than a fling.

"So tell her how ridiculous her family is being," Will suggested.

"I've tried. But she thinks they need her. The whole family was pretty upset after her mother died, and Holly ended up filling her mom's role. Now they all expect it of her."

Will leaned back in his chair. "Do you like this girl?"

Did he like her? Uh, yeah. In fact, he couldn't remember ever liking another female more than he liked Holly. She was quirky and funny and unbelievably good in bed. And way too caring and generous for her own good.

"Of course I like her," he answered.

"Then tell her. And keep telling her. Sooner or later she'll have to see that the two of you could have more than a silly fling."

But would she? Carson had the most unsettling feeling that it wouldn't matter how many times he told her how great she was, or how many ways he tried to show her he was serious about her. With Holly, responsibility always came first. To her job, her family, her school.

So that meant he had to find a way around it. Because he was sick of being Holly Lawson's boy toy. He wanted to be her boyfriend.

Now he just had to convince her to let him.

“Want a slice of pizza?” Carson asked after he’d gotten rid of the condom, leaving her in a hot, sweaty mess on the living room carpet.

Holly forced her head up to shoot him an amazed look. How was he even able to stand up? Her own legs were so shaky she knew she’d keel right over if she tried putting her weight on them. She was nowhere close to Carson’s level of recovery.

“Sex makes me hungry,” he said with an endearing shrug.

She managed to move up into a sitting position, watching as Carson flipped open the pizza box, grabbed a slice and sank down on the couch. Naked. The sight of that gloriously nude body stole the breath right out of her lungs. She’d never seen a man in such incredible shape before. Carson’s chest was solid and unyielding, defined pecs and rippled six-pack and smooth sleek sinew. A dusting of blond hair covered his chest and legs, but it was just the right amount. Not too hairy, and not pretty-boy smooth. He was masculine and beautiful and so appealing, her mouth watered like one of Pavlov’s dogs.

He cast her a grin when he noticed her staring, then gestured to the cushion next to his. “Sit and eat.”

Somehow she managed to force her legs to carry her from the floor to the couch. She grabbed a slice of pizza, but she wasn’t all that hungry, she just wanted to hold something in her hands so she wouldn’t be tempted to grab Carson. Boy, was she tempted. The aftereffects of her orgasm still pulsed through her body, tingling her nipples, tickling her thighs. She’d never experienced anything like this. The primitive, animal lust and raw pleasure and intense flood of heat.

It had been like this for an entire week. She couldn’t keep her hands off this man, and if it weren’t for work and school, she would be content being with him from morning ’til night and doing nothing but having really amazing sex.

Knowing Carson, he’d be totally up for the idea. He’d spent every night at her place for the past week, and he didn’t seem at all bored with her yet. Which was odd, since she really wasn’t the most exciting person on the planet. When she was at her apartment—and not rescuing her siblings from themselves—she usually spent her time cooking or watching TV. Not exactly anything to write home about.

Yet Carson seemed perfectly at ease doing nothing with her. Tonight he'd even brought over a couple of DVDs, all action flicks. They'd watched one before taking a break to have sex on the living room floor, and he'd spent the entire movie scrutinizing the fake military troop and telling Holly all the reasons why they wouldn't have been able to blow up the village using the equipment they had. His commentary had reminded her of what he did for a living, that his job was a dangerous one, but it still didn't seem real to her, especially since he seemed to spend most of his time waiting to be paged.

"Aren't you bored not blowing up things or traipsing through the jungle?" she found herself asking, setting her pizza slice back in the box.

Next to her, Carson chewed slowly then tossed her a thoughtful look. "Yes and no. The team hasn't been called to duty in more than a month, and I'm definitely ready for another assignment. But I'm also enjoying spending time with you, so I'm not complaining about the lull in the SEAL world."

"We're not spending time together," she reminded him. "We're sleeping together."

As if her reminder had stolen his appetite, he dropped his half-eaten slice. "Right," he said, sounding a bit sarcastic.

"It's a fling, Carson," she said firmly.

"Not anymore it isn't." He raked his fingers through his blond hair. "We've spent a week together, Hol. We've cuddled and watched movies and made each other laugh. That's more than a fling, in my opinion."

She pressed her lips together, trying to think of a response. He was right—they had done a lot of couple-ish things this week. But they'd had a ridiculous amount of sex, too, so she'd figured that canceled out the couple stuff. Not that she hadn't enjoyed the non-sex parts. She did enjoy it. She was just...

Scared, a little voice filled in.

Holly quickly forced away the thought. No, she wasn't scared. She couldn't be. So what if Steve had dumped her and told her he wanted someone more wild and exciting? That wasn't the reason she didn't want a relationship. She was simply too busy for one.

Liar. You're scared.

The voice was beginning to annoy her. In fact, this whole conversation with Carson was beginning to annoy her. Why couldn't he stop pushing her and just have fun? The two of them had become pretty skilled at *fun*.

Obviously it was time to remind him of that.

Before he could open his mouth to continue speaking, she slid closer and wrapped her fingers around his shaft. It instantly hardened against her palm.

"Oh no you don't," he grumbled, reaching for her hand. "You're not going to distract me again. We're having this conversation whether you like it or—Jesus," he groaned as she bent down and took his tip into her mouth.

Kissing the broad head, she trailed her tongue along his sensitive underside, nibbling gently on the velvety smooth flesh.

"Damn it, Holly. You're not allowed to..." His voice trailed off the moment she sucked him.

There was nothing more arousing than bringing Carson to climax. She'd done it frequently this week, and she knew exactly what he liked now. Curling her fingers around his base, she pumped and sucked his shaft, swirling her tongue over his tip on each upstroke. His husky moans and the way he lifted his hips to thrust deeper into her mouth told her she'd succeeded in distracting him again.

His cock throbbed against her tongue, his hands tangled in her hair, signaling he was close. "Can I come in your mouth?" he rasped.

She nodded, chuckling against his hard male flesh. He asked her that every time she did this, but she didn't mind. She liked that he cared enough to ask.

With a ragged groan, he let himself go. Holly swallowed every drop, gently kneading his balls as he shuddered with release. When she looked up, she saw his blue eyes were glazed, swimming with sated desire.

"You're evil," he squeezed out, falling back against the sofa cushions and pulling her naked body on top of his. "You've got to stop doing that."

She blinked innocently. "I thought you liked my blowjobs."

“I love your blowjobs, sweetheart, and you know it. But you can’t keep avoiding—” Before he could finish, the cordless phone on the coffee table began to ring.

Carson sat up with irritation then shot her a warning look. “Don’t even think about it, Holly.”

She got off his lap and started to reach for the phone. “I can’t not answer. What if it’s someone in my family? Or work?”

“That’s exactly why you shouldn’t answer it,” he muttered.

Ignoring him, she clicked the talk button and pressed the phone to her ear. “Hello?”

“Holly, I have an emergency,” came her sister Caroline’s desperate voice.

A lump of resentment lodged in her throat. “What is it, Caroline?”

Her sister didn’t get a chance to explain, because Carson had grabbed the phone from Holly’s hands. She let out a yelp of protest, but he was already speaking into the mouthpiece.

“Caroline?” he said, swatting Holly’s hands away as she tried to swipe the phone back. “I’m Carson...Holly’s boyfriend.”

“What are you doing?” she hissed.

He paused. “I know she didn’t mention it. It’s still fairly new...uh-huh....yep. So, what seems to be the problem, Caroline?”

Holly swallowed back her anger as she watched Carson listen to her sister’s response. How dare he? He had no right acting like a jerk and taking the phone from her like this.

“Really?” He nodded to himself. “Well, here’s what you’re going to do, sweetheart. You’re going to knock on your super’s door and ask him to let him into your apartment.” He paused again. “No, Holly doesn’t need to be there for that. She’s very busy right now.”

Holly fumed at him, crossing her arms over her chest to cover her bare breasts.

“Well, tomorrow morning you can take a cab over here and get the spare keys you gave to Holly, and make copies of them. Your original set might turn up...” He sighed. “Then change the locks if you think someone might find them, figure out your address

and let themselves into your apartment. How? A locksmith can do that for you.” He shook his head again. “No, Holly cannot change your locks for you. You can’t expect her to do everything for you, sweetheart... Hey, you know what, Caroline? I’ve got to go. Holly and I are about to watch a movie. Call back when you’ve gotten into your apartment, okay?” Without saying goodbye, he hung up.

On her sister!

Holly watched as he nonchalantly placed the phone on the coffee table and turned to look at her. “Ready to watch the rest of that movie?” he asked pleasantly.

She didn’t answer. Fury bubbled in her stomach. “Why did you do that?” she demanded.

He shrugged. “Because I’m sick of watching your sexy ass slide through the front door every time one of them calls you up for help.”

“This isn’t your family, Carson. It’s mine. And what I choose to do for them isn’t your concern.”

He blew out a frustrated breath. “She lost her apartment key, for God’s sake. It’s not the end of the world! And what I told her to do is what you *wouldn’t* have told her if you’d taken that call. You’d have hopped in your car and taken care of everything for her.”

“So?” she said defensively.

“So, it’s not your freaking job, sweetheart.” He looked exasperated. “Caroline is five years older—she should be taking care of *you*, not the other way around. She takes advantage of you. They all do.”

Discomfort filled her body. Although a part of her knew he was right—the part that had been feeling the same way for two years now—she still couldn’t let go of her anger. So what if her family took advantage of her? They were still *her* family. Not his. And trying to stop her from taking care of them was presumptuous and selfish of him. This was Steve all over again, making demands on her, telling her to forget about everyone and everything else in her life and just focus on him. Well, she couldn’t do that.

“You shouldn’t have interfered,” she said coolly.

Carson dragged one hand through his hair, looking frazzled. “I won’t apologize for it. It’s time you quit focusing all your energy on them.”

“And do what, focus it all on *you*?” she replied.

Before he could answer, she stumbled to her feet, suddenly very aware that they’d been conducting this entire argument while naked. Whirling around, she stomped down the hall to the bedroom, where she threw on some clothing.

“Come on, Holly, don’t be mad,” came his low voice from the doorway. “I was only trying to help.”

“By hanging up on my sister? That was unbelievably selfish of you.” She turned to face him, glad he’d put on his jeans so she couldn’t get distracted by his gorgeous body. “I’m not happy with you right now, Carson. And...” She took a breath. “I want you to leave.”

His blue eyes darkened. “You don’t mean that.”

“Yeah, I do.” She clenched her jaw. “Isn’t that what you wanted? Me being honest with the people in my life? Well, I’m being honest. I’m too pissed off to have this fight right now, so I want you to leave.”

His sexy mouth tightened in a thin line. “Fine. You want me to go, I’ll go.” He turned then shot her a glance over his shoulder. “But this isn’t over, Holly. Maybe I stepped over a line tonight, but I did it for you. You spend so much time worrying about your family that you never have enough time for yourself. I just wanted you to have one night that’s only about *you*, not them. Because I care about you, and I want...” He let out a slow breath. “I want to be with you, and I know you want to be with me.”

Her heart ached as a sad expression filled his face. “And, baby, we’d both be a lot better off if you’d just admit it.” With that, he slid out the door.

Chapter Five

Okay, so she was an idiot. It only took Holly twenty-four hours to figure it out, though a part of her had known all along she was being foolish by keeping Carson at arm's length. Ever since the night she'd met him at the Hot Zone, she'd felt more alive, more *free*, than she had in years. Instead of holding on to that feeling, she'd sent Carson away, and now she felt more trapped than ever.

Then again, was it possible to feel anything other than trapped when she was having dinner with her family?

"Pass the mashed potatoes," Todd said through a mouthful of sesame chicken Holly had prepared.

She obediently passed him the bowl of potatoes, then glanced around the table at the rest of them. Her father's dark head was bent as he cut his chicken, her brother Kyle was slathering butter on the rolls Holly had spent the past two hours baking, and Caroline was pushing peas around her plate with her fork, looking distracted.

And had any of them commented on her dinner? Nope. Even though Caroline had called her at the last minute, Holly had run around her kitchen, cooking, packing up everything in Tupperware so she could bring it over to her dad's house for this unexpected dinner *Caroline* had planned. Instead of working on the recipes she was creating for her midterms, she'd slaved to make this stupid meal, and none of them had even thanked her for it.

It only made her realize that Carson had been absolutely right when he'd told her they took advantage of her. She'd always known it, but hearing someone else say it had forced her to really look at the situation. And she didn't like what she saw. Ever since her mom died, she'd done everything for her family. When was the last time any of them had thanked her for it?

“I have my last exam tomorrow,” Todd spoke up, taking a sip of water. “Hol, do you think you could come over to my dorm after dinner tonight and quiz me?”

Her lips automatically formed the word *yes* but she quickly snapped her mouth closed. No. *No*. So what if it was Todd’s final exam? She had *her* evaluation next week, and if she wanted to impress her teacher, she needed to come up with a recipe that would knock the man’s socks off. Wasn’t that more important?

If Carson were here, she knew he’d say yes, it *was* more important, and a sudden flare of determination lit up inside her.

“I can’t,” she told her brother. “I have my own exam to prepare for.”

Todd looked startled. “You can’t? But it’ll only take a few hours. Please, Holly?”

She was about to firmly reject him again, when her older sister suddenly slammed her hand down on the table, causing the silverware to jingle loudly. Everyone turned to Caroline in surprise, even their dad, who hadn’t said a word during the entire meal.

“Quit bothering Holly,” Caroline said to Todd, her green eyes flashing with anger. “She said no.”

Todd swallowed. “I wasn’t—”

“You were being an asshole, expecting her to drop everything to help you study for an exam that for weeks you should have been reviewing for,” Caroline snapped. Her cheeks flushed. “Actually, we were *all* being assholes to Holly. Even you, Daddy.”

Their father frowned.

“I’m serious,” Caroline insisted, her eyes filling with remorse. “I know we’ve all had a tough couple of years, but yesterday I realized how unfair we’ve been to Holly. We expect her to do everything.”

“Because she’s so good at it,” Kyle offered. His expression grew pained. “You know, the way Mom was.”

“Well, she’s not Mom,” Caroline replied. “And she shouldn’t have to do whatever we ask her to. Did you guys know she has a boyfriend?”

The three males glanced at Holly in surprise. She suddenly felt uncomfortable, not to mention confused. What on earth had gotten into Caroline? For two years her sister

hadn't seemed to have any qualms about asking Holly for every favor imaginable—what the hell had changed?

"That's right," her sister said, shaking her head to herself. "She's got a boyfriend, and none of us even knew about him."

"Caroline," Holly began, wanting to tell her that Carson wasn't exactly her boyfriend.

Her sister silenced her with a sharp look. "No, don't explain. You have a boyfriend, and you didn't tell us, but that's not the issue. The issue is that none of us even cared to ask if you were seeing anyone new. We're jerks, Holly. We expect you to fix everything in our lives and don't bother being interested in yours. All we do is make demands. It's no wonder you got your boyfriend to hang up on me. I deserved it."

A short silence fell over the table, until Holly's father finally cleared his throat and shot her a gentle look. "Honey...is it true? Do you think we make too many demands of you?"

Holly swallowed. "Sometimes."

Her dad looked away, but not before she saw a flash of guilt in his eyes. "I'm sorry," he said after a moment. "You always seemed so eager to help out, doing all the stuff around the house that your mom used to do..." Sorrow creased his features. "And I was too busy missing your mother to notice how unfair I was being to you."

"It's okay, Daddy," she said, her voice coming out shaky.

"No, it's not. Caroline's right. Your mother's gone, and it's time we figured out how to take care of ourselves." He suddenly straightened his shoulders, his stern expression reminding her of the way he'd been before her mother had died. Strong, commanding. "First things first, I want you go home."

She faltered. "What?"

"You said you have an exam to prepare for." Her father's gaze was determined. "Go home and focus on that, honey. And while you're taking care of yourself, the rest of us are going to clean up and do the dishes and figure out exactly how we're going to make it up you. Got it?"

She couldn't help but smile. "Got it."

She was still smiling as she left her father's house and headed for her car. Although she was still a bit stunned over what just happened, she wasn't about to complain. For some reason, her family had come to their senses tonight.

No, not for some reason. Because of Carson.

Carson had gotten through to Caroline last night. Instead of letting Holly go clean up another one of her sister's messes, he'd forced Caroline to deal with it herself. And the tough-love approach had worked. Holly had been babying them all for so long, and thanks to Carson, she wouldn't be doing that any longer. How could she have ever thought he was selfish?

I know you want to be with me...we'd both be a lot better off if you'd just admit it.

The memory of Carson's parting words made her heart squeeze, reminding her again of just how much of a moron she was. He was right. She *did* want to be with him. She'd walked away from him that first night at the club because she'd been scared of the intense desire he'd evoked inside her. And she'd walked away from him yesterday because that intense desire had somehow transformed into something a little too close to love, and that had scared her more.

But she wasn't scared anymore. Steve might have broken her heart, but Carson had put the pieces back together.

So maybe it was time to quit acting like an idiot and give him what he wanted. What *she* wanted.

Starting the car, Holly reversed out of the driveway, knowing exactly what she needed to do.

Carson wasn't picking up his phone. Holly left him three voice mails, but by the next day, he still hadn't called back. She would have driven over to his apartment, but she was ashamed that she didn't even know where he lived. She'd tried so hard to keep him at a distance, to keep things on her own turf, that she hadn't bothered to find out his address.

By the time the early evening rolled around, she was getting frustrated. She needed to see him, damn it! Apologize for asking him to leave, for calling him selfish, when all he'd tried to do was show her that it was time to quit letting her family take advantage of her.

There was only one other way she could think to find him, so just after six, she got into her car and drove across the bridge to Coronado. At John and Shelby Garrett's wedding, she'd overheard that the bride ran a bakery and coffee shop near the Navy base, so Holly headed in that direction. She found the place quickly—the name, Shelby's Bakery Café, helped narrow it down—and ten minutes later she'd parked her car at the curb out front.

The bell over the door jingled as she stepped inside. A few elderly women sat at a small table by the window, sipping coffee, but the gorgeous blonde from the wedding was nowhere in sight. Holly drifted through the doorway that separated the café from the bakery, and found Shelby Garrett standing behind the counter, blowing her nose with a crumpled tissue.

It was obvious the other woman was upset, and Holly was about to back away when Shelby caught sight of her.

With a strained smile, Shelby said, "Can I help you?"

"You're Shelby, right?"

The blonde nodded.

Holly offered a smile of her own. "I'm Holly Lawson. I work for the company that catered your wedding."

A spark of recognition filled Shelby's blue eyes. Holly couldn't help but notice how pretty the woman was. She looked like she belonged in an advertisement for surfing gear or something, all California girl good looks.

"Is this about the check we wrote?" Shelby asked with a sigh. "Johnny swore he put the right date on it, but he tends to accidentally postdate his checks all the time."

"No, as far as I know, everything is fine." Holly moved closer to the counter, discreetly pretending not to notice the other woman's red-rimmed eyes and blotchy

cheeks. She hoped there wasn't trouble in paradise already. The couple she'd seen at the wedding had looked so disgustingly in love, it would be a shame if they'd somehow lost that lovin' feeling.

"I'm actually here about something else. Well, *someone*." She swallowed, absently glancing at the cakes sitting in the refrigerated glass cases next to the counter. "Carson Scott. He's your husband's friend, right?"

A rosy blush swept over Shelby's cheeks. "A friend of both of ours, actually."

Holly could sense there was a whole story behind that one sentence, but this probably wasn't the best time to pry. Instead, she moistened her lips and said, "I'm trying to get in touch with him, but he's not answering his phone. I was hoping maybe you could give me his address." She quickly pressed on. "I swear, I'm not a crazy stalker or anything. Carson and I...have been seeing each other, I guess. I just needed to talk to him."

"I'm afraid his address isn't going to help you right now," Shelby answered. "The team left for an assignment last night. I have no idea where they are, or when they'll be back."

Shelby had barely finished her last sentence when a few tears slid down her cheeks again. Looking embarrassed, she swiped at them with the sleeve of her green V-neck shirt. "I'm sorry. I know, it's pathetic, huh? I shouldn't get this hysterical over John being away. It's what he does. I knew that when I married him." She blinked a few times, her lashes spiky with wetness. "But it still sucks, you know? Never knowing if he's okay, making coffee and baking cakes while he's God-knows-where, possibly getting shot at."

With a shaky breath, Shelby raised her tissue and blew her nose again.

Her words brought a spark of alarm to Holly's gut. Getting shot at? She'd been so focused on herself ever since she'd met Carson that she hadn't given much thought to what the life of a SEAL was like. God, was he in danger right now? The idea sent her pulse racing.

“Shit, I scared you, didn’t I?” Shelby blurted out. She tossed her tissue in the wastebasket behind her and quickly rounded the counter. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to freak you out.”

Holly swallowed again. “I’m not freaked out. Though I am kinda worried now.”

Shelby offered a mild smile. “Goes with the territory. Do you want a cup of coffee?”

What she wanted was to hear Carson’s voice and make sure he wasn’t dead, but she found herself nodding. “Sure.”

The blonde poured two cups of coffee, then led Holly into the café, where the women sat down. “So, how long have you been seeing Carson?” Shelby asked, looking curious.

“A week and a half, but we met about a month ago. At your bachelorette party, actually.”

Shelby’s delicate brows soared north. “Seriously?”

“You look surprised.”

“Well, I am. Carson doesn’t usually stay with one woman for long.” Shelby shot her an apologetic look. “No offense to you or anything.”

“None taken.” Holly sipped the hot coffee. “He told me all about it.”

Again Shelby’s cheeks flushed. “He did? Damn, that’s awkward then.”

Holly blinked. “It is?”

“Well, most women wouldn’t enjoy having coffee with someone their boyfriend has slept with.”

Holly choked mid-sip. “You slept with Carson? Does your husband know?”

The other woman let out a slow laugh. “Uh, yeah, he knows. He was there.”

After a beat, Holly burst out laughing too. Figured. Carson had told her he’d led a pretty racy life, so she really wasn’t surprised to find out he’d had a threesome with his best friend and best friend’s now-wife. Oddly enough, she wasn’t angry, or even jealous. She’d never been the type of woman who cared about her lovers’ pasts, and the fact that Carson had chosen to leave his causal lifestyle for *her* was kind of flattering.

“God, I’m an idiot,” Holly suddenly burst out.

Shelby laughed again. “Um, okay. Care to elaborate?”

Although she didn’t know Shelby at all, Holly couldn’t help but spill everything, from her first encounter with Carson to the fight they’d had two nights ago. “He was just trying to help,” she finished, “and I called him selfish and asked him to leave.”

“Don’t worry, he’ll come back,” Shelby said. “Trust me, if Carson wants a relationship with you, he’ll fight for it. He never gives up. It’s actually very annoying.”

Holly gave a brief smile. “Let’s hope he still wants a relationship when he gets back.” Her smile faded, a quivery breath leaving her throat. “Because of he doesn’t, I’ll kick myself for the rest of my life for letting him get away.”

Chapter Six

Two weeks. He'd been gone for two weeks. And Holly was beginning to grow more than a little worried. She'd called Shelby every day since her visit to the café, and the other woman hadn't been able to provide her with any details. Apparently someone from the base had called Shelby to tell her John had been in radio contact and should be heading home soon, but other than that, Holly had no clue if Carson was okay. She hoped he was, because if he didn't come home in one piece, she was going to have a nervous breakdown.

At least one good thing had come from all the worrying. She'd tried so hard to distract herself that she'd ended up cooking up a storm, and she'd impressed the hell out of her teacher with her dishes. He'd told her he would give her a glowing recommendation letter to any restaurant she applied for, but at this point, Holly wasn't sure what she wanted to do. Shelby had told her a restaurant a block from the café was up for sale, and Holly was seriously considering getting a bank loan and taking the place over herself after she finished school.

But before she made any decisions about her future, she needed Carson to come home already. She missed him. Cooking dinner for him, watching those awful action movies, having mind-blowing sex. If he didn't come back soon, she didn't know what she'd do.

"Holly, are you listening to me?" her sister's voice snapped, jerking her out of her thoughts.

She absently walked around her kitchen, holding the cordless phone to her ear as she opened a few cabinets and tried to decide what she would make to eat. "Sorry, Caroline, what were you saying?"

“The computer course Dad is taking,” Caroline said impatiently. “He wants us to go over there this weekend so he can show us all the stuff he’s learned. I know it’ll be boring, but he’s really excited about it.”

Holly tried not to laugh. Ever since that dinner two weeks ago, her family had truly been making an effort to give her space. Todd had hired himself a tutor, Kyle hadn’t locked his keys in his car once, Caroline had stopped dyeing her hair, and their father was learning how to use the computer to pay his bills online. So far, none of them had called her with any emergencies, which was a huge relief, since the only thing she was capable of concentrating on right now was Carson and when the hell he would come back to the States.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be there,” she assured her sister.

“Good. I’ll see you Saturday then. Oh, and let me tell you about this guy I met at Hot Zone last night. Hol, he was *soooo* cute! He—”

The phone beeped in her ear, cutting off Caroline’s sentence.

Holly’s heart skipped a beat. “Car, I’ve got to go. Someone’s trying to be buzzed up.”

She hung up before her sister could object and pressed the button that would open the lobby door. Then she tossed the phone on the counter with an excited yelp and dashed toward the front door. Carson! It had to be him.

Flinging open the door, she stepped into the hallway and glued her gaze to the elevator at the end of the hall. One second...two...three... The elevator doors swung up, and a wave of joy slammed into her. There he was, wearing khakis and a green T-shirt, his jaw covered in thick blond stubble. His blue eyes narrowed with wariness when he saw her lurking in the corridor.

He took a step forward, then stopped. “You’re not going to ask me to leave again, are you?” he called out.

“Not on your life,” she called back.

A smile filled his handsome face. “Thank God. Because I missed you like crazy.”

With urgent strides, he crossed the hall and made his way toward her. He'd barely reached the door when she launched herself into his arms and wrapped her arms tightly around him. "I'm so glad you're okay," she murmured into the crook of his neck. "You were gone so long. I was worried."

He stroked her back with his big, warm hands and pressed a kiss to her temple. "Don't worry. We just extracted a CEO and led him through the jungle for ten days. Piece of cake."

Holly laughed, then pulled him into the apartment and closed the door behind them. "Please tell me nobody shot at you."

Carson shrugged. "There might have been a bullet or two aimed in our direction," he said vaguely.

Alarm coursed into her. "Were you hit? Are you hurt?" She immediately began running her fingers over his body, searching for a hidden bandage.

Chuckling, he trapped her hands between his. "Quit doing that."

"Why?" She stared accusingly at him. "You *were* hurt!"

"No, I wasn't hurt," he replied, rolling his eyes. "But if you keep touching me I'm going to come in my pants. I've been thinking about nothing but fucking you for two weeks now, so I'm a little on edge."

A smile stretched across her mouth. "You're not allowed to come in your pants. I'm pretty sex-starved too, so don't you dare deprive me."

He smiled back, and then his expression darkened. "I didn't come here to continue the fling, sweetheart."

"Good, because I don't want to."

He faltered. "You don't?"

She reached up and pressed her palm to his chest, enjoying the sleek muscles under her fingers. "I want more this time," she admitted, looking up to meet his eyes. "I acted like an idiot, Carson. I was...scared."

"Scared," he echoed uncertainly.

“I was starting to feel something for you, and I...I guess I didn’t want to deal with it. My ex dumped me because I wouldn’t make him my world, and then you wanted me to tell my family to screw off, and it was too much like what Steve wanted, and...” She took a breath. “I overreacted, and I accused you of being selfish when you aren’t, and I...I messed up. And I’m sorry. I want nothing more than to be in a relationship with you.”

Carson tilted his head, still looking unsure. “What happened to having too many responsibilities for a relationship?”

“My stress levels have lowered considerably.” She quickly told him about everything that had happened with her family, and the changes in her life. “So far, they’re managing just fine on their own. You were right, they needed to stand on their own two feet instead of relying on me.”

“What about school?” he asked.

“I still have six months left.” She shot him a grin. “But I think I’ll be able to squeeze you in between classes. Don’t worry, I’ll make lots of time for my sexy sailor boyfriend...”

“Lots of time, huh?” His voice grew husky, while a playful glint lit up his eyes. “How on earth are we going to pass the time?”

She brushed her fingers over his pecs, feeling his flat nipples harden beneath her touch. Still smiling, she moved one hand down his magnificent chest and rested it on the growing bulge at his crotch. “I’m sure we can think of something.”

He groaned as she rubbed his erection, but intercepted her hand before she could reach for his zipper. “One more thing,” he said softly. “And don’t you dare try to distract me with a blowjob, because I have to say this.”

She feigned annoyance. “Fine. What is it?”

“I’ve fallen in love with you.”

The vulnerability she saw in his eyes stole the breath right out of her lungs. As her heart did a little somersault, she swallowed hard and said, “I’m in love with you too.”

Carson bent down and brushed his lips over hers, the gentle kiss causing her toes to curl. Then he pulled back and offered a devastating grin. “So...now that we’ve settled that, how about that blowjob...*Jessica*?”

She laughed, even while she undid his zipper. “I’m sorry to inform you that Jessica is gone. You’ve got Holly Lawson now, and she’s not going anywhere.”

“I have no complaints with that.” He moaned as she slid her hand underneath the waistband of his boxers. “No complaints at all, sweetheart...”

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Lust was the lure, Candy was the reward.

Tasting Candy

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Walking around with a raging hard-on isn't Blade Vaughn's idea of a good time. He's hungry for sex and there's only one woman on his menu: Candice Warner. When Blade witnesses the shy beauty go into a panic over a harmless encounter, he's more determined than ever to prove that sex with him is just the therapy she needs.

Candice is used to being afraid of her own shadow, but when she goes all nutso in front of Blade, she's beyond mortified. She wants him to see her as an equal, and as a woman. It's time she got over her past trauma and started living again.

But trust is hard to come by when her only experience with men has left her heart in pieces.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Tasting Candy:

Christ, she was adorable. He would never get used to his reaction to this woman. She stood with her shoulder-length light brown hair piled atop her head, a look of total mortification on her freshly scrubbed face. She didn't even look sexily mussed—just mussed. That he could get a boner over her even when she wore an ugly brown terrycloth robe was saying something.

She always turned him on. He was going to do something about it, too. Eventually. Right now, he wanted some answers. Lucky for him, he was very good at getting them. He would coerce and railroad until he was satisfied. It was the way he operated. Candice would just have to get used to it.

"So, you going to let me in, or use that can on me?" He shrugged. One way or the other, Blade would gain entrance. "It's your choice."

Candice yanked her robe together tighter, which was a crying shame since it had started to drift open and he had been this close to a sneak peek. "Of course, please, come in." Then she moved out of the doorway and allowed him inside. He smiled, triumphant.

It was a small concession, but she was so closed-up around him, entering her private domain felt like a big fucking deal.

Her living room was...dainty. Figured. Damn near everything about Candice was dainty. It enhanced the fact he felt like a bull around her. It was cozy, though, something in the way she'd decorated. He'd expected pinks and peaches and fluffy ruffles, but it was all earth-tones, woodsy and serene. Actually, there was something sort of peaceful about her home. He wondered if she did that on purpose because of the panic attacks. Speaking of which...

"I want to know why you went ballistic today at the gym." Oh yeah, subtlety was his middle name. Jesus.

Her eyes widened. "Ballistic?" Candice asked. Suddenly, a smile slipped across her face, then a laugh bubbled up. Soon, she was practically crying from laughing so hard.

"Hell, it wasn't that funny," Blade grumbled, feeling disgruntled and not sure why. But he did like to see her smiling instead of near tears. Much better, to his way of thinking.

Candice calmed enough to say, "You just aren't the sweet-talker your brother is, are you?"

Now what the hell was that supposed to mean? "Has Merrick hit on you?" he asked, unaccountably possessive and jealous.

Blade would kill him. It didn't matter that Merrick was married to Candice's boss, Chloe, and madly, deeply in love. He'd still kill him.

"No, not at all. It's just that he's got a real way with words. He can sell anyone darn near anything with barely more than a smile. You, on the other hand, you're just the opposite. You bully and push until you get your way." She tilted her head to the side as if studying him. "Amazing that you're related."

"We are talking about Merrick, right?"

"Of course, unless you have another brother that I don't know about." She smiled as she moved away from him. He noticed she did that a lot, kept a physical distance.

“Nope, just Merrick.” And to set his mind straight he asked, “Has Merrick ever flirted with you?”

“No. He’s totally devoted to Chloe. I don’t think he even knows other women exist.”

Satisfied with that answer, he pointed to the couch. “Mind if I sit?”

She blushed, which, as he’d already discovered, turned him on. Every fucking thing she did turned him on. “Of course, have a seat.” Looking down at her robe, she frowned. “I’ll, uh, just go get dressed.”

“I don’t see why,” Blade growled. His gaze traveled over her once more. Christ, his lust grew by leaps and bounds whenever he was within a mile of the woman.

“Yes, well, I’ll be right back,” she stammered, then flitted from the room, leaving him to his own devices.

He went over to the couch, which was the size of a love seat to him, and sat. It was forest-green with beige stripes and surprisingly comfortable. As he waited, he studied the living room and noted something strange. While the room seemed plenty lived-in and had a real homey feel, it was devoid of anything personal. Then he spotted a single photograph nestled between a bunch of paperbacks on a bookshelf in the corner. His curiosity got the better of him. Blade left the couch and went to it, drawn by the wild need to know more about the woman who had been haunting both his days and nights.

It was a snapshot of a couple standing with their arms around a tiny dark-haired girl in pigtails. The woman was obviously Candice’s mother—she looked exactly like her—and the man had a bright smile on his face, as if he couldn’t possibly be happier. The picture was old, though. Candice couldn’t have been more than eight or nine at the time. Where were her parents now? And why just the one picture?

He left it and went back to sit on the couch, shocked at the protective instincts that kicked in at the thought of Candice being all alone in the world. He’d always had his parents, his brother and sister. They were his whole life. He couldn’t imagine not having them. And he was already anticipating Merrick and Chloe having kids someday. It’d be fun to have a few curtain-climbers in the family to liven things up a bit. He’d enjoy being an uncle.

Yep, no doubt about it, without his unruly siblings, life would be as dull as a brick. Did Candice have any friends other than Lacey? Then there was the house. Blade was surprised she could afford it. No doubt, Candice made good money working at Vaughn Business Solutions, but the house was bigger than what he would have thought she could handle alone.

It was a one-storey ranch with a two-car garage and, judging by the size, three bedrooms. More than what a woman living alone needed. Being a construction contractor, Blade didn't need to see the interior to know the approximate dimensions of the rooms. Besides, a woman living by herself generally preferred an apartment. Hell, he lived in an apartment. Nevertheless, having other people around tended to make a woman feel safe. No landscaping upkeep, either. So why choose to live alone in a house that was too big for a slip of a woman like Candice?

She was certainly a puzzle. It was a good thing he loved puzzles.

When she returned, Blade's body reacted. She affected him in a way no other women ever had—and he'd definitely had his share. Women who were sexier and no doubt more eager to be in his presence. But here he was, getting all hot and bothered over a woman who wanted nothing to do with him. Which, needless to say, made him want her even more. It was crazy, but Blade couldn't deny the temptation to get to know her on an intimate level. He'd tried that already, and he'd gotten nowhere.

It was high time he did something about his secret lust. Enough of wondering how her skin would feel against his, what her lips would taste like, how she would sound during a climax. How fucking good she would feel wrapped around his cock. It kept him up at night, and running a construction company on little to no sleep was not a good idea. Hell, if he didn't get the imp out of his system, he'd end up killing himself. The way he saw it, having sex with Candice Warner was a matter of life and death.

Once he got her to bed and had his fill of her warm, welcoming body, he would be able to get back to normal and feel in control again.

Love...or friendship? Does she really have to choose?

Only Tyler

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Circle of Friends, Book 1

Katelyn Rosewood is facing a moral dilemma, one that's six-foot-two, sexy as sin—and her fiancé's best friend. Katie spent a lot of time getting over Tyler Bonnard, but now that he's back in Sydney, he's turning her carefully reconstructed world upside down.

Her relationship with Steve Sommers may be short on heat and desire, but after Tyler left her two years before, she'll take security and solid friendship over wild passion any day. Except Tyler seems to have a good—if outrageous—explanation for why he's returned.

After a tragic family secret tore him out of Katie's life, Tyler is glad to be back with his two best friends. But one thing is out of place: Katie's in the wrong man's arms. And if her reaction to his return is any indication, she's not quite over him. Which could mean hope for Tyler, heartbreak for Steve...

And another devastating loss for Katie, who must choose between the man to whom she's committed her future, and the man who still holds her heart.

Warning: Keep a tissue or two handy while reading this book. While it does contain a few steamy love scenes, the rest of the story might just make you cry.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Only Tyler:

She had no clear recollection of leaving the theater. No knowledge of how she got in the elevator leading up to the hotel rooms. All she knew was that when she and Tyler were safely ensconced in the first car free of other people, she was finally, finally, back in his arms.

His kiss almost stopped her heart. And when it finally began to beat again, when she finally realized she'd pass out if she didn't force air into her lungs and blood into her arteries, it was to an unsteady, uneven rhythm.

He didn't just kiss with his mouth, he kissed with his whole body, melding her against him, into him, making them one. As his tongue stole between her lips, scorching her mouth, she swore she saw stars.

She was wrapped in his arms, exactly where she wanted to be. Exactly where she belonged.

For the second time that evening, he placed his hand on her lower back. This time though, there was nothing subtle about his touch. He curved her hips into his, and her world stood still. He was hard. His erection pressed against her lower belly, burning through her dress.

The impact was electric. Her breasts tightened and sparks ignited between her legs. She moaned into his mouth.

He pulled his face away to stare at her. His eyes, though flecked with gold, were so dark they were bottomless pools of desire. He tried to speak, tried to say something, but couldn't. Instead he took her mouth again in a kiss so carnal, so spicy, her knees threatened to give in.

When the lift opened to empty them on Tyler's floor, he refused to break contact. He lifted her in his arms, carrying her effortlessly down the corridor.

Though her hands shook, she fiddled with the buttons of his shirt, starting at the top and making her way slowly down. With each button that popped open, she nuzzled into his chest, kissing the exposed flesh. The flesh she'd loved so well. So thoroughly.

The third button revealed a nipple, small, and masculine, and hard. She placed her lips around it and sucked gently.

"Katie," he rasped.

He'd stopped walking and now stood beside a door.

"Is this your room?" Forget throaty. Her voice was almost nonexistent. God, she needed him so bad. Needed to fill the emptiness in her loins.

"Yes..." His voice broke as she ran her tongue over the hard nipple a second time.

"Open the door. Now. I need to feel you moving inside me." Only Ty could give her what she needed. Only Tyler.

How he managed to rummage around in his pocket, remove his key card and get the door open, was beyond her—but then most everything was beyond her at that moment. The only thing she could comprehend was her fierce need to consume Tyler Bonnard, whole.

Her body was made of liquid heat. When Tyler set her on her feet, inched the strap of her dress over her shoulder, exposing her breast, and took her nipple in his mouth, she swore she saw steam smoldering between her flesh and his lips.

The impact of his mouth on her nipple was dizzying. The world spun. The sun dipped and rose. Her head dropped back, and she moaned. Only Tyler. He was the only man who ever made her feel like this.

And then her mobile phone rang. The sound shrill and invasive.

She froze.

“Ignore it,” Tyler growled as he grazed her breast with his teeth.

She couldn’t.

“It’ll stop in a minute.” He slipped the second strap over her shoulder, revealing her other breast. As his hot lips covered her nipple, she listened to the persistent trill of the phone.

Until it stopped.

She relaxed and brought her attention back to Tyler. Her breasts were cupped in his hands. His mouth was an inch away from hers.

“Sweet, sweet Katie. I never forgot you. Never forgot this.” His lids were hooded and his voice low. “I never for one minute stopped loving you.”

It was impossible to tell who kissed whom, but their mouths joined together again, and Katie’s toes curled from the pleasure his lips gave her.

Tyler still loved her.

“I am so sorry I left you, so sorry I caused you pain. It was the last thing I wanted. Ever.”

She ran her hand over his hip. Slid her fingers along the hard length of his cock. He jerked into her touch, filling her palm and moaned.

God, she held him again. Felt his excitement and his arousal. It matched the wet heat between her legs perfectly.

His pants were a restrictive barrier, a concrete wall between them, and she lowered her other hand to grasp the buckle of his belt. She needed to feel his naked flesh. Needed to feel the pulsing heat of his cock. Slowly, she slid the belt through the buckle and pushed it out of the way. She twisted his button through the hole and then eased the zip over his solid bulge.

So close. She shoved the flaps aside and touched the waistband of his undies.

Tyler hummed low in his throat.

She pushed at the elastic, felt the swollen tip of his penis under her fingertips and groaned into his mouth.

And then his phone rang.

And rang.

And rang.

She broke the kiss, pulling away as reality crashed in on their rapture.

"It's Steve," Tyler said unnecessarily. One minute before desire had darkened his eyes. Now guilt shadowed them.

Self-loathing filled her. She looked down at her naked chest.

"It's Steve," he said again and took a step away from her.

Her breasts heaved, wet and glistening from Tyler's mouth. Her dress hung around the belt she'd cinched in at the waist. She swallowed hard as she realized what she'd done. "He's trying to find us. He...he said if he finished at a reasonable hour he'd join us for a drink."

What kind of filthy worm was she, seducing her fiancé's best friend? Demanding he sleep with her. In that instant she despised herself, and she despised Tyler, for what they'd just done to the one man who under threat of death would never harm them. He was her rock, her support, her mate. Steve was the man she was soon to marry.

A wave of nausea nearly bowled her over. How could she? How could they?

She stared at Tyler. He breathed heavily and ran a tense hand over his clenched jaw. His eyes were clouded with desire, doubt and regret. His shirt hung open around his waist, and pearly drops of moisture glistened on the head of his cock. Even amid her rush of self-hatred, the pull to go to him was intense, almost magnetic. The impulse to touch him again, to deny their wrongdoing, was potent.

“I have to go.” She pulled her dress up, awkwardly pushing her arms through the straps. “I...I’m sorry. This shouldn’t have happened.” She searched blindly for her purse and found it by the door. Then she turned and looked at Tyler’s tortured face.

He was as disturbed by Steve’s call as she was. As shaken.

Briefly she considered dropping to her knees and licking the sinful pre-come off his dick. “Steve is your friend,” she said thickly. “He’s my fiancé.”

He didn’t argue. He simply fastened his pants and buckled his belt.

Yanking the door open, she walked as fast as her legs would carry her, down the corridor and to the lifts, hating herself more with every step she took. She’d gotten maybe ten meters down the passageway when she heard the footsteps.

She walked faster.

It didn’t help. He was behind her. His hands on her hips, compelling her to slow down.

She stopped and whispered, “Tyler, don’t.”

He didn’t say a word. He just pulled her back against him, and let his erection nestle into her butt. His chest cushioned her shoulders. God, she wanted to melt into him. Wanted to stay in his arms forever. Wanted to feel him buried in her waiting heat.

“Please. Let me go.”

In this heat wave, anything and everything goes.

Heat of the Moment

© 2008 Elle Kennedy

A Red-Hot Summer story

Shelby Harper has lusted over Navy SEAL John Garrett for over a year, but no matter how many sexy signals she sends out, the man shows a complete lack of interest in getting naked. Then she overhears Garrett talking to his SEAL teammate—a discussion in which they conclude she’s vanilla. Stung, Shelby sets out to show them exactly how un-vanilla she is.

Garrett can’t believe it when sweet, sexy Shelby suggests a wild and sweaty ménage. He’s been trying to figure out how to ask her out without coming off as a guy who only wants to get in her pants—her friendship is too valuable to him to risk it. But if a crazy, heat-wave three-way is what Shelby wants, then he’s ready and willing to give it to her.

Once she gets it out of her system, however...well, then he’ll let her know he wants her all to himself.

Warning: This title contains two dangerously hot Navy SEALs and a heroine determined to get it on with both of them. Be prepared to take a cold shower (or maybe two) after reading this heat-wave ménage.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Heat of the Moment:

Carson’s soft whistle broke through the silence. “Jesus, Shelby,” he hissed out. “You’re fucking gorgeous.”

Heat spilled over her cheeks. Both men were completely dressed, and there she was, standing in front of them without a stitch of clothing so they could openly admire her. And under their scrutiny, her nipples tightened, her breasts grew heavy and a rush of moisture pooled between her legs. Maybe it made her the slut of the century, but she couldn’t wait to get started.

Evidently Garrett felt the same urgency, because before she could blink he had stepped toward her and was pulling her naked body to his clothed one. She stared at his mouth, knowing her excitement was written all over her face. “Kiss me,” she whispered.

He quickly complied, pressing his lips to hers. His mouth was hot, firm, insistent. Oh yes. Carson had kissed her like he had all the time in the world, his mouth lazy, but Garrett was more intense. His kisses were rough and hungry and passionate, as if he wanted to devour her. Well, she wanted to devour him too. So she did, sucking hard on his tongue and shamelessly rubbing against his lower body.

Breathing hard, she tugged on the hem of his T-shirt and pulled it over his head. Underneath the shirt, his chest was all muscle, a wide expanse of hard ripples and smooth golden skin, with a dusting of light brown hair leading to the waistband of his cargo pants.

Her mouth went dry, her hand unsteady as she reached out and touched that incredible chest. She brushed her finger over one of his flat, brown nipples, eliciting a ragged sigh from his throat.

She was trying to decide if she was bold enough to lower her head and suck on his nipple when she felt a warm pair of hands stroking her bare back. She nearly jumped, then realized it was Carson, obviously eager to join in the fun.

Oh God, this was surreal. Her naked body sandwiched between these two big men, Carson’s hands squeezing her ass, Garrett dipping his head and kissing her again. Shivers of arousal danced up and down her spine, and a resulting moan slid out of her mouth.

Garrett chuckled softly, then planted his hands on her waist and turned her around, pressing his groin into her ass as Carson filled her mouth with his tongue.

She could feel Garrett’s erection nestled between her ass cheeks, and when Carson pulled her closer and parted her knees with one hard thigh she could feel the ridge of his arousal too. She sighed, pushing her ass against Garrett and reaching down to rub Carson through his khakis.

“Take your pants off,” she murmured.

She was addressing both of them, but Carson was the only one to reply. He offered her a lopsided grin and muttered, “Do it for me.”

She found herself glancing over at Garrett, who simply glanced back, his dark eyes flickering with raw heat. “Don’t keep the man waiting,” he said with a faint smile.

Drawing in a slow breath, she tugged at Carson’s zipper. It lowered with a metallic hiss.

Shelby hesitated, unsure of what to do next. This was all so new to her, the entire experience seeming more like a figment of her dirty imagination than a real-time occurrence.

“Help me out here,” she said with a nervous laugh. “What comes next?”

Carson’s blue eyes twinkled. “I do.” He took her hand and guided it inside his pants. She took another breath, gathering every ounce of naughty courage she possessed, and finally wrapped her fingers over his cock and started stroking him.

He groaned, and she saw him fumble with his waistband, attempting to push his pants down. “Help me out here,” he mimicked, his features taut with unrestrained lust.

Sinking to her knees, she pulled down his khakis and boxers, wondering if the blood drumming in her ears was a result of the tequila she’d drunk downstairs or the hard cock that sprang up against her face. God, he was big.

She circled his tip with her index finger and he shuddered. “Shit, that’s nice,” he said hoarsely.

She shifted her head and saw that Garrett was now leaning against the arm of her old patterned sofa. He was still clothed, still watching her with those sexy dark eyes.

She squeezed Carson’s shaft, then met Garrett’s gaze at the same time she took his friend’s cock into her mouth.

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