



Carnal Passions Presents

Far From Innocent

By

Arlene Knowell



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Carnal Passions

A Division of Champagne Books

www.carnalpassions.com

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ISBN 978-1-926681-30-6

Augusty 2009

Cover Art © Amanda Kelsey

Produced in Canada

Carnal Passions
#35069-4604 37 ST SW
Calgary, AB T3E 7C7
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Dedication

Special thanks to Tammy and Tonya for your help and opinions when it mattered most. To Jacob and Jim for defending the freedom that we too often take for granted. Thanks to Mandy, for finding the title that I'd overlooked so many times. To my wonderful husband, Tim, for loving and believing in me even when the chips were down. And especially to God, for without his loving grace none of this would be possible.

One

Rachel had known Dex would be at the party and had come prepared to see him there. She figured he probably had a new love in his life, and was also as prepared for that as possible. It had been months since she'd seen him, but the only reason she had seen him before was the lust that demanded they fulfill their sexual fantasies at least twice a month. Or so she'd told herself until he'd said they were through. Then, she'd known the kind of heartbreak that comes through not only losing a lover, but losing her dearest friend.

The room was warm with the smell of apple cider and peppermint. Boughs of holly, inter-twined with white twinkle lights draped gracefully along the mahogany paneled walls. Deep romantic colors decorated the huge Christmas tree, and the dessert table looked more like a catalog display than anything for a company dinner.

"Hello Rachel," spoke a voice to her right. "I haven't had an opportunity to speak to you tonight."

She smiled politely at the owner of the company, because Mr. D.B. McKelvy was a very kind man. She also said hello to his wife. Thank God they didn't like her less because of the breakup. She only escaped without questions about her plans for Christmas when someone else caught their attention and she was thankful that she had. Fact was, Christmas would never be the same since she would not be sharing it with Dex.

The Christmas music played softly in the background and the chill each time the door opened reminded her that the joyful season was upon her and she would have to miss

her family's festivities. There had been no explanation why the price of plane tickets had doubled, but regardless, it was enough to keep her from purchasing the ticket that would take her to see her family on Christmas day.

The little boy sitting in the corner reminded her of her nephew, Sam, stowed away out of sight with the chocolate covered cherries he'd swiped. She smiled at him as he raised a finger to his chocolate covered mouth to silence her. She hated the thought of not going home this year, not seeing her family, and if it wasn't so far to St. Louis she might be tempted to take a couple of extra days and make the drive.

"It's snowing!" An all too familiar voice echoed from the back of the room and Rachel took a deep breath, mixed feelings stirring painfully in her chest. When she finally allowed herself to look toward him the smile on his face almost took her breath away, though it wasn't even aimed at her. It amazed her that he'd never let his family wealth change him and it was proven so not only by the way he laughed and talked with the employees of the company he would someday own, but by the fact he was happily serving his country as a Green Beret.

As she approached, she looked out through the glass wall of the company conference room, seeing his reflection against the falling flakes. Honesty forced her to admit, if only to herself, it was a need to be near him, rather than the snow that drew her closer. He glanced at her but his expression did not change. If she hadn't known better she would have thought he didn't even know her.

He studied the snowflakes. "I haven't seen snow in over two years!" he admitted, stuffing his hands into the pockets of the polyester blend trousers that made him look more like a clothes model than a soldier.

Rachel smiled widely, remembering many times that he'd called to ask if it was snowing because he was about to catch a flight home. She was happy to be part of the moment, happy with the warm friendship they shared, even before it became so much more. After the initial surge to admire the swirling flakes, the crowd dwindled away from the window, leaving her and Dex standing side by side, somehow sharing a moment they hadn't planned. He glanced toward her again, hesitated only a second, then turned and

walked swiftly away.

Her heart broke. They'd been friends first and had sworn to always be. He had told her his deepest secrets in the past, yet now, he would not acknowledge she was alive. She did not understand how he could just throw away the friendship that had led to the more intense relationship they had shared. Her mind glided back to happy moments when the last thing he wanted to do was ignore her...

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She heard the key as it slid into the lock and she took her hiding place in the dark. It had become a game that they played and it only fueled the intensity of the moment that he would finally get his hands on her. He closed the door with a barely audible click while she stood motionless in the dark. She held her breath, frozen, waiting for her moment to pounce or be pounced upon. The silence was deafening. The dim glow of the street lamps outside filtered through closed burgundy colored drapes. Tonight, she chose to stand on the coffee table, after days of studying the light patterns, it seemed the best choice. If her thought process was correct then the Army Green Beret would instinctively walk around the table, and she would be successful in getting him before he got her.

A floor board creaked in the dining room, her heart pounded, because she needed to win at this game. It always happened the same, she would plan her strategy and just when she thought she was about to win he would silently stalk up behind her and take her as his prize. His shadow moved across the light through the dining room window and she almost laughed. Raising her hand she held her nose, it seemed the only way she could keep from sniggering and giving herself away. She watched his shadow as he stopped and arched his nose into the air.

You've got to be kidding! He smells me? She scowled with disbelief.

He moved closer and his shadow faded back into the darkness of the room. She could sense that he was close; it was as if her body was reacting to the promise of pleasure that was moments away. Her ears filled with intense pounding, the same intense throbs that engulfed her clit and radiated through her body in pulses of desire. She felt the

sharp tap of his leg against the coffee table and heard the honorable attempt he made not to gasp from the pain. She waited. He was inches away when she leapt like a panther onto her prey in the darkness. He grunted loudly, perhaps it was the first time in his career that he'd been successfully stalked. His hands quickly pulled her from his back into a position that locked her legs around his waist. He kissed her deeply, passionately, as if he were feeding for the first time in weeks. He stumbled his way into the bedroom as the lust and need engulfed the room in a thick cloud that loomed in the darkness. She felt the cool cotton sheets beneath her then reached for his shirt buttons. They gave way one by one as she worked with a silent, well rehearsed skill of undressing him. The cool material of her yellow baby doll nightgown surrendered to him leaving chills as he lifted it off her arms. He moaned as he cupped his hands onto her breasts then trailed down her abdomen to the tiny thong panties she still wore.

"I've got to see you," he moaned, his voice hoarse with desire.

The glow from the Victorian lamp beside the bed illuminated the room revealing the lust in their eyes. She rubbed her hands up his chest, finally gaining access to his skin and tense muscles. He shook the shirt from his shoulders then quickly reached for the button on his jeans. An audible growl escaped him when she pressed her hand inside her panties stroking her clit to suppress the painful throbbing.

"My damn boots!"

"Please hurry," she moaned, arching herself into her self-pleasing touch.

He ripped the panties from body seconds before he spread her legs and pulled her to him. He pressed inside her, pumping, needing, and searching for relief for him, for her, for them. She arched into him, twisting her nipples as she looked into his eyes.

"You feel so good. So wet," he murmured.

"Faster," she begged. "Oh Dex, don't stop!"

"Is that it, baby?" he asked as he quickened his rhythm.

"That's it."

She reached for him allowing her fingers to glide down his chest and abs as she locked her eyes into a passionate dance with his. He was her dream, the man she had loved since the first minute she saw him. She loved his ruggedness, his scars, as well as the tenderness he displayed as he warmed her bed on cold dark nights. The heat that burned in her chest exploded into a million tiny fireballs that seared every nerve in her body. Her eyes rolled as she lay gasping, fighting to regain her breath while she remained locked in the powerful vise of orgasm. He wrapped his forearms beneath her thighs, grasping her legs, forcing her toward him as he pounded deep inside her, searching for his own release. An animal like roar escaped him as he held himself inside her and his hot, thick cum pulsed into her...

~ * ~

"Are you holding up okay?" a friendly voice asked, snapping Rachel back from the memories. She smiled at Debbie, the tall slim brunette, from Accounts Receivable, who had spoken. "Have you seen her yet?"

"Who?"

"Vicky." Debbie said. "The curvy blonde who arrived about ten minutes ago and attached herself to Dex. She either has money or is enjoying theirs, because they sent a limo to pick her up at the airport."

Rachel's heart sank. She had expected this, but in the aftermath of the flood of memories the realization of another woman with Dex became almost too much to bear.

Then she saw the woman. The description Debbie had given was accurate, although voluptuous would have better suited the platinum blonde than the "curvy" Debbie had used. Rachel watched as Dex proudly introduced his new love to several people and she wondered why she had never been so fortunate as to be acknowledged publicly. The vixen in her wanted to march right up and tell the new woman in his life that she'd ridden Dex more times than a prize winning bull at the rodeo. The part of her that loved Dex McKelvy however, wouldn't permit it. When her broken heart silently demanded that she leave the party, she thanked Mr. McKelvy for a lovely evening and explained that a previous engagement would prevent her from staying any longer and she made her way into the parking lot.

"That's the way he's always been," a female voice said softly, footsteps coming up quickly behind her as Rachel approached her car.

"Mrs. McKelvy!" Rachel spun, startled. "I looked for you to say goodnight but..." her words trailed off. Then, "What do you mean, the way he's always been? Who?"

"My son, of course. If he doesn't know what to say, then he feels better to ignore the situation completely. I saw the way he cut you dead. I saw your face and knew how hurt you were. I also knew you'd run."

Rachel smiled at the lovely lady who had walked into the frigid Denver winds in attempt to salvage a mere employee's feelings. "Thank you." She managed a smile. "I guess I just didn't expect that from him."

"That's natural," Mrs. McKelvy said, pulling her mink coat collar closed. "You were friends for so many years it must seem foreign that he's now acting as if you don't exist."

Rachel fought back tears, but one finally slid down her face. "It's a valuable lesson, I suppose. I wouldn't have traded his friendship for anything, not even for a chance to have him love me as I love him."

"It doesn't seem like it right now," Mrs. McKelvy said, "but someday you'll look back and remember only the good times."

Rachel held out her hand, allowing snowflakes to rest and melt there. "I can't tell you how many times I've prayed that it would snow when he could be home." Her eyes moved to the window where Dex and Vicky stood admiring the snow.

Mrs. McKelvy looked over her shoulder, following the direction of Rachel's gaze, "Don't be too upset, he'll figure it out in his own time." She smiled, "Just be patient."

"I had better go." Rachel interrupted as Dex's gaze fixed on her through the glass. "Have a wonderful Christmas."

Two

The heavy footsteps in the office early in March reminded Rachel of Dex, but then everything reminded her of him. The snow outside was deep and part of her wished that Dex could see it, to enjoy one last snow before winter gave way to spring. Sometimes she wondered why she still cared, even though she knew the answer in her own heart. She still loved him. The feeling wasn't mutual, evident by the fact that everyone at the Christmas party had noticed he'd avoided her at all cost. Several people even asked about it. She had answered the questions as honestly as possible, but it wasn't easy to answer a question for someone else that she couldn't answer for herself. Before the rise of their sexual relationship they had promised to always remain friends. Yet, it seemed that as suddenly as the relationship had ended so had his need to have her friendship. One day he visited as usual, nothing seemed amiss, and the sex certainly wasn't lacking. Two days later he called to tell her that he thought they shouldn't see each other anymore.

A very familiar figure walked passed her door and she knew in an instant that her Army guy had come home. A sigh escaped her. He was no longer hers, but it was still a relief to know he was okay. Logic however, told her that something was amiss because Dex would never return so soon without a reason. She smiled bitterly. Once, she had been the reason for his frequent returns, when they shared a sexual relationship. A relationship that rendered him hard the moment he walked through the door.

~ * ~

Hoping to hide her despair, she mumbled something

about a bathroom break and rushed along the hallway, stopping in her tracks when she heard her name spoken in Mr. McKelvy's strong voice, his tone making it sound as if he'd uttered it at the end of a sentence. His door stood slightly ajar. "I'm not interfering in your personal life," the boss went on. "I am simply asking you to act your age and at least pay Rachel the respect of acknowledging her."

"She'll ask questions," Dex said, sounding sulky.

Rachel remained rooted in the hallway. "So, answer them. You owe the girl the truth, if nothing else."

"I don't want to see her. Don't want to talk to her."

"Your mother isn't going to let this go, son." Mr. McKelvy insisted. "Not unless the two of you are talking again."

"Has Mom told her already?" Dex quizzed.

"No." The older man's voice snapped, "But that doesn't mean she hasn't thought about it. And in fairness to Vicky, Rachel should be told."

Rachel stood frozen wondering about the big secret, hoping one of the men didn't step from Mr. McKelvy's office and catch her eavesdropping.

Finally, Dex submitted. "All right. I'll say hello and tell her myself." Then he added, "But Mom needs to keep her mouth shut about stuff."

"You know she likes Rachel." Mr. McKelvy reminded him. "She just doesn't want to accept that you're engaged to someone else."

Rachel stood transfixed. Her heart pounded, her forehead began to sweat and tears twisted their way up her throat and burned the back of her eyes. She had never understood until now why Dex had suddenly pulled away from her, and why he thought it would be best if they didn't see each other anymore. It had never occurred to her that he had already found a new love.

Her mind flooded with questions; how long had he been seeing Vicky? After three years of dating, Rachel had been no closer to a proposal than when they'd started their sexual relationship. Was it possible that Vicky was pregnant? If that were true, then... no, she didn't want to think about that. When the doorknob turned, she scampered back into her office. She tried to no avail to steady her shaking hands.

She began tapping out a quick rhythm with the 10 key on her desk, because she needed to at least look busy.

"Rachel?" Dex's voice asked from the doorway.

She looked up and forced herself to smile. "Hi, there soldier, come on in."

He wiped his palms on his thighs. "I only have a minute," he said, taking a seat in the chair at the corner of her desk.

"Headed back to base?" she asked continuing keying, looking briefly toward him from time to time.

"Yep." He nodded, smoothing his hand over his midnight black military cut. "It will probably be several months before I make it back so I wanted to say hello before I left."

Jotting a number into the report book, she flashed him a quick smile. "I'm glad you did."

As quickly as he'd sat down he was again on his feet. "Well, I guess I'd better be going."

Laying her pencil aside her eyes traced their way up his tall lean body. "Take care and watch your six."

He gritted his teeth. "Yeah, my six."

A faint smile teased her lips as she looked at his jeans. She'd given them to him on his birthday. He had tried them on in her kitchen while she cut his cake, and she vividly remembered admiring them when he forsook the chair and took a seat on her oak table top. It had been a playful game of teasing that led her to suck the cake icing from the end of his finger. It was also that same teasing game that sent their clothes flying in a whirlwind around them which left them in throes of passion on the floor. The jeans still bore the small frayed hole in the leg beneath the pocket, where the knife fell from the table and stuck point first into the material. Her eyes focused on the small imperfection and his gaze instinctively followed hers there. The smile found its way back to her face as she thought of that moment. The puffed laugh that he exhaled was proof that he'd done the same. He gently rubbed his finger over the hole and met her eyes.

"It gives them character."

She glanced back to the hole once more. "Yes, it does."

"Well, take care."

She wanted to run to him and wrap her arms around him. She wanted to unzip those jeans and suck him off, right there in her office. She needed to touch him, to feel him hard and throbbing one last time.

"Bye-bye." She smiled, hoping he couldn't see the longing in her eyes.

"Bye," he said softly as he walked out the door.

She went back to the calculator beside her, glad that he couldn't read her thoughts.

Abruptly, the door swung open and he was back. "I can't let you find out from someone else," he blurted, wringing his hands.

Her gaze met his. "This is a factory, and nothing stays a secret for long." she nodded, turning her attention back to the 10 key, "I already know. You're engaged to a woman named Vicky. I saw her at the Christmas party." She couldn't help adding, "Where you took great care *not* to see me."

He scuffed his foot against the floor to avoid looking at her. "And you don't hate me?"

She laughed, hoping that the tears in her eyes wouldn't spill onto her face. "I could never hate you," she admitted. "I'm glad you're happy."

He grabbed the door knob then looked back. "How long have you known?"

"Does it really matter?" she moved around the desk, closer to him.

"I guess not." He nodded briefly, then looked at her, allowing his blue eyes to tell her things that should have been left unsaid.

She trailed her fingers down his chest. "You were my friend first, Dex. As much as I loved you I wouldn't risk your friendship to have you back."

His muscles tensed against her touch. "How can we go back to being friends?"

"We agree right now to put it all behind us and never look back." Tears she couldn't control slid down her face.

He closed the door, leaning against the inside of it. "Just forget it?"

She was so close that she could smell the spearmint on his breath. "It has to be that way."

Dex exhaled, then plopped onto a chair. "Dammit, you

were supposed to be mad. You were supposed to hate me."

She took his chin into her hand. "I'm sorry, but that will never happen."

"Spit on me, slap me, throw pencils at me," he suggested with outstretched hands. "Anything but this."

She kissed him, then smiled. "Now, get out of here you piece of shit!"

Grinning he walked out then bolted back in a second time, locking the door behind him. He slammed her almost violently against the wall, kissing her with a passion that overwhelmed her. His hands explored her, tugging at the straight knee length skirt she wore. She pulled her skirt above her thighs, as desire engulfed her body in a rolling wave of lust. He hastily unzipped his jeans and pulled his hard, throbbing cock into his hand. She pushed her panties to the side as he grabbed her ass with both hands and hoisted her onto his shaft.

"Oh, Dex," she sighed.

"Don't scream baby, don't scream."

Unexplainable feelings of pleasure shot through her body with each stroke. Her eyes begged him to go deeper, faster and harder.

"Unbutton your shirt," he said breathlessly, determined to satisfy both of their needs.

She almost ripped her shirt open, pulling her tits from her bra without so much as thinking of unfastening it.

"Oh, yeah baby. That's it." He groaned and whirled her around and laid her across her desk.

It felt as good as it was confusing but there was no way she could resist. Heat radiated up from her toes, climbing quickly through her body, ready to explode at any second. She gritted her teeth through open lips as her body locked in orgasm. He plunged deeper inside her with each thrust, searching for his own release.

"Come on," she panted between thrusts. "Give it to me Dex, I want to feel you come inside me."

With her words he drove into her, locked in total ecstasy, unable to control his muscles as they jerked with the pleasure of his intense release. The growl that escaped him was animal-like and if she hadn't been certain that there was another woman in his life she would have sworn that

this was his first release in months.

"Oh, my," she said as she pulled a wrinkled report from beneath her head.

"Wow! That was intense." He laughed, wiping the sweat from his brow with the back of one hand.

"I think I need that box of Kleenex behind you."

He stood with his jeans around his knees as his thigh muscles quivered spasms of relief. Looking over his shoulder he snagged the pink box of tissue from the standard three shelf bookcase. "Are you okay?"

"I will be as soon as I get everything back where it belongs." She laughed while reassembling her disheveled clothes. She tugged at her bra, mentally noting that it seemed far more painful to put away the body parts she'd accessed in haste.

He lowered his head back to her breast. "Damn baby, you look good. You smell good and you taste wonderful," he mumbled with this mouth on her breast.

A smile reclaimed her lips, because it had been far too long since she had enjoyed his attention. Running her fingers over his hair she reminded him that she wasn't beyond begging for more.

Her lips were so perfect, her skin so soft, she was everything he needed. He leaned close and kissed her, and began to stroke himself. "More of this?"

"Oh God, don't do that unless you plan to give it to me," she teased, then bit her bottom lip.

She threw the tissues on to her chair, lifted herself from the rectangular monthly desktop calendar and scooted to the corner of her large square red oak desk. She lifted her legs and used her fingers to pull herself open for him.

"Damn it, girl," he laughed. "Let me see if I can help you with that."

She forced her thighs wider apart and planted her hands firmly on the cheeks of his ass, pulling him in as deep as she could get him and holding him there. She flexed her own cheeks and worked herself against him, enjoying the feel of him deep inside her.

"Oh, shit." He looked confused. "I don't know what you're doing, but don't stop."

The minutes clicked away as she ground herself

against him, forcing him deeper and deeper inside her until he finally reached the magical spot that gave her all the pleasure she sought. Her body began to convulse, but she refused to release her grip on him even after she came.

"You have no idea how hot you just looked," he said as he began kissing her neck. "But it's my turn now." He grinned and tugged her close, grinding into her.

She felt him lock inside her again as her body continued to enjoy the newly mounting pleasure his plunging cock gave her. His breath caught as his mouth hung open in uncontrolled disbelief of the ecstasy he was experiencing and then he came, too.

He slid his fingers into the cum that coated both their thighs. "I'd say you really need the tissues now." He rolled his neck with relief. "You are on fire girl, because this is the first time in two months that my neck isn't hurting."

"What's been wrong?" she pulled him down and kissed him again.

"Nothing you couldn't fix." He pulled the tissues from the chair and handed them back to her. "You always know how to fix me."

"Shame on you, for making me wait. Do you know how lonely I've been without you? Do you have any idea how many times I've needed your big hard cock?"

"Oh damn," he groaned. "You are like a drug."

They both laughed as they worked to clean up the mess they'd made. "It's never messy on television, have you noticed that?" she asked.

"If they had gotten it like I just got it, it would be really messy."

She reached for him and he gladly leaned in and kissed her. "Come to my house tonight and I'll show you messy," she said.

"You've got a deal," he mumbled through the kisses he planted all over her face, her neck, her shoulders. "There is one thing that I need really bad."

"What?" she asked.

"These lips on my dick." His lips took hers again in a deep and meaningful kiss. "I've had a hundred dreams lately about you sucking me off."

"Really?" she asked with a catlike grin. "Maybe you'd

like a sample."

He smiled, "A sample would be great."

She reached down to feel for his shaft. It hadn't been hard a few minutes ago when she'd seen him wipe it with a tissue, but now... "Oh wow, it's ready."

"It stays ready around you."

She got onto her knees then smiled up at him. "You're sure?"

"Stop teasing me." He took her hand and wrapped it around his shaft. "It's been a long, painful wait."

She teased the tip with her tongue and liked the coarse sound that escaped his throat. Slowly she took him into her mouth giving him what he had wanted. His tight thighs told her that he was enjoying it, maybe too much.

"Oh hell," he snapped. "Talk about bad timing."

"What's wrong?" she quizzed, looking at him with wide eyes.

"My phone is vibrating." He laughed, pulling it from his pocket as she took him inside her mouth again. "I hope to hell I'm not going to have to hop a plane back to work."

The smile fell from his face, and he jerked himself from her mouth, zipping his pants quickly as he stared at the tiny screen, clearly recognizing the number of his caller. He looked from it to Rachel, still on her knees, snapped "What the fuck am I doing?" and turned abruptly toward the door.

As he entered the hallway, Rachel heard him say, "Vicky, baby, what's up?"

Rachel felt the blood drain from her face as the ugly reality of his actions rocked her. She slumped into the wingback chair near her desk and recounted his words and the look of disgust on his face.

Was it disgust he felt toward himself? Or toward her?

~ * ~

"Mr. McKelvy!" A female voice yelled interminable minutes later as frantic footsteps clicked past the door to Rachel's office.

"What's wrong?" Mr. McKelvy's voice questioned from the other end of the hall.

"It's Dex! He's hurt!"

Mr. McKelvy ran down the hall as Rachel jumped to her feet and entered the race for the door.

"What happened?" Mr. McKelvy asked.

Dex stood stooped over, holding his right hand with his left. Blood dripped steadily off his finger tips and onto the concrete sidewalk as snow filtered down around him.

"I broke my damn hand," he barked.

Rachel gasped as she fell onto her knees on the concrete. "Oh my God, Dex, What happened?" She lifted her hands onto his left arm, wishing she could ease his pain.

Dex was silent, but the second he turned his gaze to her, she realized that he blamed her for everything that had just happened. Slowly the reality began to consume her and her eyes filled with tears.

"How did this happen?" Mr. McKelvy asked again.

"He hit the wall, sir." the female worker answered, "Just cocked his fist back and slammed the brick with everything he had."

"If I need a spokesman I'll ask for one." Dex growled through gritted teeth.

At that moment Rachel's stomach tumbled and became nauseated. The cold March wind chilled her to the bone. Her eyes met his once again and she saw the resentment that remained there, resentment aimed at her. She allowed her hands to fall away from their grip on his arm. The tears in her eyes spilled onto her cheeks. "Oh, God," she sighed, rising to her feet and moving away. She looked at the wall of the stylish blond brick building and realized that it was true. His blood was on the bricks and it could have only gotten there if he'd rammed his fist into them as a punishment for the mistake he had just made. Clapping her hand over her mouth, squinting in pain, she wondered how she could have been so stupid as to think that she could have ever won him back from a woman like Vicky.

"Rachel, wait." Dex said as he flinched in pain.

She looked back, allowing her eyes to meet his, and then she disappeared into the building without a word.

Three

Rachel looked up from her computer when she heard the soft click of heels on the earth tone ceramic tile in her office floor. She wasn't surprised to find Mrs. McKelvy standing there, newspaper in hand.

"My husband says that you already know." It was more a question than a statement.

"Yes, ma'am," Rachel admitted as she admired the elegant lady.

"This is quite awkward to tell you, but the rest of the office staff is driving over for the engagement party tonight at the Vail house. I want you to know that if it were up to me you would be more than welcome to attend, but..."

Rachel took a deep breath, as a cold empty feeling consumed her. "But Dex doesn't want me invited. He's right, I don't belong there."

"You really care about him, don't you?"

Rachel swallowed hard as she thought about her answer. She nodded, "Yes, ma'am, I do. I never realized how deeply he was rooted into my life until all of this happened. Not only did I lose him, I lost his friendship and his respect."

"This girl is so wrong for him." Mrs. McKelvy's face and tone suddenly bore an amazing resemblance to June Cleaver.

"He doesn't think so." Rachel smiled. "Let him be happy."

"They will be here 'til Monday." Mrs. McKelvy went on. "They'll be stopping by the office before they head back to Florida."

"I can't avoid him the rest of my life, but I do appreciate the warning," Rachel said with a smile she hoped

looked more genuine than it felt. "However, the quicker I get used to the idea, the better I'll be."

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Rachel took a deep breath while putting her car into park. She knew that Dex would be at the office today and that Vicky would be in tow. The announcement was in the newspaper and the engagement party was over. It was no longer something that she could ignore. Dex was getting married and the count-down had begun. She looked at the small brick building that sat attached to the huge factory behind it, this was the place where she had met Dex, many years ago, when he was still trying to decide if he wanted to be an Army Green Beret or a Navy SEAL and she was fresh out of high school working part-time while attending business college. It had been a job packing shower curtains into boxes that got Rachel started; it wasn't glamorous but it kept spending money in her pocket as she worked toward a degree that would later earn her the top spot in Accounts Payable. She remembered the day that Dex had come into the shipping warehouse in search of the boxes he would need to pack away his high school trophies to make room for the new accomplishments he had planned for his life...

~ * ~

"I need some boxes and a tape gun," he'd said politely. "Can you help me?"

Rachel was struck by his good looks. He was dressed in parachute pants and a ratty T-shirt. His clothing and longish hair offered no clue that he was the owner's only son, so she didn't guess him to be anyone but maybe related to another employee. "Sure, what size boxes do you need?"

"Big ones." he said proudly. "I'm packing up my sports trophies. I've got to make room for new ones. I'm about to join the military."

Rachel smiled, because she would have given her last ten dollars to touch those adorable, stylish curls that hung onto his neck. "Wow, what branch?"

"Either the Army or the Navy."

"The Army." Rachel replied. "That's an easy decision."

Dex smiled at the slim red head with 'big hair' and returned to his task of getting boxes off an upper shelf. "Why do you say that?"

"My dad was in the Army for twenty years," she said proudly. "I was twelve when he got out."

"What was your dad's MOS?" he quizzed as he took a seat on the high stool beside the packing table.

"He was a paratrooper." Rachel smiled. "When I was seven he took me on my first jump."

"You skydive?" he questioned with big eyes, stroking his thumb and index finger over his cool, thin black mustache.

Rachel nodded proudly and began stuffing prepackaged shower curtains into a new box. "Sure, there's nothing to it. My dad was one of the best and now he packs chutes once a month for the Air Force."

"Do you think your dad would talk to me about the Army?" he quizzed. "I want to go into the Special Forces, Airborne Division."

"Sure he will." Rachel said as she taped her box shut. "They live in St. Louis though. I'm only here going to college."

"I'm sure my dad would give us airfare to fly there," he said with excitement. "Would you be willing to go?"

Rachel considered her words carefully. After all, she didn't even know this guy. She gave close consideration to how dangerous it could be to travel with a young stallion like him then decided via the same means that any teenage girl would have. He was the cutest guy she'd ever seen and that was reason enough...

~ * ~

Rachel shook herself from the memories as another car pulled along side her in the lot, it seemed so long ago that she had met him, so long that they had been friends and now she had lost him completely.

She settled into her office and hoped that she could make it through the day without having to look Dex in the face. Her office was a constant reminder of what had happened, of what can go so wrong when two people let lust and desire and memories consume them for even a moment. She rubbed her hand over her desk, and she wondered if she could have done anything different in her last attempt to reclaim him as her own.

The intercom on her phone beeped, it was Accounts

Receivable. "Rachel?"

"Yes," Rachel answered.

"I just wanted to give you warning that they are here." Debbie's voice advised. "They arrived about ten minutes ago, and are in Mr. McKelvy's office now."

Rachel laughed. "Well, maybe I can stay hidden until it's over."

"You must be Rachel," a light, feminine voice said from the hall as the door opened without so much as a knock.

Rachel didn't bother to ask if the tall leggy blonde standing in her doorway had been unable to read the plaque on the door that announced whose office it was.

"You're the only person I didn't meet at the engagement party. So sorry you were unable to make it. But, of course I understand."

Anger raced through Rachel like a windswept wildfire at the saccharine sarcasm in the blonde's voice and the way she stood with her left hand propped on her hip showcasing the big rock Dex couldn't possibly have afforded on his Army salary. "You must be Vicky," she said. "It is a pleasure to meet you."

"Save it." Vicky shot back pointing a finely manicured index finger at Rachel, as she stepped inside the office and closed the door behind her. "Dex is mine now, so you can save the sweet girl act."

Rachel noted that the intercom was still active and that Debbie was hearing every word.

Rachel sighed. "I was just trying to be polite."

"It would be best that you stay clear of my fiancé." Vicky snapped. "Dex told me that you'd do anything to get him back."

Rachel swallowed hard against those words, it seemed that Dex had covered all his bases in the event his lovely new wife-to-be heard about their fling on the desk. "Dex has his life now and I have mine."

Vicky scowled at her then moved closer, planting her palms on Rachel's desk as she leaned in. "I don't like the fact that you still work here and considering that I'm soon to become a McKelvy, things don't look good for you."

Rachel had heard of people like Vicky, she had even

read about them and watched them on television but until now she had always thought they were the product of over zealous screenplay writers or authors attempting to make a character despicable. "I've worked for the McKelvy's for fifteen years. I hope you'll forgive me if I don't drop my pencil and scamper out the door."

Vicky laughed as she tossed her long platinum hair over her shoulder. "You are as good as gone. You might consider starting a search to find something else for your future. I have an amazing ability to get my way with Dex, and I plan to see to it that you are gone very soon."

Rachel couldn't help but snap back. "You must suck hard, too, then. He likes that."

Vicky stiffened then scoffed. "Your past relations with my fiancé are irrelevant."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I thought we were talking about getting your way with Dex. I was simply telling you how easy it is." Rachel smiled.

"Obviously not as easy as you once thought." Vicky laughed. "Consider this job as much a part of your past as Dex is," then she sailed confidently up the hall.

"Well, I guess I just got fired." Rachel said to Debbie on the intercom.

"Sounds like." She heard the smile in Debbie's voice. "What are you going to do?"

"Stir the shit and smell the stink," Rachel laughed. "Just sit back and listen, I'll be damned if that fake-titted bitch talks to me that way. She thinks she knows her man, let's see how much she really knows."

Rachel stormed out of her office and up the hall toward the executive offices. She saw Mrs. McKelvy standing in the break room pouring a cup of coffee.

"Well, hello Rachel." she smiled, pouring the creamer into the cup.

"Ma'am." Rachel said softly. "Since I was unprepared for today would it be okay if I return tomorrow to pick up my things, or may I take a box from the supply room?"

"What on earth are you talking about?" Mrs. McKelvy questioned as she walked closer and sipped her coffee.

"I thought you knew." Rachel said. "I'll just wait for Mr. McKelvy to finish in his office and I'll ask him."

"If you are uncomfortable because Dex is here today, you are welcome to take the remainder of the day off with pay." Mrs. McKelvy soothed.

"Ma'am?" Rachel managed to look genuinely confused by the statement she'd just heard.

"Is something else wrong?" Mrs. McKelvy asked.

Rachel looked at the elegant lady whose blonde hair was fixed perfectly in a bun behind her head. The reading glasses that hung around her neck on a gold chain made her look even more intelligent.

"I've been fired." Rachel said, her tone sad.

"Fired!" Mrs. McKelvy dropped her coffee cup, splashing the hot liquid over Rachel's feet and legs even as she jumped back to avoid the shattering china and hot coffee. "Oh gosh! Rachel are you okay? Did it cut you? Are you burned?"

"No, ma'am, I'm fine," Rachel reassured the boss's wife while helping pick up the pieces of the broken cup. "I'll get some paper towels and the broom. Be careful and don't get cut."

"Who fired you?" Mrs. McKelvy asked as they finished with the broken glass. "Dexter said nothing to me about this."

"No, ma'am, it wasn't Mr. McKelvy. It was Dex's fiancée." Rachel explained. "She said that she didn't like it that I was still here and that I needed to start the search for a new job because I was as good as gone."

"We'll see about that!" Mrs. McKelvy snapped as she stomped into Mr. McKelvy's office without so much as a knock.

"Where is she?" she demanded.

"Who?" Mr. McKelvy asked.

"My son's fiancée who has taken it upon herself to fire the head of Accounts Payable," she snapped.

"She what?" Dex asked.

Now let's see who is in the hot seat, bitch. Rachel thought as she stood silent in the hallway.

"She just fired Rachel," Mrs. McKelvy raged.

"She couldn't have," Mr. McKelvy said.

"Rachel must be lying," Dex snarled. "There is no way Vicky would have done that!"

Rachel grinned and made her way from the building with little more than a handful of possessions from her office.

The number on the display of her cellular phone indicated that it was a call from within McKelvy Industries. She sighed it could be good or it could be bad. She answered with a hesitant voice and was relieved to hear Debbie's voice on the line. It seemed that Mr. and Mrs. McKelvy weren't at all discreet about their opinions about their soon-to-be daughter-in-law as their voices rose beyond levels anyone had ever heard inside the factory. Vicky, it seemed was crying, wailing almost uncontrollably as the family hashed out their differences.

Rachel wondered what life would have in store for her now, since she had challenged the future Mrs. Dex McKelvy, Jr. She would never work for the McKelvy's again and might not even get a good recommendation from the company because she'd walked away without notice. She'd known when she challenged Vicky that it would cut her time short, not because the McKelvy's wouldn't allow her back but because her pride wouldn't allow her to be anywhere near a place Dex or Vicky could turn up at any time.

She threw her coat and scarf onto the sofa. Now would be an excellent time for some of that special recipe hot cocoa her grandmother had taught her to make. She sighed. Dex had loved the hot cocoa and asked dozens of times how to make it, and she denied him the secret because of the fun games that ensued as he tried to coax it out of her. She wished now that she'd told him, but at this point in her life there were many things that she wished she had done differently.

It wasn't a surprise when her phone rang and if she guessed correctly it would be Mr. McKelvy. She wasn't surprised when he asked her to return to talk with him. Rachel explained that she didn't think it was in her best interests to return. After all, Vicky was a member of the family and they could find another accounts payable clerk. Mr. McKelvy had insisted that she agree to return the following day to discuss the matter with him and his wife and reluctantly Rachel had agreed.

She returned to her hot cocoa, happy that the brunt of the episode was behind her and now she could start to think

of what to do with the rest of her life. It was odd but she'd woken up that morning not feeling any different than she had other days. The pending dread seemed to gather within her as she neared McKelvy Industries and the prospect of seeing Dex with Vicky turned her day to mush.

There was a knock at the door, which was unexpected. She turned off her cocoa once more and made her way to the door. Outside she found Dex looking at her like the world had just ended. She had known that he would come because he was the guy that didn't let things like this happen around him. She hadn't expected him so soon. Truthfully, she would have thought that the battle was still on between him and his wife-to-be.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she said, her voice cool.

"Can I come in?"

"No!"

"You won't let me come in? What the hell is up with that?"

"I got fired for being in the same building with you," she snapped. "She'd probably have me killed if she knew you were here."

He smiled. "We'll cross that bridge when we get to it." He closed the door behind him.

"I just talked to your dad," she said. "He wants to talk to me tomorrow."

"You are going back today," he insisted.

"Not until tomorrow. One more run in with that bitch would mean one of us would walk away with a lot less hair and few less teeth."

"You need to let it rest," Dex said matter of factly.

"Let what rest?" Rachel asked, looking at him.

"Mom and Dad's opinion of Vicky isn't going to change anything. I'm going to marry her even if you succeed," Dex explained.

"If I succeed?" Rachel wondered if she'd been wrong about his character after all. "Succeed in what?"

"Vicky told me that she'd gone to your office to introduce herself to see if the two of you could possibly get off to a good start."

Rachel's mouth dropped open before she quickly

recovered. "She didn't introduce herself, she threatened me."

"Stop it!" Dex raged. "I'm tired of this bullshit!"

"What bullshit?"

"It's not going to happen, Rachel. We are through. We are not getting back together."

"What does that have to do with anything? This isn't about the future, it's about the past. She doesn't want me there because I have a past with you."

"But it *is* in the past Rachel," he snapped as he rubbed his hand over his head and looked almost disgusted at the photos of himself on the walls.

"I know that! Do you think I just waited for her to walk into my office and told her that I'd ridden you more times than the Cannonball stopped in Hooterville?"

"That's exactly what I think happened," he shot back.

"Well, you're wrong." Sick disappointment flooded her, "I've known you for fifteen years. If you really believe that about me, then you never knew me at all."

"Oh, I know you. I know enough to know that you're lying to make yourself look good and Vicky look bad."

"No." Rachel said calmly. "I have no reason to lie. She walked into my office and told me that she didn't like it one little bit that I was still there. She also said that she had a talent for getting her way with you and that I might as well start the job search because I was good as gone."

"You'd do anything to get me back," he snapped, stepping closer, looking at her with an expression Rachel could read only as deep hatred. What had she done to earn that?

Then she found out.

"Look at this place." He waved his hand around at pictures of him, of them, of the years they'd shared as friends—then as lovers. "It's a damn shrine to Dex McKelvy."

"No it's not!" Rachel shouted back at him. "That Dex McKelvy walked out of my life in October and I never saw him again."

"Damn it I *am* Dex McKelvy!" he barked through gritted teeth pointing his left index finger in her face. "And you are living in a fucking dream world."

He turned and ripped a framed photo of himself from

her wall and threw it to the floor. "*It. Is. Over!*" he raged as he stomped the picture with the heel of his shoe, grinding the glass into the photo.

"Stop it!" Rachel screamed, grabbing hold of his arm when he reached for a second picture.

His eyes met hers for only a split second before he snapped her across the room with his arm. She skidded into a solid oak end table sending the antique lamp that belonged to her grandmother crashing to the floor. He jerked the photo from the wall with his right arm, not even allowing the cast on it to slow his progress. When his fit of anger was complete he'd taken every photo memory that Rachel had on her walls and smashed them to the floor. She looked at the devastation in her living room and she realized that he truly hated her. She had been wrong about him; it seemed that Vicky might have known her man after all.

"My God," Rachel said. "What did I do to make you hate me?"

"You stuck around like a damn mangy dog!" he roared pointing his finger in her face. "Any other woman would have packed up her shit and left McKelvy Industries once we were through but you stayed right there waiting for me to throw you a bone. Get a life Rachel, because you are ruining mine!"

"I'm not the one standing in *your* living room" she said. "Now get out."

"I'll get out when I'm finished," he growled. "You play this damn little innocent game with my parents and they buy into it. I don't know if you are aware of it or not but you are far from innocent."

"I never said I wasn't," she said as tears filled her eyes.

"I give you credit for knowing how to get your way with a man." He laughed. "You open those sweet little legs and it's hard to say no. You touch just right, you suck just right but you're a damn leech that a man can't shake."

"Get out," she said more forcefully.

"I can't remember why I fucked you the first time." He stood there looking around in thought. "But I can sure as hell remember that it was good. You've been up my ass ever since. Deal with it, Rachel, you are a good piece of ass, and most of the time that's all a man really wants, but now I

want more. I want a wife."

"You never asked *me!*"

"No. You were too easy. Too available. I didn't have to ask. You just gave and gave and gave!"

"Get out!" she screamed. "You have no right to talk to me that way! It wasn't *me* who came flying across the country all the time to crawl into *your* bed, so get over yourself and for the last time, *get out of my house!*"

She slammed the door behind him then slid down it to the floor. His words were like daggers through her soul. He was the only lover she'd ever had, the only man she'd ever been in love with and he had said things to her that he wouldn't even say to a stranger.

The following morning Rachel found herself refusing to take back a job that she loved. She refused to stay another minute at McKelvy Industries because of the things Dex had said, had accused her of. She wanted to pack her bags and get as far away from Denver as she could get. She needed to put miles between herself and his family's business.

Four

Rachel took a deep breath as she rolled through the city limits of Hopkinsville, Kentucky. Her desperate need to escape Dex McKelvy had led her here. She'd searched for a job, any job, somewhere, anywhere other than Denver, Colorado or Pensacola, Florida. When her dad managed to arrange one for her waiting tables at his old Army buddy's place called Happy Jack's near Ft. Campbell Army base, she was pleased. It wouldn't have been her first choice to relocate near an Army base but the fact that Dex McKelvy didn't live there made the deal too sweet to turn down.

Inside Rachel inquired about Jack Benton. She nodded politely when a Bart Simpson look-alike asked her to wait while he summoned Jack from his office. A medium height man with a comb-over and a limp stepped into the hall and motioned her toward his office. He opened his arms to her in lieu of a handshake, because, he explained, she was the daughter of a man with whom he'd been knee deep in the Vietnam mud.

Rachel slowly looked around the large rectangular room, as Jack explained his reasons for opening a bar in an Army town. The nicotine yellow walls, once white, he said, were covered with awards from his old Army days and a very successful bar and grill. His oversized mahogany desk sat in the left corner of the room, and a book case against the wall behind it was filled with photo frames containing hundreds of pictures of women in cowgirl costumes that reminded Rachel of the Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders.

She followed as he motioned her down the hall into a second room that looked more like a Vegas showgirl dressing

room than anything in a bar. He pointed her toward the mandatory uniform and informed her that she'd need cowboy boots.

She cringed. She'd never had a job, or considered a job that required she work until 2:00 a.m., but until now she'd never been desperate. She would gladly work six days a week, and share her space with five younger women if it meant getting a fresh start away from Dex. Even if that fresh start did land her temporarily living in a hotel owned by yet another of her father's Army buddies.

At 16:00 Rachel slipped into the so-called uniform that allowed more of her to show than anyone other than Dex McKelvy had ever seen. She pulled on thick socks and stepped into her first ever pair of cowgirl boots. She looked at herself in the mirror and even if she had to say so herself she looked damn good. She French braided her hair and pulled on her trench coat to protect her for the cool wind then made her way to work.

The clock read 1:50 a.m. when she finally walked into her hotel room. It would take quite sometime to get used to the hours, the dancing, and her younger coworkers. She tugged the boots off her feet and dreaded rolling the socks off to see the size of the blisters there. When she finally collapsed into her bed after showering she smiled, realizing that she hadn't had time to think of Dex McKelvy at all.

~ * ~

Two weeks later the quarter sized blisters had healed and her hair seemed much easier to braid. She slid into her uniform with ease and stepped out onto the floor with a newly found confidence. The dance floors were behind her and it hadn't taken long to learn that there were 30 tables, five of which were hers.

"Damn it all," a gruff voice said from close behind her. "They've got a new one."

"Step aside, Linden," said another man. "Let us all get a look."

"Nope," he said. "I saw her first." He put a hand on her shoulder and turned her around.

Her eyes focused on the figure that towered over her. The BDU's that he wore did little to camouflage his large masculine form. His hair was dark, but the dim lights

suggested that it was brown, not black. His free hand took her wrist and she saw it was large and held the scars of many battles. He pressed his palm against her back as he looked her up and down. Unexpected pulses of electricity danced from his fingers onto her body, made her knees wobble.

"You been here long—" He looked at her little name tag. "Rachel?"

Rachel smiled. "Just over two weeks."

"Point me to one of your tables," he grinned. "I need an opportunity to impress you before sweeping you off your feet."

Heat radiated through her body because even as a joke it was a compliment for a man like him to single her out. Her heart pounded wildly as if her mind was already involuntarily considering the pleasures he could provide.

Rachel tilted back her head and laughed before leading him and his friends to a free table. Tingling sensations shot through her body when he smoothed his hand over the curve of her ass. She leaned in close to him, looking into his green eyes. "Tell me soldier, do you do that to all the girls or am I getting special treatment?"

Her body's reaction to him was confusing. She squirmed slightly, wishing the sudden wetness between her legs would evaporate. It did not.

He teasingly snapped his very white teeth at her. "You have no idea how special I can treat you." She didn't budge. She'd learned from the other girls that the tips got bigger if the dicks got hard. She looked slowly down toward the bulging package between his legs. Searing heat shot through her body, a feeling of demand, and an overwhelming desire to touch him. An audible breath escaped him as if he noticed that she'd held a steady gaze far too long to just be working toward a tip.

She looked back to his eyes. "Oh, I have a vivid imagination."

"I bet you do."

"What can I get you to drink?" she asked. "Something tells me that you could easily get me into trouble."

"You're a tease," he laughed.

"You caught me." She laughed along with him as she

lightly rested her hip against his arm and scanned the faces of his buddies. "What can I get for you guys?"

His friends wanted a pitcher of beer but his reply didn't shock her—he wanted a Jack and Coke with her as a chaser.

"Straight up?" she asked with a wide, teasing smile.

"Absolutely."

She ordered up the pitcher of beer, mugs and a Jack and Coke and danced her way back with their drinks. She noted Linden never took his eyes off her. She had a hard time keeping hers off him. What were the chances that this big hunk of sexual lure would be a Green Beret? It seemed that there would always be something to remind her of Dex. As a desire to be near Linden coaxed her back around to his side of the table she drew his hat from where he had it tucked and looked at the insignia on his uniform.

"5th Special Forces Group."

He smiled. "You know your insignia."

"My dad was an Army guy. We actually lived here for a while when I was a little girl."

His eyes flowed over her body, touching all the sultry spots as he admired her.

She laughed and spun his hat around the tip of a finger. "May I?" she asked as she held it forth in question.

"Be my guest. My cover's gotta look better on you than on me."

She pulled it on over her braided hair and gave him a mock salute.

"You grew up in the Army and you're going to tell me that some Hooah didn't snatch you up?"

"There was one," she said with more ease than she'd expected. "But he preferred platinum blondes with big... eyes."

He nodded in confirmation. "Was he blind or just stupid?"

She carefully adjusted his beret on her head, intentionally avoiding his question. "It's a little big, but I like the color. Excuse me, someone just called me."

His eyelids went to half-mast. "Can I do that too?"

"Sure thing, guys. Just call my name if you need something before I get back to your table," she said, looking

straight into Linden's green eyes though she addressed all the men at the table.

"What if you are what I need?" he asked with a sexy smile as she walked away.

She looked back. "Do you think you need me more than the other men here say they need me?"

The smile on her face was evidence that she certainly hoped he did. Even if he wasn't the staying kind of guy, and she suspected he wasn't, he would be a wonderful way to cover the recurring memories of the last sexual experience she'd had.

He pivoted his chair around on the hardwood floor, "What do you think?" he asked glancing down at his hard shaft.

Rachel looked down at the bulge and mentally noted that it occupied a great length of space. She swallowed hard but her clit throbbed harder. She sauntered back. "That could take a while."

"Show me," he begged.

She pressed her hand against the back of his chair and he followed her lead by scooting back beneath the table. She placed her left hand on the back of his chair standing beside him. Leaning forward she placed her hand on his thigh and slowly slid it up as she leaned to his ear. "That is a very nice unit you have there."

He swallowed hard as her hand slid the length of his throbbing shaft. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." She smiled. "I'll be back."

She was hot, painfully so. She had never so much as thought of touching a customer that way, yet she'd suddenly allowed her hand to wrap around his hard cock. She'd felt it throbbing, so rigid that it could give her hours of unbridled pleasure. His eyelids had fluttered closed at her touch and it told her that it had been far too long since a woman had surprised him with a seductive caress. Her pulse pounded in her clit and she could feel the juices of her body preparing for the hard cock she had touched. She would have to stay away from the well-endowed stranger or she'd be taking him home.

Returning with another pitcher of beer for his buddies, she leaned forward to fill one of the mugs. The legs of her

shorts pulled up just enough to expose the soft, silky forbidden skin beneath the curve of her ass. His fingers slid over the delicate skin as if they had reacted of their own mind.

~ * ~

Linden trailed his hand down the back of her thigh and smiled when she squirmed slightly. He knew that squirm, he'd seen it before, it was as obvious that she was throbbing and wet as it was that he was rock hard.

"I bet you'd look as good in my T-shirt as you look in my cover." Linden said with a cocky smile.

She arched her brows at him. "Think so, do you? Maybe someday when I know your first name we'll find out."

"Blake," he retorted quickly. "I would give you my business card but I don't have much call for them."

"Tell me, Blake Linden, what size is your... T-shirt?" she asked fluttering her eyes from his touch.

"That would be an XL." He grinned. "But I think you already know that."

"And you called me a tease." She laughed as she walked away and forced herself to attend to her other customers.

Returning to their table she announced to Blake Linden and his friends that it was last call. Each ordered an individual drink which Rachel returned with faster than usual. She liked being near him. "Beer for everyone except Blake. You must be the designated driver. Here's your coffee."

"Who knows if I'll drive?" His teeth flashed white in a quick grin. "I just want you to know that I'm sober when I take that cover back."

"Do you do crazy, unmentionable things when you're drunk?" she laughed.

"Let's just say that I'm not a big drinker. I like to knock the edge off but I know my limits. But I'm not drunk. I'm in total control and I'm reminding you that I'll have to take that cover before I go."

She smiled, "And I was starting to like it."

"Me, the cover, and the T-shirt come as a package deal." He grinned again. "You don't get one without the others."

The music lowered to a dull roar as the patrons left

the bar. Rachel wasn't surprised when the other guys told Blake Linden that they'd wait for him in the car. He rose and looked down at her. "The flirtin' has been fun, but now it's showtime."

She noted that he had square cheekbones. "Well, all I know about you is that your name is Blake Linden, you are a Green Beret, you drink Jack and Coke, and you have a hell of a package between your legs."

He grinned, "What else do you need to know?"

"Your hopes and dreams. Do you still believe in Santa Claus?" she stated more than questioned.

"Take me home with you," he said. "I'm an open book."

Her knees shook, it was time to either put up or shut up. If she turned him down after all the teasing she might never see him again. It was obvious that he didn't have to go home alone; men like him didn't have to sleep alone.

"I'm new in town, I don't have a home," she said honestly.

He reached for the cover that still sat atop her head, "You're stalling," he said then traced the edge of her belt buckle with his fingers.

"Can I be honest?" she asked, looking down at his fingers.

He nodded as his fingers slid onto the edge of her waist band and glided toward her side.

She explained that she'd loved a Green Beret once and he'd broken her heart. He'd asked his name, but that didn't matter, the chances that they knew each other were slim to none.

"Jake is going to kick you out." She laughed as she looked at the bouncer standing at the front door watching the customers try to work their magic on the waitresses.

"Jake don't want none of this," he said matter of factly. "Do you?"

If he only knew how badly she wanted him. His voice wrapped around her like a security blanket and even though she'd just met him she felt safe with him. His eyes, emerald pools of desire, seemed to beg her in ways that words could not.

"I'm staying at The Relax Inn, room 188," she finally

said. "Go all the way around the building to the back. I won't be there until 02:15."

Five

Rachel took a deep breath when she heard a firm couple of knocks, and reached for the door knob. She knew that even though he'd said he came to talk, that her lust wouldn't allow him to leave until she'd had him. She deactivated the locks and pulled the door open. Her pulse quickened. Blake Linden was ruggedly handsome even in the bright lights. She studied him as he walked into the room, suddenly realizing that the BDU's had done an above average job of concealing his shape after all. The short sleeved oxford style shirt that he wore open over a T-shirt revealed more than she had imagined. The muscles of his chest bulged beneath the cotton material, and his biceps looked rock hard.

He took a seat on the loveseat and looked Rachel up and down. He wasn't new to this game. He obviously knew how to get what he wanted and telling her she was beautiful was step one. She couldn't imagine how a man with a body like his could find her even remotely attractive. Sure she had obvious curves, but they were natural, nothing enhanced and certainly nothing emphasized by exercising.

He touched her leg, mentioning that he liked her pajamas, revealing that he'd never owned pajamas because he slept in his skivvies.

Now that was a mental picture—bulging muscles, and throbbing cock with nothing to hide them but the cool soft cotton material of his skivvies.

She sat down beside him. "How long have you been in the Army?"

"Nineteen years," he replied proudly. "I joined when I was eighteen."

"That makes you thirty-seven."

He turned slightly toward her. "Is this where you tell me that I'm a dirty old man and I need to go?"

"Heavens, no," she said as her gaze met his, held it. "I was just doing the math."

She wondered if he really thought he was old. If he did, if he thought anything short of a nuclear threat could prompt her to ask him to leave, then he was mistaken.

He smiled. "Let's do a little math on you."

She shrugged sheepishly. "I turned thirty-two a few months ago. Sometimes my job makes me feel fifty-two."

His laughter was a low, sexy rumble. "You don't seem like the type of girl to be waiting tables in a bar."

Rachel leaned back and began telling him about her life before she came to Hopkinsville. It seemed that the story of her life was less dramatic being told than she had thought it would be.

Blake smiled at her. "It sounds like he had more problems than just you. To be honest, I get the impression that he was a party boy who got caught up in his own game."

Rachel blinked at him. "What do you mean?"

He smiled at her and gave his head a long, slow shake. "It means," he started, "there are soldiers who never stop looking, never want to lose the fun of the chase and the thrill of the conquest. But even they usually have one woman they know will be available to him twenty-four-seven, and that to most of those women, the guy being a Special Forces soldier only sweetens the pot."

Was that what Dex had meant when he'd said she was always there, always available? And was that what this sexy man, this Blake Linden wanted from her? Yes, of course it was. His lips had moved with great precision, and his words had been perfectly pronounced. There was no mistaking things with him.

Her eyes glided down his body and it was too late by the time she realized what had happened. She could easily see herself being one of those women again, at least where he was concerned. Fact was she figured that if she got lucky

enough to have him beyond tonight that it would be on an 'as needed' basis. It was obvious that he could set his own rules and that women would play by them. She would play by them.

"But why?" she asked. "Why would a woman sleep with just any soldier?"

"Well, the women know that a soldier will spend his entire paycheck trying to get or keep their pants down."

"Okay, enough of that." She smiled. "I don't want to know anymore. I'm starting to get the impression that you may have categorized me with those women."

His eyes widened. "Not at all. I'm being totally honest with you. You look like one of those girl next door types."

"Girl next door?" she asked with a tilt of her head.

"The ones who seem innocent but set the sheets on fire."

"I'm not so innocent," she snapped. "I never claimed to be."

His smile fell away. "I suppose I should keep my opinions to myself."

"That's okay." She offered him a rueful smile. "I'm sorry I snapped. *He* accused me of trying to act innocent."

He nodded. "Is this where I should apologize for telling you the wicked ways of the Army world?"

"No." She slowly shook her head. "This is where you kiss me."

He made a "mmm" sound of agreement and leaned in to her, their lips meeting only briefly before he pulled away. He looked into her eyes and, finding no regret there, he slowly returned. She sighed and folded into his embrace. Her heart pounded and her clit throbbed painfully. His hand slid around her waist and his fingers slid beneath her pajama top to caress her. She whimpered involuntarily. His tongue teased her, forcing every thought of Dex McKelvy out of her mind. Slowly he pulled away, allowing her to recapture her breath.

"Wow." She smiled. "You've had lots of practice at that."

"You aren't going to kick me out in the morning and tell me not to come back, are you?" he asked. "I'd rather

leave now and get a second chance than to stay tonight and screw it up."

"To be honest, with the things you'd said about the women being available twenty-four-seven, I assume this might be my one chance," she admitted.

"I said they were *available*. I didn't say that I actually accepted the offers. I've gotten past all of that. It was fun in the beginning but that's not what I'm looking for now," he explained as he trailed his fingers down her thigh.

She stood and tugged her spaghetti strap cotton pajama top over her head. Her eyes instantly locked on his and she hoped he liked what he saw. His face showed approval and she saw his muscles tense as he forced himself to sit still. She slowly pulled down the matching thin cotton bottoms and stood there wearing a pink lace thong. She reached for his hand. "What *are* you looking for?"

"I'm not looking anymore. I just found it." he said as he stood and dropped his shirt to the floor. He smoothed his hands down her sides, stopping at the top of her panties. Withdrawing his arms he crossed them over his body and pulled his T-shirt over his head. His torso was lean and defined by taut, rigid muscles. His chest was smooth but for a few scars, evidence of his dangerous job. "Oh my God, you have a six pack."

"A six pack isn't all that I have right now." He laughed, looking down at the bulge in his jeans.

She rubbed her hand over his rock hard unit. "Talk about anticipating the moment." She smiled. "I already know this is going to be something I won't soon forget."

"If I'm lucky you won't forget me." He looked from her hand to her eyes.

The barbwire tattoo on his left arm automatically caught her attention. "I have nightmares about barbed wire tattoos," she said honestly, smoothing her fingers over his tattoo.

"No, you have nightmares about *his* tattoo," Blake corrected. "Not this one."

She nodded. "I guess you're right. They are identical, though."

"Of course I'm right." He looked into her eyes. "You'll never have a reason to have nightmares about this one."

She rubbed her hands over his abs then up his smooth chest. "I've seen chests like this in magazines but I never knew that they were real."

He looked down at her with a slow smile. "I'm very real."

She sank down onto the edge of the bed and twisted the switch turning out all the lights but one. "Do you remember telling me that I had no idea how special you could treat me?"

He nodded. "I meant it."

"Can you make me forget?" she asked as she reached for the snap on his pants. "You have no idea how much I need to forget."

"I'll gladly make you forget."

He leaned in, hovering over her as she took her spot under the bed covers. "Let's make some new memories."

Rachel closed her eyes as his big hands tugged her panties off her hips and down her legs. His breath was hot on her breast, seconds before he took her nipple into his mouth. He struggled to work his way out of his jeans and his underwear, never once stopping the kisses that started at her breast and worked up her neck to her lips. He crawled into the bed beside her and stopped kissing her long enough to smooth her auburn hair behind her ear.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "Once it's done we can't take it back."

"I'm sure," she said breathlessly.

Cold chills ran rampant up her spine and she couldn't help but shiver. She swallowed hard when she saw his erection pulsing with the same sensation that was running through her clit. He forced her legs open and crawled between them. She had expected to feel his hard cock at any moment as her head relaxed back and she closed her eyes. Then she felt his lips pressed against her private spot, and his tongue reached deep inside her, gliding across her opening and upward to her clit. She certainly hadn't expected that. He forced her legs wider apart. His thumbs reached and pulled her open and he ground his face into her wetness.

"Oh God," she muttered.

"HMMMMM?" he questioned keeping his face nested

in her wetness as the vibrations of his voice sent pulses of fire shooting through her body.

He rose up to meet her eyes then kissed her. She could taste herself on his lips and she liked it. With one hand she reached down rubbing her wetness and he watched her with a smile.

"You're a bad girl." he said in a whisper.

She raised her fingers from her wetness and licked them. "Is that bad?"

"Oh shit!" he growled deeply as he watched her lick her fingers. "Not at all."

She reached back down and massaged herself with more force and for a second she thought she could see his mouth water. She reached down and grabbed his cock hard, pulling him closer and he moaned. She reached both hands to her wetness, pulling it open wide and looking up into his eyes.

"Damn woman, just like I said, you set the sheets on fire." He moved slightly and pressed his long hard shaft into her.

"Deeper." she whimpered.

"Are you sure?" he asked, because one thing was for sure Blake Linden wasn't lacking in penis size.

Again and again she begged him to go deeper. She couldn't say what it was, but there was something very deep inside her that was just itching to be touched, something no one had touched since Dex McKelvy had his way with her on her desk.

"That's it," she said.

"Are you sure?" he asked, still holding himself motionless until he was sure.

"Yes, that's it," she growled back. "Do it."

"Look at me," he said. "*Know* who's fucking you."

She gasped. "Do it, Blake! Do it!"

"Gladly," he said as he began to move.

The passion racing through her body was the most intense feeling she'd ever experienced. Nothing, including the times she'd been with Dex, compared to this. It was like driving an expensive sports car through the parking lot at your class reunion as everyone stood and watched.

"Faster," she begged. "Harder."

He said her name as he grabbed the head of the mattress to anchor himself and give her more pleasure. "Anything, Rachel. Anything you want."

The kaleidoscope of colors exploding inside her was the culmination of her every sexual experience rolled into one. It was like every good feeling she'd ever had combined to shatter into millions of splinters of ecstasy throughout her body. She collapsed into a state of euphoria that faded swiftly to sleep, not to awaken until the sound of a police car screaming down the road in front of the hotel jerked her upright.

She snapped her head to the opposite side of the bed, hardly daring to hope that it hadn't been a particularly erotic dream.

"Good morning," he said softly, looking at her with an amazing pair of green eyes.

A sultry smile grew across her face. "It wasn't a dream."

"Are you disappointed?" he asked.

She rolled onto her side and traced circles on his chest. "No woman in her right mind would be disappointed to have you in her bed."

He grinned as her fingers began sliding down his torso pushing the sheet inch by inch. "What are you thinking?"

"That you are the sexiest man I've ever seen." She smiled as she traced her fingers in the cubes of his abdomen.

"You don't get out much do you?" he asked with a laugh. "I'm just an old war hound."

She leaned and kissed his arm. "I've always wanted a dog."

He almost howled with laughter, as he pulled her against his torso. "Well, I'm all yours. Can I see you tonight?" he asked. "I'll meet you after work and see you home."

Rachel hadn't honestly expected him to offer his services again, but she certainly was pleased that he did. The fact that he'd offered to escort her home from work only sweetened the deal.

~ * ~

The glow on Rachel's face was obvious and the girls at work noticed it the instant that she walked into the dressing

room. They quizzed her as she took a seat at one of the white tri-mirror vanities. She shrugged off their questions. It wasn't like she was about to get married. In fact she'd just met the guy. True enough that she'd also just slept with him but that was something that the girls didn't have to know.

The loud wolf-whistle at the bar entrance several hours later caught everyone's attention. Rachel looked toward the door and a wide smile swept across her face. The man at the door was Blake and she knew immediately that the whistle was for her. She sat the last of three drinks onto a table then turned and walked toward him. "I take it that you need some attention."

His eyes scanned her as his right arm lifted slightly toward her. "I'll take all the attention from you that I can get," he said as she turned into his touch and he wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

"Have a seat and I'll be right back." She smiled. "Those drinks on the bar are mine."

As she returned she wondered how much the guys at that table knew. Were they smiling about what they thought they knew or did they actually know? She shrugged the thoughts from her mind, because the answer wasn't really worth it. As she stood beside him taking their drink orders, he wrapped his arm loosely behind her legs and his fingers trailed up and down her outer thigh. She looked at him but his eyes were asking for anything but a beverage-filled glass. Her core throbbed, because just the thought of having him again sent her into overload.

"Are you drinking?" she asked looking down into his eyes.

"I guess it would be bad manners to take Jack's newest waitress and not buy his liquor huh?" he asked with a crooked smile.

A tingling sensation ignited in her chest and crept slowly through her body. The warm smile on her face told him that she'd liked what he said, even if it divulged a bit more of her personal life than she wanted Jack to know about—she needed to keep her job.

"I'm sure there would be at least a two drink minimum for that," another of the guys laughed.

"Jack and Coke." He smiled. "I better buy his booze

because I'm definitely taking his waitress."

There was something in his eyes, a need that hadn't been filled. She wondered how long it had been since a woman had really shown him how desirable he was. Not a calculated, thought out session of love making, but the raw, sultry side of passion that happened on impulse. He looked like a guy who would appreciate knowing that a woman found him irresistible enough that she couldn't wait until the time was right.

He wasn't half way through his first drink when she returned to his table. The hand that immediately trailed up the back of her thigh was proof of his need. She didn't see any reason to waste her break on something like rest. It could be better used to help Blake Linden realize just how sexy he really was.

She looked down at him, trying hard not to act suspicious, the last thing she needed was patrons knowing what she was about to do. "Since you are just hanging around to take a waitress home why don't you come and help me move a few drink cases?"

He nodded as if it sounded like a fair exchange. "I have a few hours, and I guess I could do that."

Her eyes drank in the image of him as he rose to his feet. The denim painter pants that he wore defined his trim waist as they accentuated his strong muscular thighs. She smiled in spite of her best efforts to refrain. This was the man that had been in her bed last night. He was the man that she was about to give herself to in the storeroom. He was the most perfect specimen of male existence that she'd ever seen, and at least for the time being, he was hers. She led him to the back of the store and up the stairs to the right side of Jack's office. She laughed at his comment about being afraid of the dark, and proceeded up the tall slender staircase. His fingers trailed up the dark mahogany walls that encased the stairway. At the top of the stairs she pulled a nylon cord to activate the light.

"So where do we start?" he asked seriously.

She pushed the door closed and locked it. Then she scooted a case of rum in front of the door. "Start right here."

"Don't get me all worked up." He laughed and looked at his watch. "We have six hours to go."

She locked her eyes on him. "Don't get you all worked up? Do you have any idea how crazy you've been driving me with those hands of yours? Do you know how wet I got when you came in looking like you do?"

His eyes searched hers, as if wondering what she had in store for him. "I'm not apologizing. I'll just have to take my punishment like a man."

She looked slowly around the hollow attic. "Six hours is a long time."

He looked her up and down. "If you only knew."

She smiled and reached for the three inch belt buckle that she wore. "I don't think I can wait six hours."

He stood silent for a few seconds watching her every move. He wasn't sure if she was toying with him or if he was about to get lucky in the storeroom at a bar. Slowly she unzipped her denim shorts and slid them off her hips inch by inch alternating sides. He grunted but refused to take his eyes off her. She stepped out of her shorts with a solid thud of her boots on the wooden floor. He slowly nodded in disbelief as his eyes trailed over her body. He moved closer, his hands yearning to touch her, his cock throbbing to have her.

"You are full of surprises." He smiled. "I was really going to move boxes."

She slid her lace thong panties down her legs, stepped out of them then held them in front of his face on her index finger. "I have a box you can stack."

He looked at her. "There's not a man in that bar that wouldn't fight me to the death for you if they knew what was going on up here."

"There isn't a man in that bar that I'd even entertain the idea of bring up here," she informed him. "I'd also be willing to bet that there isn't a man down there who can do with his dick the things that you can."

She turned her back to him and stepped up on a flat of beer cans, pressing her hands forward onto a taller stack of whiskey cases. A smiled grew across her face when she heard the zipper on his jeans. He rubbed his hands on her hips pushing upward beneath her vest and shirt. She looked over her shoulder at him and bit her bottom lip because she knew what she was about to get would certainly be worth it.

He gripped his hard shaft and rubbed it over her checking her wetness. He released a growling sound from his throat as he pushed himself upward into her and pressed his hands on her hips, pulling her down.

"How's that?" he asked as he stroked himself inside her and reached around her to give her clit equal attention from his finger.

"Oh yeah, Blake." She moaned. "That's it."

"You are amazing," he ground out as he continued to pump inside her.

She lifted her right foot onto a whisky crate to her right and her boot hit it with a sound of authority. He moaned as he scooped down to access the area between her legs and pushed himself deeper into her. She reached for his hand, she'd moved her leg to make the position more enjoyable but she didn't like it that his finger had stopped.

She confessed that she'd gotten wet the instant he walked in the door and that she could almost feel him moving inside her.

He wrapped his left arm around her beneath her shirt and stood her upright. His left hand was cradled around her breast, and his right was over her thigh fingering her clit with a quick rhythm. She panted breathlessly as she stood there with her back pressed against his chest, trusting him to hold her, needing him as badly as he needed her.

"You're about to really feel me." He grunted.

With three quick direct thrusts he finally locked himself inside her, and jetted his hot lava into her. She squirmed only slightly before he regained a quick rhythm that soon had her begging for more. She needed more and her desire forced her to tear away from him just long enough to climb atop three cases of whiskey. She opened her legs to him and pulled herself open.

"Damn you have got to be the hottest woman I've ever even heard of much less seen," he growled.

She grinned at him and demanded that he give her something that no one else had ever gotten from him. She wrapped her arms around his neck and held on tight. Sweat began to bead on his forehead as he hammered himself inside her. He pressed deeper and harder until he heard the signs of her release coming.

He stroked slowly inside her until he was positive she was finished and only then did he stop. He looked down into her face and even with the dim lighting he could see the satisfaction in her eyes. She reached for his face and he moved in to kiss her. She licked slowly across his lips in a tease, drawing her tongue back into her mouth and pulling her face away. Then she returned to do it again. He sighed at how quickly she could make him rock hard. Finally she pulled his lips onto hers, allowing her tongue to sweep into his mouth and curl slightly up before retreating. She did it again and again before he finally took control. She giggled softly as he wrapped his arms around her and allowed himself to explore her mouth and taste the woman who had just rocked his world.

She smiled as she made her way off the crates. "I guess I better get back to work."

He reached down and pulled his jeans back into place, "How'd I get so damned lucky?"

"When a man has equipment like yours and can use it the way you can," she said as she pulled on her shorts and stuffed a soiled napkin into the pocket, "luck has nothing to do with it."

"I don't know. I've had some pretty cool things happen to me before," he said with a satisfied grin. "But nothing like this."

She smiled and buckled her belt. "Well, do I look freshly fucked?"

"I sure as hell hope so and I hope every son of a bitch out there knows it was me."

She stepped closer to him again. "You don't need this," she said as she wiped lipstick from his mouth. "It makes you look guilty."

He quirked his eyebrows. "I am guilty and proud of it."

Six

Dex took a deep breath and slid down into his mother's black Mercedes. It seemed that his life had fallen apart in the past few months and he figured it was about to get worse. He had attempted to deal with the guilt but with each passing day it seemed to sink deeper into his soul. It was a need to protect his fiancée that led him to lash out at Rachel. Surely she could understand that.

He pulled the car into drive and proceeded through the parking lot at McKelvy Industries and toward the main roadway. "Damn it." Slamming the steering wheel with a fist, he shouted, "What in the hell am I going to say to her?"

Pressing his foot onto the accelerator he moved forward into the road and toward Rachel's home. He needed to make things right between them and if she would agree he wanted her back in his bed. He pulled into her drive and noticed at first glance that the burgundy drapes were gone.

"What in the hell?" Rachel wouldn't have taken down the curtains unless she was gone for good. His dad had already told him she'd never used the great recommendation he'd given her, and calls to all the businesses accounting firms he could think of had given him no indication she'd even looked for a job in her normal line of work.

He walked toward the door, stopping long enough to peer through the front window to see the house was empty. Over the past three years, he had spent almost every night that he was home in this house. He and Rachel had snuggled on the sofa and many times it turned into hard core action that was worthy of publishing under a triple X rating.

She had helped him put away his hunting kill in that

kitchen; she'd even cooked it for him. Now that he thought about it, there was some pretty hot action between them in that room too. He looked toward her bedroom and cleared his throat, because it was in that room that she made him feel most like a man. He remembered the game they'd played in the dark as he arrived, and the night she had lain naked across her bed as he searched in the dark for her. It had been her scent that drew him closer, a sweet aromatic fragrance that smelled better than any perfume she could ever wear. He smiled. She'd won the last time they played that game and it was an honest victory.

Only when he looked around the property did Dex notice the *For Rent* sign in the yard. He began jotting the number onto his hand when a voice came from behind him. She had asked if he was interested in renting the house; it was hers. She lived next door. He wasn't surprised when she told him that Rachel had moved away so quickly that she'd stuffed her things into storage in the old lady's basement and hit the road. When he quizzed her further, she said Rachel had mailed a storage rental payment from somewhere in Kentucky, and offered to show him the envelope.

"That would be fantastic," Dex replied as he planted himself beside her and helped her along as she made her way back to her home.

He held the envelope in his hand and stared at it with disbelief. It was postmarked in Hopkinsville, Kentucky and he couldn't imagine what Rachel would be doing in an Army town.

With a half-hearted smile he made his way back to McKelvy Industries. He needed more answers and he was willing to do anything to get them. He couldn't live with the guilt any longer; he needed to make it right. He walked down the hall and into Rachel's still unoccupied office, closing the door behind him. He took a deep breath, imagining her scent lingered there. Bolts of energy shot through his body when he took a seat behind the desk and he knew in an instant why Rachel couldn't work there anymore. He rubbed his hand across the desk top and it seemed to vibrate beneath his fingers as his mind replayed the moments they'd shared there. He smiled at the flashes of hot, lustful sex that rushed

through his mind. He nodded and rearranged the throbbing unit between his legs. She had left the most of her things and it was probably because she'd faced the memories of the room as long as she could. The snow globe he'd bought for her their last trip to the cabin in Vail, sat on the desk. The framed picture of the two of them standing together on the slopes had not been moved. He picked it up and studied it, both of the people in the picture were happy, but that was before he'd thought ending it with Rachel would make things easier.

He logged onto the internet hoping for an idea, any idea that might lead him closer to finding the only woman who had ever truly satisfied him in bed. It only took a few seconds for his fingers to seek out the private investigators of Denver. He thought about the consequences if Rachel found out that he'd had her followed. He considered life without the opportunity to make things right and reached for the phone. The voice that answered didn't announce a business; in fact it gave no more than a standard household greeting. Dex paused then asked if he'd reached Winkman Private Investigations. Once the voice verified that he'd reached his mark Dex began to ask questions. Fact was that he needed to know if this man could help him find someone who had disappeared for the purpose of escaping him. With hesitation the man agreed.

"Do you think you can find her?" Dex asked after revealing the awkward details of the situation with Rachel.

Winkman assured him that he could find her if anyone could. He would even bring back photo verification as proof that he'd located the right woman. He could leave first thing in the morning if he could get a flight.

For the first time in his life Dex found himself utilizing the things available through his parent's money and McKelvy Industries. He was suddenly offering the use of the private jet, and everything in his arsenal to find Rachel.

"We will need to discuss payment." Winkman stated. "I'll also need a picture of the girl."

"I can be there with your money and a picture in twenty minutes. Is that okay?"

Dex leaned back in the chair and looked around the room, satisfied that he'd made the best choice possible for

finding Rachel. He leaned forward and took the ski picture from her desk. He would need another picture and Vicky had made damn sure that every picture he had of Rachel had long since been destroyed. He thumbed through the drawers of the desk, because it made sense that there would be more that she had left behind. His heart all but sank when he found the stash of photos that she'd removed from her desk after their breakup. The photo of them made in the saloon at Silverton, Colorado when they went on that weekend camping trip was clear and it was the Rachel that he missed so very much.

"I'll pack my bags and catch the first flight out in the morning." Mr. Winkman informed as he shook hands with Dex.

Dex smiled, "Just watch your step, she's a smart cookie. I don't mind her knowing that I hired you to find her, but I want to be the one to explain it to her."

"Don't worry," said the man that reminded Dex of Boss Hogg in a flannel shirt. "This is how I make my living. I could track anybody, even you."

Dex looked down on the short round man. "I wouldn't advise that. In my line of work someone following me means I'm about to have to kill somebody."

The man stood shocked. "What in the hell do you do for a living?"

Dex laughed. "Relax, I'm Army Special Forces Airborne. Don't go sneaking up on me and we'll get along fine."

"No worries." Winkman admitted with a laugh, "I'll announce myself before I approach."

"Oddly enough, the only person that ever succeeded in a sneak attack against me is the very person you are looking for," Dex admitted with a smile. "I taught her well."

Seven

It had been five days since Blake had left on his last mission and Rachel had no clue when he would be home. She remembered how anxious her mother would be when her dad was on a secret mission and only now did she understand that it wasn't that he had gone away, it was the fear that he might not come back. She had never gone through these feelings with Dex, not that he didn't have his own share of covert missions, but that he lived half a county away. She didn't see and touch him every day, and with the exclusion of a daily phone call when he was gone, all seemed normal. It was different with Blake because he was there for her everyday, without exception, then his job would call him away to an unnamed land for an unknown amount of time.

She made her way through another Saturday night wanting nothing more than to know the security of Blake there to take her home. She wanted to fall asleep in his arms and know that she was safe. It was odd how the small things bothered her while he was away, even the short round guy that had been in the bar the past few nights gave her the creeps. His eyes were dark and mysterious and she couldn't help but feel them following her as she worked her way around the room.

Hour by hour he sat there, studying her like she was an ancient puzzle. He wasn't anyone that she knew or had met, she was sure of that. He wasn't an Army guy, but then she couldn't quite figure out what else he could be. Perhaps the entire situation wouldn't bother her so badly but she could have sworn that she had seen the same guy last night in the parking lot of the hotel. Of course it wasn't as if it

would be a crime for a man to be in a hotel parking lot. It probably wasn't a crime for him to be looking in her car windows with a flashlight either, but she'd seen him doing that too. She sighed, thinking of how glad she would be when she could move into the new apartment closer to base. In two more weeks there would be no reason that a strange man could sit yards from her bedroom and not incriminate himself. In fact, if Blake Linden were home, she knew that it wouldn't be a worry at all.

A loud whistle filled the bar. Rachel spun on a dime, empty tray in her hand, because she knew that her man was home. He searched for her as his eyes adjusted to the dim lighting inside the bar. He looked just like every other night he returned from a mission, like a rugged, take-no-prisoners type of soldier as he and his team walked into the bar. She walked quickly toward him trying to hide the wide smile by biting her bottom lip. Damn Jack Benton for his rule that she couldn't kiss him while in the bar. Her mind raced, this was the first time he'd returned during her shift, and she needed to get her hands and lips on him. She walked dangerously close to him, pressing her hand against his chest. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply the masculine smell that radiated around him. Gently she pressed, pushing him back.

"The door." She said to an Army guy she'd never seen until now.

He opened the door with a bewildered smile. "Yes, ma'am. What the hell did you do, Linden?"

Blake smiled down at her as he backed slowly out the door. "She can't fondle me in here. There are rules in the bar. Aren't there, Babygirl?"

She backed him against the cobblestone wall between two plate glass windows and sighed to finally be out of sight of the bar patrons. She reached up and touched his face. The two-day-old growth told her that he'd had a very hard ending to his mission. "Welcome home, soldier," she said as she pulled him close and kissed him.

"It's good to be here," he said as he wrapped his arms around her. "I probably smell like hell. I just spent sixteen hours on a C-130 flying back from the middle of damn nowhere."

"I could eat you alive." She said as she took another

deep breath and allowed her body to drink its fill of him.

"How much longer till you get off?" he quizzed.

"Three hours. Can you make it?" she asked with a grin.

He smiled. "I'm not leaving without you."

Rachel carried on her duties for the most of an hour, making time to visit Blake's table just to feel his hand on her skin as she stood beside him.

"So what's up with *that* dude?" he asked as he sat his drink back onto the table.

Rachel looked at him with a smile. "What dude?"

"The one who can't keep his eyes off you. The fat guy over there," he supplied. "I know you're easy to look at, but he's starting to tick me off."

Rachel explained the strange actions of the stranger. The way his eyes seemed to follow her without ceasing, and the fact that she thought she'd seen him near the pool at the hotel.

A jealous, greedy fire ignited inside Blake. He wasn't the kind of man to tolerate another man even entertaining the idea of making a play for his girl. He studied the man, wondering how many ways he could torture him before he finally choked the life out of him.

"Did he follow you home?" Blake asked, aggravated at the thought of someone assuming a striking position against his girl, even if it was a distant position.

"I don't think so." She sighed. "I'm not sure what he drives. There was a car that followed me to the hotel Thursday night but I didn't think much of it because it pulled in to register when I went around to my room."

"Well here's a little news flash for Mr. Lard Ass." Blake bit with an angry tone. "Daddy's home."

The proud feeling that engulfed her was second only to the feeling of need that she felt for him. He was rugged and tough but he had his soft side. He was the man who would stroke his fingers through her hair until she fell asleep. He was her hero.

Rachel laughed and leaned in kissing him quickly on the lips. "It's okay, down boy."

He laughed. "You shouldn't kiss the customers, you'll get fired."

"You wouldn't let me go hungry and homeless would you?" she teased.

He couldn't fight the vivid thoughts of her in his bed. His quarters were tiny but they served the purpose. He would love to walk down the hall with her in tow, smiling at the other men in the hall. Seeing the jealousy on their faces that he'd landed the little lass at Jack's who could make a monk sin.

"Not a chance," he replied.

When the hours finally clicked away Blake and the other guys from his team tagged each other with a fist to fist bump in lieu of a handshake. He watched Rachel as she made her rounds for last call and he counted the minutes until he could get her behind closed doors.

"Just a few more minutes, big guy." She teased him. "Then you can rub my feet."

He grinned. "I can think of a way to make that work. You'd have to be flexible and my tongue would be sore tomorrow, but it would work."

"Blake Linden, you are awful."

"I'm in uniform." He corrected as he popped her on the ass. "That's Master Sergeant."

She spun around looking at him with a wide, toothy smile. "That will cost you."

"I'm counting on it," he said as he lifted his finger and crooked, it calling her back.

"Yes, Master Sergeant Hard Cock, what can I help you with?" she whispered into his ear.

He literally howled in laughter as he tilted back his head and gave a loud yelp of victory. He told her that he planned to go out the front door to check out the stranger who had been paying far too much attention to her.

The street light was dim in the parking lot behind the bar. Fog hung low, clouding the ground with the promise of something dark and unwanted. She looked both ways and made a quick dash to her car. She sat down inside, her imagination running wild about what could be happening between Blake and the stranger. Five minutes passed then ten and her thoughts became painful and twisted. Startled by the opening door she gasped and Blake instantly knew that there was something that she wasn't telling him.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing, you just scared me." She smiled.

"Rachel..." he growled, "tell me."

"That guy was looking in my car last night with a flashlight," she admitted almost sheepishly.

"What?" he snapped. "Why haven't you already told me? Stop the car!"

He jumped from the car as Rachel came to a stop and he ran a short distance down the sidewalk until he discovered that the stranger had gone. He returned to the car and slammed the door closed. "He's gone."

"What were you going to do?" she asked seriously as she pulled out into the narrow street.

"Ask him what in the fuck he was doing looking in your car." He chided with a defensive voice, "Damn, Rachel I let the bastard get away because I didn't know if he was stalking you or not. Now you tell me that he was looking in your car. Doesn't that seem odd?"

"I called the cops but by the time they got there he was gone," she replied. "I'm sorry. I just don't want to make a big deal out of nothing."

He looked toward her as she pulled into the lot in front of her room. "Babygirl, I never know when I'm going to be called away on a mission, so I can't wait for a situation to explode before I deal with it. If this guy is a threat to you I need to know now, while I'm here and can deal with it. There's not a damn thing I can do when I'm somewhere in a Third World country trying to zero in on a drug cartel."

She pushed the car into park and looked back toward him. "I know. I'm sorry. There is nothing else. He knows that I go to the ice machine every night after I change because that's when I see him. If he's here, tonight will be no different."

She inserted her keycard into the lock then removed it. Pushing the door open they walked into the only home she'd known in the past few months. She threw her purse onto the table and began disassembling her uniform.

Blake growled his approval and for a few enjoyable minutes he forgot about the stranger outside and the possibility of impending doom. He followed her to the shower, because he needed a shower too. His hands flowed

over her body as she scrubbed her hair.

"Are you having fun?" she inquired lazily as she stood facing him, holding her head back beneath the water.

"Do you even have to ask?" he smiled as he continued to rub soapy hands over her body. "I've been lying in mud for four days. You feel like a dream."

"If you've been laying in the mud let's get you cleaned up." She smiled and turned her soapy hands to his body. "I'll be happy to give you a rub down."

He moaned in pleasure when he slid his shoulders beneath the hot water, her hands massaging his muscles. "That feels great."

He rinsed his head as she soaped his body into a healthy lather. He applied shampoo and within seconds he was rinsing it away. Rachel watched as the water slid down his body in sheets taking the soap with it down his full, perfect length. She looked at his hard cock and dropped to her knees, taking him into her mouth without so much as a giggle of warning.

His breath caught. "Oh hell, baby." He moaned as he looked down at her and couldn't help but place his hands on her head.

She looked up into his face and licked the head of his cock then slowly took him back into her mouth. She moved with sultry precision as she stroked him in and out of her mouth. She needed to taste him and it was obvious. His eyes rolled back in his head as his body swayed with the rhythm that she made. Her mouth pulled away and if he could have found the words he would have protested. She lowered her head and moved in, taking one of his balls into her mouth, sucking it gently sending him into some seizure-like movement. She took equal time with the other one then turned her attention back to his hard, long, thick shaft.

Faster and faster she stroked until he grunted, "Stop. If you don't stop you are gonna have to soap up again."

"I want to taste you." She almost whined as she returned to her stride. "Let me have it."

He reached above and grabbed the shower rod. "You look like an angel, you make love like the devil and now I find out that you swallow."

She grinned and looked up at him, vibrating her voice

in agreement.

She looked up into his eyes as the hot thick flow of liquid began leaking from his body and she swallowed. She opened her mouth again allowing him to finish and see the evidence on her tongue. She swallowed again then licked the head of his cock as if to ask for more.

"Damn, babygirl." He held her face in his hands. "They say practice makes perfect and I don't even want to think about who the lucky bastard was. I'm just glad it's me now."

She stepped from the shower first and began to towel herself dry. He followed. She suggested that she go out and get some ice so that they could have a cool drink before starting round two. She slipped into a tiny pair of green thong underwear and he grunted. Then she pulled one of his T-shirts over her head. If she had her way he wouldn't be covering his chest with it until they woke in several hours.

"You do look good in my shirt." He grinned as he pulled on the extra pair of underwear she'd stashed in a drawer for him.

She grinned and smoothed her wet hair out of her face and over the top of her head. "If I look half as good in your shirt as you look out of it then I could get more tips at work wearing this."

"Negative," he said solidly. "That's for my eyes."

"It is ice time." She smiled. "I'll let you know if the pervert is out here."

"I'm waiting right beside the door. If you aren't back in two minutes I'm coming out."

"Relax, I do this every night." She smiled. "My daddy taught me well."

"So did your momma." He grinned as he slapped her on the ass.

She grinned back. "My momma didn't teach me any of the tricks I use on you."

Rachel made her way out the door and toward the ice machine which was no more than twenty feet away. She looked around; she didn't want any surprises. The fog still hugged the ground making even the routine walk eerie. Her bare feet moved quickly toward the machine and she slid her container under the chute. She pushed the button with her elbow as she pressed her back against the machine.

Someday someone might grab her but it wouldn't be because of her not being alert. She grabbed the bucket and turned toward her room door. In the distant fog at the opposite end of the building she saw him there, hidden behind a row of shrubbery taking photos of her. She looked away as her heart raced, she wanted this to end and if she could only make it back to the room without the stranger knowing that she'd seen him then she was certain Blake would end it all.

"Oh my God!" she said as she almost threw the ice onto the small round table beside the door, grimacing as if something foreign had touched her. "The sick bastard has a camera."

Blake looked at her as he stood zipping his jeans. "Stupid fucker stuck around one day too long," he spat as he snagged a pair of running shoes. "Where is he?"

"At that end of the building." She pointed. "Behind the shrubs."

Blake went out the door like a flash wearing nothing but a pair of jeans and running shoes. Down the sidewalk he bolted at top speed, finding nothing in the shrubs but tracks as evidence that the stranger had been there. He looked around, his highly trained eyes searching for movement, he knew the stranger was there and he was determined to find him. His eyes fixed upon a lone shadow as it advanced away having no clue that hell was in pursuit.

Eight

"You better have a damn good reason for being here," Blake growled as he grabbed the stranger by the front of his shirt. "Nobody stalks my girl."

"Wait, wait." The stranger almost begged as he held up his hands in defense of the fist that was already drawn for contact. "I can explain."

"I'm not big on patience." Blake ripped, keeping his fist cocked. "Talk fast."

"I'm not a stalker. I'm a private investigator."

Blake slowly released his fist. "You're what?"

"I'm a private investigator," he repeated. "I have ID if you'll allow me to get it out."

Blake stood close, his heightened senses so alert that the wind couldn't have escaped him. He took the ID that the man offered and looked at it briefly then back to the man called Winkman. "What in the hell are you up to?"

"I'm sorry. I can't disclose my client information," Winkman said.

"Let me explain this to you a little more clearly," Blake said as he grabbed the man's shirt once again with his left hand and cocked his right fist back. "Either you spill your guts or I'll rip 'em out your ass."

Winkman swallowed hard because as big as this man was, it still wasn't as scary as facing a Green Beret and telling him that he'd loused up the entire deal. "The man who hired me would kill me."

Blake drew his fist slightly back bracing to release and Winkman began to talk. "Okay wait. I was hired to find

Rachel Kenyon. I have no orders other than to locate her and bring back pictures as proof."

"Who hired you?" he snarled.

The man shook his head stubbornly, but rethought his position as he stood beneath the wide knuckled fist of Blake Linden. "McKelvy."

"McKelvy? Who the hell is that?"

"He's a big guy, much like yourself." Winkman winced, "He lives in Florida."

There was only one other man that would possibly be in search of Rachel and that was the fool that had broken her heart. Blake squinted against the possibility that someone from Rachel's past was about to come rushing back in.

"Why is he looking for her?"

"I don't know," Winkman whined. "I don't ask questions."

Blake grabbed the camera from around Winkman's neck, and his fingers worked to delete the pictures of Rachel. He left one and handed the camera back to Winkman. "Take it back to this McKelvy and tell him that the man who owns that shirt will be waiting."

"This guy won't scare."

"Probably not." Blake smiled. "He's a bad ass Green Beret, or so I've heard."

Winkman nodded in confirmation. "He mentioned that."

"Well tell the cocky bastard that when he comes, to pack his damn bag because it's not going to be easy. He's not the only Special Forces man the Army has."

Winkman stood confused for a few seconds before the reality of Blake's words hit home. He nodded in confirmation, there was only one thing that Winkman wanted and that was to be out of the middle of the mess that he had suddenly found himself in.

"I'll...I'll tell him." Winkman stuttered. "Thank you for listening instead of proceeding to beat the hell out of me."

Blake twitched half a smile. "Just be sure that you don't ever come back. The next time I catch you sneaking around my girl... I'll kill you."

Winkman swallowed hard. "That's fair enough."

~ * ~

Rachel sighed with relief when Blake turned and began walking toward her room. She smiled as he glided across the lawn, step by step, with a wide stride. It looked like an action movie playing out as the shirtless hero came walking back through the fog to claim his girl.

"Well?" she asked as he placed his hand on the small of her back and herded her back toward the room.

"He was an information specialist in town for a meeting," he explained. "He thought you were hot. He was taking pictures to show the guys at work."

"How creepy." She shuddered.

"I made him delete them. He won't bother you anymore."

"How do you know?" she asked. "We should have called the cops."

"He won't bother you," Blake repeated.

"How can you be sure?"

"Because I told him I'd kill him." His smile was cold. "He believed me."

She looked confused. She had assured herself that it would be over now, that the man would be happy to go to jail after Blake finished with him.

"You just let him walk away?" she questioned. "He was taking pictures of me for goodness sake, and you let him walk away?"

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. She had been sure that he would have guaranteed her safety by delivering him to the police, barely able to walk. Instead he'd let the guy walk free with little more than a warning.

"The situation is under control," he said. He couldn't tell her the truth because he didn't want to deal with the memory of Dex McKelvy. She was the most important thing in his life and he had to find a way to make her believe that before McKelvy came riding in on his white horse.

"I'm calling the police," she snapped as she turned toward the phone.

Blake grabbed her. "I told you it was under control."

She pulled away. "And what about when you aren't here? What happened to that crap in the car about taking care of it now because you can't do it from some far away land?"

"Listen to me!" he yelled. "He's gone. He's not coming back... ever."

"But you don't know that!" she yelled back. "I'll still be here to deal with it when you're gone saving the world."

He spun her toward him placing both his hands on her arms and shook her. "I told the son-of-a-bitch that I'd rip his fucking heart out his ass. He knew that I meant it. How do I know that he knew I meant it? Because I know his name and I'll walk across a goddamn desert to kill him if he ever gets near you again. Trust me Rachel."

She saw the determination in his eyes and she felt suddenly safe. She believed him, and knew that he would keep her safe at all costs. She melted into his arms, needing him like the earth needs rain.

Nine

Dex reviewed the information he had gotten from Winkman. He looked around the empty hull of an apartment where he lived in NCO housing. There were no pictures on the walls, no female touches to make it feel like home. The sleeping bag over the window was proof that until now he had lived his life much too haphazardly and he needed to start sleeping when the moon was out.

He had met Vicky because of his refusal to let go of the party life and no good came of that. Rachel had been the best thing to ever happen to him but he thought he needed more attention, and he found that in the arms of the leggy blonde. He sighed deeply, if Winkman was right, Rachel was happy with the new man in her life. Winkman also said that the new man was an 'in your face' kind of guy, and Dex knew that he wouldn't mix well with a man like that.

A smile slowly grew across his face as his mind faded away to a place and time not so long ago. It was the only time he had ever allowed Rachel to visit him in Florida because he didn't want her to learn that for Dex McKelvy the party never stopped. He gave her some lame excuse about getting into an argument with his boss to keep from having to show her around base. At least he had been a gentleman and driven her up to the Mississippi coast to visit botanical gardens there. He had shelled out quite a chunk of cash to secure a little love nest near the park, but like always Rachel made it worth it. She was so happy that weekend to have him all to herself, not knowing that there was a reason he didn't want to be seen with her near base.

He took a seat in his favorite chair and continued to

think about that weekend. Rachel had given him the shock of his life. He still remembered her words as they sat in front of the fire drinking wine, "I love you." She'd said it honestly and simply. It overwhelmed him because after three years he thought that she understood that he wasn't comfortable with that word. Some cowardly part of him withdrew from her that night and never returned. He needed a bed warmer, not love.

Winkman had told him that the new man was also an Army man, but that was no shock because Rachel knew about the Army and would be the perfect military wife someday. He also said that the new man had come into the bar where Rachel worked Saturday night wearing his BDU's and the patch on his sleeve was 'U' shaped and black. There was only one 'U' shaped patch at Ft. Campbell, and that was the men of the 5th Special Forces Group. Dex smiled, because the Green Beret had snagged himself a new girl that would follow him to the ends of the earth and out the door of a plane at four thousand feet.

He grinned remembering the day that Rachel had proven her abilities to him while skydiving. It wasn't that he hadn't believed her when she told him that she jumped from planes, but that it wasn't a usual characteristic of a girl like Rachel. The only girls he had ever seen skydive were the brute women that he had met during Army maneuvers. She even looked sexy in a jumpsuit, and the sex they had underneath her parachute was phenomenal. It had been another weekend trip, this time to a remote location in Utah. Dex had rented a plane to fly them over the area where they jumped with their supplies. Of course his parents had sent a helicopter to extract them three days later. They had camped with little provisions; in fact he had trapped their food. Rachel didn't complain, she just smiled that sweet smile and made the best of the situation. Rachel was wonderful at that, always making the best of a bad situation.

It was her ability to make the best of things that forced her out of Denver. It was a move that was best for everyone, or at least she saw it that way. If she left he would be happy because she wasn't ruining his life anymore and she would be happier because she wouldn't have to constantly see the stupid jackass who had said such a thing

to her. He flattened his lips into a thin line of disgust. If only he had compared the entire package of Rachel to that of Vicky, none of this would be happening. Sure Rachel paled in comparison to Vicky in the looks category, but that was expected, there were very few parts of Vicky that weren't dyed or enhanced. But Rachel had a brain between her ears and love in her heart. Vicky had dollar signs in her eyes. Rachel was a little devil in bed, the one woman who always set the sheets on fire with her kinky ways. Vicky was the straight and narrow, nothing out of the ordinary because it would mess her hair kind of girl. Rachel ate a worm when he taught her about survival on the camping trip, and Vicky screamed at the sight of a grasshopper.

Rachel's face haunted him, the sheer devastation as he ripped her pride apart. The things he'd said were inexcusable and he had known it when he said it. It seemed like the easy way out at the time, a way to keep Vicky happy and a way to rid him of Rachel once and for all. The only other alternative was to admit that he depended on her because she was the only one who could please him in bed, to sacrifice the soon to be trophy wife and cling to the woman who made him feel alive. There were many reasons that he felt like he couldn't do that, but it seemed that one stood out within his mind. He knew that Vicky looked better on his arm, and the other guys were jealous.

This weekend I'm going to Hopkinsville to face her.
The decision made, he rose from his chair and released the buttons on his BDU blouse.

~ * ~

Dex sat in a parking lot across from the bar called Happy Jack's and took in the atmosphere around the place. It reminded him of the riverside street in Savannah, GA. Buildings stood connected in a line the length of the street, separated only by occasional alleyways. The brick and stone of the building fronts seemed to be from another era when people actually took time to look at the things around them. Elegant black lamp posts lit the sidewalk and cobblestone street. Happy Jack's was a grey stone building with a single entrance at the left side. Two large picture windows filled the front, separated only by three foot spaces between the panes of glass. The green awning over the windows gave the

building character, and Dex knew in an instant that that this bar wasn't some low rate honky-tonk.

He smiled as a crowd began to gather outside the bar and he pulled the key from the ignition of his rental car. He took a deep breath as he closed the door behind him, made his way across the street and waited in line with the other men. It wasn't long before he'd struck up a conversation with some Army guys about why this bar was so popular. He wasn't surprised to learn that it was the girls. He certainly wasn't surprised when he got confirmation that Rachel was one of those girls.

His mind strayed back to a time when she was his. She had cooked dinner for him, standing in a French maid costume to serve it. He'd taken four maybe five bites before she dipped her finger in gravy and pressed it into his mouth. That was all it took for him to forego dinner in search of the satisfaction she promised.

He proudly answered the questions about knowing Rachel, because fact was that he knew Rachel better than anyone on the planet, especially her new man named Linden.

"I'd drink her damn bathwater just to see the places it washed," one guy said.

The places it washed. Dex smiled. If the guys around him only knew that he'd seen, touched and kissed every inch of her body. If they only knew that she was as much a vixen in bed as the woman they described working a tip.

"Yeah and Linden would kick your ass into next week," one replied.

Dex was intrigued by the statement, "Who is Linden?"

"Master Sergeant Blake Linden," another answered. "He's been with the Green Berets for about fifteen years now."

The door swung open and the crowd of men began pouring into the bar. "Is it like this all the time?" Dex asked.

"Every night."

He took a seat at the distant corner of the oval bar, he wanted a few minutes to watch and think of what he would say before he actually got to the chore of apologizing.

His eyes searched in the dim lights; he was anxious to see her and when he did, his gaze locked on her as she had a conversation with the barkeep about the link between a full

moon and a wild night. He watched her as she walked across the floor and for the life of him he couldn't remember why he had thought that Vicky looked any better. He'd never seen her wear boots before and to be honest she didn't look right to him. Rachel wasn't a cowgirl, far from it, but she was playing the part well. Her hair was braided and it was longer than he remembered. Those shorts, well they left very little to the imagination but then there was no part of her that he hadn't seen. The belt buckle was a showpiece, sitting on a trim waist wrapped by hip hugger shorts. He took a swallow of his beer and looked down at the erection that had come out of nowhere.

He searched the tables, and took advantage of an empty chair at a table with the men he'd talked to outside. The men asked if they would get to witness the reunion, and it burned his pride to admit that there might not be a reunion. He'd been stupid. He'd said things he shouldn't have said. Done things he shouldn't have.

It was only a few minutes until Rachel returned to the table. "You guys doing okay?"

They nodded and looked toward Dex.

Rachel's eyes landed on Dex. "What can I get you, soldier?" she asked attempting to act as if she'd never seen him before.

"Another beer," he said, slightly lifting the draft glass toward her.

~ * ~

Rachel took a deep breath and threw her tray onto the bar, excusing herself to the restroom. She slammed the door closed behind her, pressing her back against it looking at herself in the mirror. She placed her palms on her forehead. *Think! Think!* Her heart pounded. What in the heck was Dex McKelvy doing in Hopkinsville? *Okay. Shake it off. Get back out there.* She couldn't lock herself in the bathroom. She had to face him.

She set his beer onto the table in front of him. "Here you go."

He looked at her. "Are we pretending not to know each other?"

She would have laughed but there was no way to hide her nervous hands. "I figured you preferred it that way."

He shook his head. "I came here to talk to you, not ignore you."

She looked into his blue eyes then glanced away when someone called her name. "I can't imagine that there would be anything left to say."

"Just give me five minutes," he asked with a smile. "Please?"

"Excuse me." She gave him a stony glare. "I hear a customer calling."

She wished that Blake wasn't away on a mission. She needed him tonight to be her strength against the biggest battle she'd ever fought.

After seeing to the needs of a few other customers, she took another deep breath and made her way back to Dex. "Do I dare hope your wife didn't follow you? If she did, I assure you that things are different now. I don't really give a shit what you or the McKelvy's think and I will snatch that bitch's hair out if she says one wrong word to me."

She looked across the table to the guys who sniggered at her, and explained: "It's a long story, and to be honest it's not worth telling."

"I don't have a wife," Dex said with one of his old, winning smiles. "That engagement didn't work out."

"Oh, dear," Rachel said in a sickly sweet tone that could only be heard as sarcasm in the raw. "Was I to blame for that?" In truth, she really wanted to laugh, because it seemed there was some justice in the world after all. Instead, though, she said with a careless shrug. "So what are you doing here? New orders land you in Hopkinsville?"

"Not orders. Need. Mine. I owed you an apology. I went to your house to give it to you and you had moved. So I'm here to say I'm sorry."

Rachel looked around and unfortunately, the tables seemed fine. "It is water under the bridge, and to be honest the bridge burned."

"Can you give me five minutes?" he asked. "Just five, Rachel."

"All right. Five minutes. Follow me."

She led him into the dressing room and closed the door behind them. "Time is money. Talk fast."

"I didn't mean the things I said," he spouted quickly.

Rachel felt her face burn. She had hoped never to have to think of those things again. She wanted to tell him to kiss her rosy ass, but fact was, she'd probably enjoy that far too much to suggest it. She wanted to find the right words to hurt him the way he'd hurt her. She wanted to rip his heart out and take a bite of it. She watched him wipe his sweaty palms on his thighs, and she knew that he only squinted his right eye when he was worried.

"Then you shouldn't have said them, because you certainly can't take them back. If you came here hoping that I can just pretend it never happened then you give me far too much credit. I'll accept your apology but I'll never forget."

He tried to explain that he couldn't get his mind off her, that she haunted him day and night. His body demanded her, sometimes so hard that even an orgasm left him needing more.

"So you miss all the good sex?" she sniped.

He laughed nervously. "Don't make me think about sex."

Thinking about sex with Rachel was far too painful to endure. If only he had realized earlier that no other woman would ever be able to satisfy him in the sack once he'd had Rachel, then none of this would be happening.

She tried not to laugh but she couldn't help it, "Well, it's true."

"I'm sorry for what I said and I'm certainly sorry for pushing you," he said.

"It wasn't necessary to come here to apologize."

"Yes, it was necessary," he corrected her.

He moved closer and pulled her into his arms. It felt right to hold her. Her smell engulfed him, that same sexy fragrance that no perfume could duplicate.

She fought against the feeling that swept through her body, a feeling of comfort and peace. She fit into his arms like a hand in a glove. He lifted her chin slowly, "Tell me that I have a chance and I'll fight like hell for you."

"Please don't," she sighed. "There is someone else now. He cares about me and I care about him."

He lowered his face. "But you still love me." He soothed as his lips touched hers in a soft warm caress.

She wrapped her arms around him, hungry for the love that she had lost, allowing her new life and new love to slip from her mind. His mouth captured hers with great demand, licking, sucking, and stroking her lips and tongue until she was confused. His hands pressed down her back onto her ass where he pressed her against him. His cock was hard. He ground himself against her and he smiled when he felt her press into him.

"Oh God," she sighed as she forced herself away. "It isn't this simple. We can't do this."

"I can't make it without you." He reached for her hand, pressing it against his hard cock. "Nobody can satisfy me but you."

She wrapped her hand around him, her fingernails scraped against the dark blue denim. She moaned. She could feel him, see him and taste him. Her mind was riddled with flashbacks of sultry nights of hot sex and lust. Her crotch throbbed.

"We'll talk later." She pulled away. "I can't afford to get fired."

She straightened her clothes and smiled as she watched Dex try to arrange his hard shaft inside his jeans. She puckered her lips and blew slowly out through wet, hot lips. Damn if he wasn't still as hot as ever.

As the hours clicked away, Dex was no closer to accepting that Rachel couldn't be his. He needed her in his life and he was willing to pay any price. He knew that she still loved him; he could feel it in her touch. He could taste her need for him on her lips and her body was saying everything but no.

"So where is the Master Sergeant?" he finally asked, "I'd like to meet him."

"He's on a mission. I'm not sure if he'll be back tonight or not." She answered then looked back toward him. "How did you know he was a Master Sergeant?"

"Does he know about me?" Dex asked with a smug smile that suggested the Master Sergeant didn't have a hope in hell now that *he* was back in town.

Rachel nodded. "Yes, he knows because I told him. But you didn't answer my question."

"The private investigator who found you," he supplied.

"Private investigator?"

"Linden didn't tell you?"

"How would he have known? Why in the crap did you hire a private investigator?"

A loud whistle echoed from the front door.

It was as if the winds had blown him in, as if the arrival of Blake Linden was on a timer. Rachel spun toward the door with a wide smile. "He's home!"

Dex watched as she strode away and began pressing the biggest of several men back out the door. As the men at his table filled him in on the details of Rachel's not being allowed to kiss her Master Sergeant in the bar, his mind flooded with wild, restless thoughts. *Kiss him? Like she just kissed me?* He shifted to battle the fact that he'd gotten a semi just thinking of having her in his arms again.

~ * ~

"Hello, sexy," Rachel said as she pressed her hand against Blake's chest and pushed him back out the door. "Welcome home."

"Damn, you're a sight for sore eyes." He smiled as he pressed his back against the stone wall and placed his hands on her hips pulling her close.

She freely gave in to his touch, teasing him with promises of a wild night which left him to deal with the throbbing of a rock hard cock. She traced her finger around his neck and she felt his fingers as they tensed against her skin. She looked up into his eyes and smiled, "I have something to tell you. Nothing bad, but I'm glad you came home tonight."

"What's up?"

"Remember the other Green Beret?" she asked as she traced her fingers along his neck.

"Yeah, what about him?" He didn't like where this conversation was heading.

"His name is Dex McKelvy and he's here," she said, "He came to apologize to me."

The anger was visible in his eyes. He wasn't anyone's fool. Since the invention of the telephone, there was no need to travel across the country to apologize. In fact he'd done some pretty lousy things in his life and the only way he'd travel that far to apologize to a woman would be to get

back in her pants. He certainly didn't believe for a minute that Dex McKelvy wanted to meet him with nothing in mind but shaking hands with the man who now warmed Rachel's bed. He knew when he was being sized up as a competitor, and he smiled at the thought.

"Do you know anything about a private investigator?"

Blake hesitated, because he never dreamed that she'd find out that he had hidden the truth from her. Damn Dex McKelvy for swooping in like a vulture just waiting for him to die.

"I took care of that. I didn't want you to worry."

Rachel felt like the walls were closing in on her. The last thing she needed was to learn that Blake had kept secrets too. She needed Blake like she needed water. He was perfect in her eyes and she needed him to stay that way.

She looked toward Dex's table and he rose, began walking toward her.

Blake studied the man who approached, and even in the dim lights he could tell that he looked familiar.

Dex looked down at his dive resistant wrist watch and then to Blake. "It looks like you've had a hell of a day."

Blake smiled. "You guessed it man, just another day in paradise."

Dex held forth his hand, and just for a second he paused. "It's nice to meet you, I'm Dex McKelvy."

Blake nodded and took the hand that was offered. "Blake Linden."

Dex looked at Blake with a noticeably confused expression. He couldn't figure out where he knew the guy from, but it was as obvious as the nose on his face that they had met. The name meant nothing to him though and he shrugged it off as just another of those coincidences in life that leave you wondering.

"I told Rachel that I would like to meet you because I feel like if the situation was reversed I'd expect an explanation about why the ex is in town." Dex laughed.

"It did cross my mind." Blake said tonelessly.

"To be totally honest with you I came here to take her back home," Dex said matter of factly. "After talking to her I'm satisfied, at least for now, that I got to apologize to her."

Blake looked at the man who stood before him giving

details that he himself might have withheld. He wanted to hate the guy. He wanted to kick his ass. "So you came all the way to Kentucky to apologize?"

"Like I said, I came to take her home," Dex said honestly. "But she's happy so I won't complicate things. But I do feel obligated to tell you not to fuck up."

Blake grinned and admitted to himself that he sort of liked the guy just for having the balls to stand up and speak his mind, "I know what I've got." Blake wrapped his arm around Rachel, "I'm planning to keep her real happy."

"Fair enough." Dex smiled.

"I've got to check my tables." Rachel said looking up at Blake, "You'll have to sit at the bar until some people start to leave."

"Hey, there's an extra chair at my table." Dex said as he motioned, "Come on and have a seat."

Rachel looked confused but she tried not to let it bother her that the only two men she'd ever loved were sitting at a bar table bonding. She brought out a stiff Jack and Coke and sat it onto the table in front of Blake. "See if that will take the edge off your day."

He looked up and thanked her, then returned his attention to Dex. He studied him, trying to solve the mystery within his mind of how he knew the guy. "Rachel says your headquarters were at Bragg but your group relocated to Elgin. That is the 7th Special Forces Group, right?"

Dex nodded in confirmation. He saw the wonder in Blake's eyes, the same wonder that he felt in his own. "What about you? I hear you are an Army man too?"

As the two sat discussing their careers, it finally became clear why they felt as if they knew each other. They had both served with the 1ST Special Forces Group in Okinawa, Japan more than a decade ago. It was the most of another hour before they finally pieced the entire puzzle together. The expression on Dex's face told Blake that the mystery was finally solved.

"There was an off base party," Dex said as he suddenly pointed his finger at Blake. "There was a girl named Kiomi."

Blake's eyes got large. "Oh hell. That was you?"

The memories flooded back as they remembered the

young Oriental girl who had thought she could take on two horny American soldiers. She had been wrong.

Dex snapped his fingers as he tried to remember. "They called you Triple because you got hammered one night and took on a set of triples."

Blake swallowed hard and smiled. "Yeah, but it wasn't nearly as cool when I found out that they were only 16."

"They called me..."

"Blue!" Blake laughed. "Hell yeah. How in the hell have you been, man? That has been what, ten or twelve years?"

Ten

Struggling to get her boots off Rachel hopped in the door on one foot. Her feet were aching and the rest of her wasn't far behind. She walked into Blake's embrace and melted into his arms, feeling the nervous energy that had risen to a boil within her.

"It's okay," he consoled her, the hot smell of bourbon on his breath. "I want you to know that I'm okay with you and McKelvy. He's a good guy."

"Okay with us?" she asked. "What do you mean?"

"I'm okay with your past. You don't have to hide anything from me," he replied.

Rachel creased her brow in doubt, because if Blake was okay thinking of her with another man then he'd had one Jack and Coke too many.

Rachel relaxed into the hot water as it flowed over her body. She couldn't believe that Dex had shown up out of nowhere and she certainly couldn't believe that he and Blake actually became quick friends. She shrugged it off, thinking it was another full moon. The vanilla shower gel soothed her mind as it heightened the sensual senses of her body. A smile grew slowly across her face as she traced her hands over her body, washing away the smoky scent of the bar. Her mind slipped away to moments she'd tried to forget, moments that until now she had thought were locked away in the deepest recesses of her mind.

It wasn't a burning desire to have Dex in her bed; it was more of an aching that arose the moment that she looked at him. A yearning need that grew within her since he'd touched her. He had been her first true love, the one

who had helped to mold her into the sexual vixen that she now was. It had been Dex who welcomed her kinky thoughts and helped to bring them to life. She shook the thoughts from her mind, turning off the water and stepping outside the tub. She towed dry and enjoyed the calming sound and heat of the hairdryer as she prepared for her night with Blake.

She noted that there was the slightest wobble in Blake's step, a product of the bourbon he'd kept requesting. Even slightly inebriated she knew that he could satisfy her every fantasy. He had a way of making her forget everything. He laid her across the bed and his knees hit the floor with a thud. Slowly lifting her legs he guided them over his shoulders then he lost himself in her wetness. His tongue teased her clit, tasting the juices of her sweet lure that he'd missed. His hands searched her, feeling her breasts, twisting the nipples as she arched herself to the wonderful torture of his touch.

The bedroom door slowly opened and her gaze instantly shot in that direction. Blake's hand pushed her gently back down. "It's okay, I invited him."

"Invited who?" she asked with mounting fear.

"Lie down," he prompted again. "Relax."

He returned to the spot between her legs as she arched her head back in search of the stranger who had opened the door. Her heart pounded wildly but she was too inebriated by Blake's exotic talents to protest. The world could end and chances are she wouldn't care. His tongue was all that mattered as it coaxed her clit toward exploding with a writhing passion that had been building within her since the day he'd left on his mission.

The arm that appeared over her head briefly startled her but it was nothing that a quick flick of Blake's tongue couldn't subside. The symbolic bumping of Blake's knuckles against that of the strange hand alerted her mind that she was safe in his care. Her breath caught because she recognized the tattoo. Dex leaned over her and took a nipple into his mouth. She gasped at his touch and relaxed only when he released his grip on her nipple and kissed her gently on the lips. His mouth searched hers as if he were looking for a key in a dark room. She could feel the need on his lips and

the gentle growl that crawled up his throat was as familiar to her as her own voice. Her heart pounded deep in her chest, because if this was really happening it was the crowning jewel in her tiara of sexual fantasies.

Blake's hands slid up her sides. "Relax," his voice assured her.

She reached for his hand and interlocked her fingers with his. She needed him to understand that she couldn't do this. Certainly her body was willing, that was evident, but her heart was a different story. She was afraid to get this close to Dex again, and her fear was warranted. She had loved him so long that she couldn't remember what it was like not to love him. She had shared over a decade of memories with him and more than three years of a loving sexual relationship that surpassed all her wildest dreams.

Dex pressed his knees into the bed beside her and winked at her. She swallowed hard and rolled her eyes from the pleasure of watching him stroke himself slowly, deliberately teasing her. She locked her eyes on his then smiled as he leaned to kiss her. It was then that her body gave way to the fiery orgasm that Blake had demanded.

"Come here," Blake said as he reached for her and pulled her into his arms. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "I don't think this is a good idea."

"We are both familiar to you. There is nothing new here." He soothed her again with sweet, gentle coaxing kisses. "This is all about you. This is all for you. Enjoy it." He sighed as he kissed her one last time and turned her around.

Blake slid his hard cock inside her as she crawled onto the bed. She moaned and pressed back into him. She smiled as Dex knee-walked across the bed toward her. Her hot breath teased him a second before the warm soft caress of her lips sent his senses reeling.

Blake stroked in and out of her and his huge cock rolled the lips of her crotch with each stroke. He wasn't demanding a quick satisfaction of his urge but rather a sultry, hot, extended session to prove that he could last longer than the other man in the bed. He drew out and only pushed in again as the head of his cock reached the sensitive outer area of her lips.

Dex looked down at her as he moved inside her

mouth. He ran his finger through her hair watching her swallow up his hard throbbing shaft.

"Damn it man, I can't take it," Dex finally blurted. "It's been too long. I've got to get inside her."

Blake's laugh was somewhat slurred but he was certainly coherent enough to understand the other man's need. Rachel moaned a loud disapproval when they both pulled away. But she gladly took Blake's cock into her mouth a second before Dex slid into her pussy. Dex's arm slid around her and his finger found her clit and began stroking the swollen bud of her passion. Blake's hand found the drawer of the night stand and had she not been so busy enjoying herself she would have questioned his need for the lubricant. She squinted as he spread it onto his hand then reached toward her. He slid his hand down her spine following its end and pressed his finger inside her. She grunted her disapproval but quickly gave in to the pleasure that mounted in her body. Her mind spun in a whirlwind of confusion as Dex stroked her cunt with his hard cock, and his finger teased her clit. Blake filled her mouth time and time again as his finger seemed to prepare her for something yet to come. Unable to stand any more her body locked in another orgasm, and she bucked wildly against Dex.

"Damn," Dex growled locking inside her, spilling his lust into her.

Blake's breath caught as she sucked him hard demanding his release. He shook in battle against her, as if he had something to prove. She looked up into his eyes and sucked harder, begging for his release. An extremely masculine growl escaped him as he released his passion into her mouth.

She barely had time to swallow until they had hammered out their next plan of attack. She sat silent, almost confused by their actions as they prepared to help her find her third orgasm and their second.

Blake rolled Rachel onto her side, and with a reassuring smile he lifted her leg then flanked the other with his knees. He stroked his cock and looked at Rachel. "Are you ready?"

"I'm ready." She smiled.

He pushed his way into her, filling her completely. He

grunted as he kissed her ankle.

Dex lay down facing her and bit, licked and kissed his way to her breast where he took it into his mouth sucking painfully hard, awaking a new arousal within her.

"I want to taste you," she finally whispered. "You always tasted so good."

"Take what you want, baby."

She took him into her mouth, stroking him with her hand beneath her lips. Occasionally she flicked her tongue at the head of his shaft as she kept a demanding rhythm with her hand.

"Here it comes," he said harshly, tangling his hand in her hair as her eyes glowed up at him. The smile on her face made him feel warm. He had dreamed of her sucking him off, and teasing him as she swallowed his lava. His heart seemed to skip a beat and even the alcohol he'd consumed couldn't disguise it.

She looked at Blake as he continued to straddle her leg, pumping his dick into her like he was mining for gold. He looked hot.

"Oh baby, you look as good as you feel," she panted. "Give it to me, Blake."

"Oh damn!" Dex grunted as he took his own shaft into his hand and began pumping. "You are on fire Rachel."

Blake laughed. "I knew she could take us both."

Rachel reached for Dex, pulling him closer so that she could take over the job of pumping his cock. "I can't get enough."

The minutes passed as she gave pleasure to them both, and they continued to repay her efforts. Blake began grunting a sound so familiar that Rachel knew he was about to give in to his second orgasm.

"Oh yeah, baby that's it." She gritted her teeth, unconsciously stroking Dex harder as she watched Blake preparing to release.

He pulled quickly from her, pumping himself as his hot, white liquid streamed onto her. She opened her mouth, licking, wishing that she could taste him, needing to taste him. Dex's hands clinched the covers as a second stream of liquid fire irrupted toward Rachel. There were no words to describe the feeling that consumed her, but it made her wild.

She was writhing with need, as if it had been months since she'd been satisfied, not minutes. She reached for them both, she didn't know what to ask for but she was desperate.

"I have an idea." Blake grinned widely. "Hold on, baby."

Blake lay down onto the bed and curled a finger at her. She began pumping his cock with her hand, she needed it hard again, and she needed it right away. She crawled quickly atop him, almost slamming herself onto his rock hard cock. She looked back at Dex. Straddling Blake's knees he pressed against her back and pushed her forward, working her back and forth on Blake's cock helping her to relax before he entered her. She felt the cool lubricant that he rubbed on her and she looked back to see him stroking himself as she worked herself on Blake's shaft.

"Yes!" she hissed. "Slide into me, please..."

"Ah, yes," Dex said with a throaty rumble. "I wondered what in the hell had happened to the Rachel I knew."

"I'm right here," she said in a demanding voice, remembering that he had helped her learn to enjoy the taboo position she'd sworn away until he'd talked her into trying it just once.

"This is going to be fun." Blake laughed then kissed her.

"Just do it!" she begged. "Both of you, do it."

Dex mounted her slowly, allowing her time to adjust to the additional pressure inside her. She screamed. He pulled away.

"No, no!" she laughed. "It hurt but it was good. Do it again."

"Yes, ma'am," Dex murmured, sliding back inside her.

Blake began stroking up into her as Dex joined his motion. Rachel shook violently and screamed again as she stretched to accept their movements.

"Oh my God!" she cried.

"Are you okay?" Blake, asked, cradling her face between his hands.

"I'm fine," she whispered. "You two have no idea what you are doing to me."

"Tell us," Dex coaxed as he massaged her breasts.

She shuddered, barely able to speak. "My G-spot."

"Oh, really?" Blake smiled. "What about it?"

"It's between you," she said with a quiver. "You're stroking it from both sides."

"So you are about to get off again?" Dex smiled.

"That's putting it lightly," she gasped.

Her senses reeled because no woman deserved the pleasure her body was experiencing at that moment.

"Let it out," Blake whispered. "Enjoy it."

"Faster," she cried out, her voice high and vibrating... and then she came.

Her scream was like nothing either of the men had ever heard. She froze as her muscles contracted. Her eyes rolled and she held her breath.

"Breathe, babygirl," Blake said softly. "Breathe."

They gladly gave her space when she needed to rest. Fact was that they had no reason to complain, any woman with talents like Rachel deserved to rest.

Rachel lay her head onto Dex's shoulder when Blake made his way to the kitchen to get a glass of water. Dex kissed her, until it turned into a deep, searching, needing act.

~ * ~

Blake walked into the room and stood motionless. What had he done? He'd allowed a single moment, a mistake he'd made in the past to influence the present. He'd allowed another man into his bed with Rachel, he'd shared her. He had thought it was an awesome idea when the liquor was still heavy on his senses, but now it didn't seem such a wise idea.

"Here, baby," Blake said, intentionally cutting the kiss short while wishing like hell he'd thought this through before he allowed it to happen.

Who knew how many drinks he'd had? Who knew how many Dex had either? Obviously they had both had too many and it was Rachel who had paid the price.

Eleven

The music thumped loudly as Rachel and her co-workers danced a choreographed number near the middle of the floor. Her eyes locked on the figure entering the door. Dex. She wasn't sure exactly how she should act or what she should say for that matter. He had been under the influence last night, so had Blake. She, on the other hand, had not. She made her way toward the dark corner where he stood, when the song ended. His smile told her that he was happy to see her.

"I'm sure I'm not the only man here tonight to tell you this but you are gorgeous." He admitted as he allowed his finger to trace down the stitched design on her vest.

"Thank you." She smiled. "Would you like something to drink?"

"No," he nodded. "I had enough last night to do me for a while."

She nodded as the words evaded her like a giant cat walking in the dark shadows.

"Last night was amazing," he said.

She took a deep breath. "It is behind us." As good as it had been, she didn't want to remember.

"Damn that!" he barked, voice hard, eyes burning into hers. "Some things you can't forget, last night would be in the top ten."

A rush of fire and ice fought through her veins. It seemed he had no regrets, and she wondered how anyone could claim to love and not regret. She explained that she'd get a break in ten minutes and sent him to the upstairs

liquor room to wait. She needed to know if he really had no regrets.

She returned to her tables with an ever nagging question in her mind. Exactly how in the hell did she get herself into this mess? Of course she had no answer to her question anymore than she knew why she hadn't heard from Blake. He had left during the night, and she had left Dex asleep in her bed this morning.

The door creaked open to display Dex sitting on a case of Puerto Rican Rum sporting a wide satisfied smile. He met her gaze and he remained silent until the door was closed behind her.

"You were absolutely on fire." He smiled. "I'm hard just thinking about it."

"How did it happen?"

He walked toward her all the while explaining that it had been a conversation about days gone by that led them to her house last night. It had been funny when the young girl named Kiomi stumbled from the hotel room barely able to walk. That was at least 10 years ago, and Blake had transferred shortly after it had happened. They had never talked again until last night. The drinks led to the moment that they began comparing notes about Rachel. When they both admitted that they'd never met another woman that could hold a light to Rachel in the sack, their imaginations ran wild. They had joked that she could take them both, and as it turned out, she had.

Rachel stood shocked. She questioned him to be certain she'd understood. He had said that he and Blake had shared another woman once upon a time, that they knew each other. That their tattoos were put there by the same artist on the same night. They had used her as another pawn in their sexual game. She couldn't understand how two men who both cared for her could do such a thing.

"I never realized just how kinky you really are." He smiled. "If I had known we could have had some smoking threesomes."

"With who?" she asked, somehow shocked at his words.

"There were dozens of women," he bragged. "To think I tried to keep you from finding out."

The feelings of fire and ice battled through her body once again, leaving her as mad as hell that he'd betrayed her and found a way to make it her fault. She studied him a few seconds, wondering if she'd ever known him at all. "How long did it go on?" she asked.

"It never stopped," he admitted. "I knew that you wouldn't dare let me back in your bed if you didn't think we were an item. If I had only known."

She stood shocked, in total disbelief of the things he was saying. She wished that he would stop talking because he was destroying the memories of the happiest time of her life.

"Do you realize that you are telling me that I was your sex toy?"

He nodded. "Of course, though I've never met anyone half as good as you in the sack."

Rachel didn't bother to hide the tears in her eyes. "Wow," she said softly. "I would have died for you. I've never loved anyone the way I loved you. And the odd thing is that you wouldn't know love if it bit you in the butt."

She walked away, closing the door behind her. The staircase was dark and she made her way to the bottom by memory more than sight. His words reeled in her head as she worked the rest of her shift, and she couldn't say she was sorry when he walked through the bar and out the door without a word.

Her apartment was disappointingly dark. She'd hoped Blake would be there. There had been many times that he had been there waiting for her when he had been too tired to sit at the bar. She laid her keys onto the table and flipped on the light. Making careful yet painful steps she made her way to the sofa then flicked her boots across the room. Moments later she turned on the bedroom lights out of curiosity more than fear, her shoulders slumped to find the bed empty. She could only hope that a hot soothing shower would wash away her tension.

Her stomach growled, reminding her that she hadn't eaten all day. On her way toward the refrigerator, the kitchen phone briefly caught her eye. Noticing some left over Chinese food she smiled. It would suffice. Popping the cardboard container into the microwave she looked at the

clock. It was ten minutes of four, far too early to call anyone. The beep of the microwave drew her attention briefly, as she began satisfying the hunger within her belly. She dropped her fork because the hunger in her stomach couldn't begin to match the hunger in her heart.

"Hey, this is Master Sergeant Linden, you know what to do."

Tears streamed steadily down her face, knowing that his eyes had opened the moment that the phone rang. She figured he was lying there wondering why in the hell she thought he would want to talk to her. She had proven to him that Dex McKelvy was still welcome in her bed. Blake wasn't the kind of guy who had to settle for a woman who couldn't put him first.

She snapped her head toward the ringing phone, knocking the Chinese food in the floor she bolted back toward it.

"Hello?" she said softly.

"Hi." Blake's voice seemed unsure of what to say. "You called?"

Heat rushed through her body as tears once again spilled onto her cheeks. Of course she had called, but she had called the man she'd learned to love, not the stranger that was calling now.

"I thought you might be on a mission."

"No." he supplied. "I'm at home."

"I'm sorry for waking you."

"I wasn't asleep. I was watching a movie."

"I just finished the last of our Chinese food," she said, desperate to sound normal. "I'm off to bed."

"Good night," he said softly, but in a tone that told her the conversation was over.

"Good night." She pressed the button to disconnect the call.

She walked down the hall toward her bed and the reality that she'd lost Blake in this ridiculous mess consumed her. She leaned against the wall as she cried. Her cries were desperate as she slid down the wall not caring if the sun rose again, hoping within her soul that it would not. Submitting to the exhaustion, she cried herself to sleep as she lay on the carpeted floor of her hall. The most of an hour passed before

a faint sound woke her.

The gentle sound of his key sliding into the lock alerted her that someone was there, but she couldn't move. He closed the door behind him and focused his eyes upon her as she laid in the hall curled into a fetal position sobbing. He walked toward her, angry with himself that this had happened, angrier at Dex McKelvy for showing up out of the blue. He fell onto his knees and reached for her. "Come here, baby."

She wrapped her arms around him and hung on for dear life. He smiled, because she had no idea how badly he needed to feel that she still wanted him. He smoothed her hair away from her face and forced her to look into his eyes, "What about McKelvy?" he asked his voice telling her that he'd just sat through the longest night of his life.

"I talked to him briefly at work," she answered. "To be quite honest with you, he and I have nothing to talk about."

"Are you okay?"

She nodded slowly as a faint smile teased the corners of her lips. "I am now."

"Don't cry." He wiped away the tears that still glided silently down her face.

"I'm sorry," she said wiping her face. "I just can't stand the thought of losing you."

"Baby look at me." He smiled gently. "You haven't lost me. I'm right here."

She sighed as tears continued to spill from her eyes. "If you can't forgive me I will understand."

"Forgive you?" he looked at her as if she were an advanced algebra equation. "I was drunk. You were depending on me to keep you safe and I didn't. Hell Rachel, I pushed you back down when you tried to stop us. I was too drunk off my ass to comprehend what was going on. This is the reason I don't drink much. By the time I actually sobered up enough to pay attention I figured I'd lost you forever," he said as he sat beside her.

"You can't lose me. I'm so head over heels for you that it's crazy."

Her lips met his and he moaned his approval. His green eyes sparkled like never before and the wide perfect smile on his face told her that he'd been happy to hear it.

"Why didn't you call me, or come to work or here?" she asked.

"I figured I'd opened the door to you and him getting back together," he answered. "I knew he'd broken your heart and the only way you can break someone's heart is if they love you."

"So you didn't realize that I loved him then, but I love you now?"

He smiled. "You have my word that I'll never pull any shit like that again."

"You better not." She laughed and punched his arm lightly. "If you keep dragging men home you might find one someday that could make me forget about you."

"If he ever comes back I'll have to kill him," he said solemnly.

"He won't be back." She smiled, then kissed his chest. "I belong to you and he knows it."

"Did you tell him?" he asked.

"I didn't have to." She smiled up at him with eyes full of love. "I think it's written all over my face."

About Arlene

Arlene Knowell lives with her husband, Tim, in a small town in North Mississippi. Working full time and managing a home leaves little time for hobbies but she somehow finds time to escape her troubles and responsibilities by writing.

She loves to travel and hopes that someday she and her husband can retire and travel extensively. Until then however, the rat race continues, and she's learned day by day that it isn't about who finishes the race first, but rather who stops to appreciate the sunsets along the way.

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