



Decisive Engagement

Michelle Cary



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...Clay brushed his thumb over one nipple while he continued to ravage the other with his mouth. God, it had been such a long time since he'd had the pleasure of touching her, tasting her. He hadn't even reached the good part yet and already his body hummed with need, his cock springing to life on the promise of a satisfying completion.

Her hands traveled down his chest and tugged at his polo. Despite his reluctance to let go, he did and shrugged out of his shirt. Her eyes widened and she reached out for him, her nails grazing over his flesh.

Desire raced through him, causing his dick to jerk against his zipper. Thank God he'd decided to wear boxers and not go *au natural*. It would have been a bitch having the metal zipper rubbing against his shaft.

She gave him a wry smile. "I forgot how damn sexy you are."

"That goes double for you, baby."

Before he could touch her again, she backed away and turned out the light that had been on when they came in. For several seconds the room was dark, then his eyes began to adjust. With the balcony curtains standing halfway open, the three-quarter moon bathed the room in a soft glow. He watched her cross the room, strip and climb onto the bed. Sitting on her knees in the middle of the mattress, she looked like an angel and a temptress all in one. "It's been too long, Clay. Don't make me wait any longer."

How could he deny a request like that?

He stepped out of his shoes and shucked the rest of his clothing, letting the garments fall where they may. Nothing in the world was more important right now than this moment and the woman he loved...

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BY

MICHELLE CARY

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DECISIVE ENGAGEMENT
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CHAPTER 1

Am I still welcome here?

Clayton Storey stood on the edge of his driveway, staring up at the house he hadn't seen in nearly a year. Eight months ago, he'd stood outside his barracks eagerly awaiting the mail call only to receive Amy's "Dear Clay" letter. His first reaction had been one of anger and frustration at being stuck in a battle zone overseas while the one woman he loved contemplated divorce.

After a few days of mind-numbing deliberation and several desperate unanswered calls home, he accepted his part in the demise of his marriage. She'd begged him not to reenlist when his last tour ended and he'd all but ignored her feelings, citing the need to serve his country in the face of danger.

Until he'd received her sad and despondent letter, he'd never

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considered how much sacrifice he'd forced onto her unwilling shoulders. When he finally had his head on straight, he'd written her back, begging her to wait at least until he returned home before filing for divorce.

While he hadn't received another letter in the months that followed, he also hadn't received any divorce papers either. She'd all but cut him from her life, yet she'd left their marriage intact.

He'd hoped she would be there to meet him when his platoon arrived home. Apparently, even that had been too much to hope for. Disappointed, he'd taken a cab home and now stood in his own driveway, wondering if the two-story white colonial was still his. Oh, sure, as far as he knew his name remained on the mortgage, but with the way divorces worked, she'd probably end up with the house.

Maybe she even had another man living with her already. His stomach churned at the thought of some other man touching her, making love to her in the bed they'd once shared. He shook his head in a desperate attempt to rid himself of the image. No sense in getting upset over speculation. He'd done enough of that over the last eight months. It was time to find out where both he and their marriage stood.

If she really didn't want to be married to him anymore, then he wouldn't force her to stay, despite the fact she'd never given him a reason other than then saying she simply couldn't do it anymore. Not that he could blame her much for leaving. When she'd stood at the altar with him, in front of God and family, and recited her vows, she hadn't expected him to turn around and sign up for the military.

Though she knew of his feelings surrounding the September

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11th attacks and the war in Iraq, he never gave her any inkling he would actually join up and serve, but day after day of watching the news and seeing innocent people murdered at the hands of the insurgents gnawed at his conscience until he couldn't take it anymore. He had to do something.

Now home from his second and hopefully last tour of duty, he glanced at the driveway, noted the absence of her vehicle, and drew in a deep breath. Time to find out if she still kept the spare key hidden in the secret compartment on the bottom of the porch swing. Clay climbed the steps, his mind racing in a million different directions.

Had she changed the locks since he left? Was all his stuff packed away in a storage unit somewhere? She'd never contacted his parents about his things, so he could only assume everything was still here. He glanced around the yard, ensuring nobody was close enough to see him reach under the swing. There, in the little cubby he'd made, he felt the cool metal of a key. *Bingo!* He pulled it from the secret spot and headed for the door. With the key in the lock, he paused. What if she'd acquired a dog during his time away? He really wasn't interested in becoming a snack for some mutt from the local pound. He turned the key—a click indicated that it still worked—and waited, listening for any barking or snarling from the other side. When nothing but silence greeted him, he entered the house.

The midday sun filtered through the living room curtains, casting a bright light on the tan sofa and chair. He inhaled, taking in the familiar smell of old wood and Mr. Clean. The mix of scents harkened him back to a time when all was right with his world; before the war, before his marriage had fallen apart. His duffle slid

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from his shoulder and landed on the foyer floor. Obviously, nobody was home. He had to wonder if she even knew he'd be returning today. Maybe he should have called first. He frowned, giving his thought a snort. *To hell with calling first.* This was still his house and he'd be damned if he were going to ask permission to be there.

Still wondering if anyone besides Amy now lived here, Clay crossed through the foyer into the dining room. The large oval table was clean, save for a manila folder with a pen resting on it and a small white envelope. Both sported his name. Apparently, she had remembered his return and had made a point not to be home when he arrived. That realization caused a new ache in his chest. Did she really hate him so much she couldn't stand even being in the same room with him?

He opened the folder and pulled out the contents. His heart jumped to his throat as he stared at the divorced papers he'd hoped didn't exist. Amy's signature was next to the blank line on the last page. *So this is how it's going to be?* Anger festered deep in his belly and worked its way to his heart. She hadn't given him the respect of telling him to his face that she wanted a divorce. The least she could have done was have the guts to face him with the papers that would break their tie.

If she wanted out so much, then he'd be happy to oblige her. He reached for the pen and brushed a hand across the smaller envelope. For several seconds he stared down at it, while trying to decide if he wanted to be bothered reading what he guessed was her dissertation bolstering her reasons for wanting out. In the end, innate curiosity won out and he ripped open the envelope and fished out the letter.

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My dearest Clay,

I want to start by saying I'm sorry. I can't begin to imagine the hell I've put you through over the last eight months with my one letter telling you I wanted a divorce, then my lack of correspondence that followed. Any excuse I could give wouldn't be worthy of being heard. The fact is I messed up. When I wrote that letter all those months ago, I was in a very bad place emotionally. Spending Thanksgiving alone had been more than I could bear. I resented the fact that, while my sister was enjoying the holiday with her new husband, I was "sacrificing" for the good of the country.

I was lonely, heartbroken and tired of being a military wife. What I didn't think about was the fact my sacrifice was nothing compared to yours. I wasn't the one putting my life on the line every day, or eating, sleeping and living under conditions sometimes not fit for human beings. Somewhere in all my self-pity and depression, I forgot you were lonely, too, and by the time I realized the mistake I made, the process was already set in motion.

After all the turmoil I put you through, I know it's wrong of me to ask for a second chance, but I'm going to anyway. If you're willing to try to save our marriage, meet me at the Carlton Hotel in Oak Ridge. I've made

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reservations for the weekend and have a surprise I'd like to share with you. Everything is already in place. Just give them your name at the front desk when you arrive.

However, if after all the hell I've put you through, you simply want to be rid of me, I've left the papers here for you to review and sign. Before you put pen to paper, though, please know that above all else, I do still love you very much and I'm so very sorry.

*Love,
Amy*

Clay reread the letter two more times before he set it on the table. She'd given him the exact thing he wanted and put the decision in his hands. His marriage and the all the baggage surrounding it were his to save or destroy.

He glanced down at the paper between his fingers. By her letter she sounded remorseful about what she'd done. Still, if she really was sorry, why hadn't she tried to contact him before now?

He scrubbed his hands over his face and went to the kitchen for a drink. *What to do?* He leaned against the granite counter and stared through the doorway at the table. She'd mentioned something about a surprise. As curious as he might be, could he put aside his anger and pain to give her another chance?

* * *

Amy Storey paced back and forth in front of the full-length

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mirror. Her stomach fluttered as if a dozen dragonflies beat their wings in unison. She'd planned this day for the last six months, biding her time and reaching her goals, always with this moment in her sights. Now that it was here, second thoughts swirled in her head. Could she finally be the person she'd worked so hard to become?

The fact she was still Clay's wife had played to her advantage when she began planning the weekend getaway. Privy to his rotation orders, she knew when he'd be home, allowing her to plan everything out ahead of time. Pausing in front of the mirror, she smoothed the fabric on her mini-skirt for the hundredth time and straightened her spaghetti-strap top. She only hoped he wouldn't sign the divorce papers, instead giving them a second chance.

"You can do this!" she said to the image staring back at her before she glanced at her watch. The big hand pointed to the eleven, while the smaller of the two sat on the eight. If he had read her letter and decided to come, he should be downstairs waiting for her right now. "Show time," she said, letting out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding.

She tossed her head, sending her long tresses bouncing off her shoulders, then turned and picked up her keycard and money, shoving both into a tiny front pocket on her skirt.

The fluttering in her stomach increased as she heard the door slam shut behind her; the resulting thud reverberated through the empty hall. Only the sound of her bare feet slapping against the soles of her wedge heel sandals kept her company as she made her way to the waiting elevators. *What if he didn't show up?* The question was a scary prospect. What if he hadn't read her letter? It wasn't so much the idea of spending the evening alone in a strange bar as it was the fact she'd have to face the cold, hard reality of her

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marriage really being over.

Whose fault would that be? Her conscience argued as she pressed the button for the elevator. After all, he had every right to be mad at her for what she'd put him through. Of course, he still didn't know the entire story. Even if he did give her another chance, it all could still blow up in her face.

The doors opened, she stepped inside the empty carriage and watched the heavy steel close her inside. The claustrophobic feeling only served to accentuate her already raw nerves. The elevator began its descent, providing a quick and powerful weightless feeling to rush through her body. Her already nervous stomach lurched a second time.

Nervous, she glanced at the numbers on the screen above the door, then, in an attempt to relax, turned her attention to her nail polish. Maybe she should have chosen the coral color instead of the soft pink. Making a face at her thoughts, she sighed and let her hands fall to her sides, brushing her damp palms against her clothes. She could wonder why she was so nervous, but the reality was, she knew why.

The carriage door opened, and she crossed out into the lobby. If all went according to plan, she'd find him waiting for her in the lounge. As she walked into the bar, the heat of several gazes shifted in her direction. Scanning the room, she realized one sickening fact—Clay wasn't there. Her heart sank. Would he have changed so much in a year's time that she wouldn't recognize him? She doubted it, but then she didn't look anything like the person she'd been twelve months ago, so anything was possible.

She took a second look, making eye contact with several interested men before confirming her first determination—he wasn't there. Wringing her hands, she quickly walked to the bar.

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Maybe he's just late. It was only now eight o'clock. The last thing she needed was to jump to conclusions.

The bartender sauntered over and leaned an elbow against the mahogany surface. "What can I get you, doll?"

Doll? She flicked her gaze over the rather large man with wide shoulders and long, dark hair who leaned on one arm and stared at her, waiting for her order. She slid onto the worn vinyl stool, making sure her short skirt kept everything hidden from probing eyes.

The easiest thing would be to order a beer, but she hated the taste of beer. Still, having a little alcohol in her system might help her to relax. "Um, I'm not much of a beer fan, so what would you recommend?"

He cast an appreciative gaze over her, and Amy had to resist the urge to cover herself with her hands. Even after four months, she still wasn't used to attention her new body drew.

"A beautiful woman like you should be drinking something sexy. I have just the thing."

A smile tugged at her lips as she watched him pull a highball glass from beneath the bar and walk away. He'd called her beautiful. Maybe Clay would think so, too. She swept a quick glance around the bar. That is, if he ever showed.

When the man returned with the liquid-filled glass, she arched a curious brow. "What is it?"

"Sex on the Beach." He nudged the glass toward her. "Try it."

She picked it up, inspected the reddish liquid, noting the mix of orange and pineapple scents, then took a sip. A warm feeling passed over her tongue, along with a fruity flavor that tempted her taste buds. Her eyes widened as she took in the full experience of the drink. She'd expected the liquid to burn and cause her to spit

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and sputter in disgust. To realize she actually liked it was a pleasant surprise. "This is good."

The bartender smiled. "Five-twenty-five, doll."

Amy pulled a five and ten from her pocket and tossed them on the mahogany top. "I'll take another. You keep the change."

The man nodded, peeled the bills off the counter and walked away.

She took a long, slow swallow, enjoying the slight burn the vodka caused. It warmed her insides and filled her with the relaxing sensation she sought. If Clay decided not to show, maybe she'd be drunk enough to not care; after all, it was only her marriage on the line.

Though, if she were being completely honest, she had to admit their rocky relationship was of her own doing. She'd been the one to send him the "Dear Clay" letter and she'd been the one who filed for divorce. It was only after the car accident that she'd realized how much she really loved Clay. By then, the wheels were in motion and stopping them would have taken a Herculean effort. Her only hope was this weekend and Clay's willingness to play along. If he returned home angry and carrying a grudge against her, all of this would have been for nothing.

She returned the empty glass to the bar, picked up the full one and spotted the hand resting next to it. Her head darted up and she came face-to-face with a cerulean gaze.

His grin sent a quick jet of lust directly to the apex of her thighs, her pussy clenching in response. *Damn, he looks good!* She'd thought the same thing about him when he'd been home on leave a year ago. She'd almost stripped him naked on their front porch, before he'd managed to push her back into the house. The rest of the week had been spent either fighting about him being

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gone or making love.

"The next drink's on me." The deep tenor in his voice echoed inside her head, fogging her thoughts.

"O...okay," she managed to reply, her own voice sounding as shaky as she now felt.

He placed a ten-dollar bill next to her glass, then skimmed the lightest touch along her arm, raising a fresh crop of goose bumps along the way. "Mind if I have a taste?" he asked, motioning to her drink.

"No, not at all." She raised the glass to his mouth and watched his luscious lips pucker around the tiny straw. Oh, how she wanted nothing more than to have those lips touching her all over, reminding her of why she married him in the first place.

When he finished, he pulled away and smiled. "Sweet. If my recollection is correct, you used to taste that sweet, too."

Oh, God! What an image those words conjured. Her entire body shivered with hopeful anticipation. Was he really willing to go along with her plans?

"So, you here with anybody?"

Guess that answered her question. Between the numbing effects of the alcohol and her own nerves, she managed a near-coherent reply. "Um...I...I'm waiting for my husband."

His gaze dropped to her hands, then shifted back to her face. "I don't see any rings."

She glanced at her fingers, noting the absence of adornments. When she'd filed for the divorce, she'd taken them off. Now, as she turned her attention back to him and the pained look he wore, she'd found herself wishing she'd decided to wear them.

"It's...uh...complicated, but I assure you that I'm married." *I think!* She could only hope the fact he was here meant he hadn't

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signed the damn papers.

His hand passed over her shoulder and eased back her hair. His breath feathered over her skin, and his lips hovered mere millimeters from the rim of her ear. “Happily?”

She twisted her neck and stared at him, unsure of how to answer. It was a valid question. Would she consider her marriage to Clay happy? Considering the divorce papers sitting at home on the kitchen table awaiting his signature, she’d have to say no. Still, the fact she was here, attempting to recapture the love they once shared, had to mean something.

“Well?” he asked, pulling back to rest his elbows on the bar railing.

Time can have a funny effect on a person, she realized as she fought to keep from reaching for him. Issues that seemed insurmountable a few short months ago now didn’t seem so important. “I hope it’s happy,” she finally replied, realizing she meant every word.

He cocked his head to one side and gave her a sad smile. “Let’s find out.”

CHAPTER 2

Clay stared at the woman next to him, who, for the moment, he still called his wife, not quite believing his eyes.

Her straight, brunette locks were now deep auburn curls, which hung well past her shoulders. Judging by her lean, slender legs and white belly shirt, she'd lost at least thirty pounds, if not more, making her sexy as hell. The addition of two large, perfectly round mounds on her chest added to her already sultry look. His fingers itched to feel them, to touch the cherry centers and send her spiraling into the abyss. Maybe it was his wayward libido taking over, but the anger and fear he'd wrestled with all day was gone, replaced with a renewed desire to have what was still his for the taking.

Her hand touched his, and he laced his fingers through hers.

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Together they walked to a low-lit booth in the back corner of the bar. He watched her from the corner of his eye, observing her nervous mannerisms.

She slid into the cushioned seat and looked up, giving him a small smile. The hesitation in her gaze struck him. It was the same expression she'd worn the first time they went on a date. He eased down into the booth and turned on his hip to face her.

"You look amazing," he said, brushing a stray hair from her face.

"Thank you." Her gaze fell away to the table.

Her timid nature pulled at his heart. It was as if he were seeing her for the first time. The woman he'd left behind was gone, replaced by a sultry goddess who didn't realize the power she now held.

"When did you—" He motioned to her chest.

"About four months ago," she replied. Her attention rose to meet his, a hopeful expression spreading across her face. "You really like them?"

He scooted closer until they touched at the hip and knee. "I can't wait to see them up close and personal."

A pretty shade of crimson crossed her cheeks. "Me, too."

If all of this was nothing more than a game, she was playing her part well. Then again, maybe he wanted to convince himself her intentions were sincere, that this wasn't all some ploy to gain more in the divorce settlement. He gave himself a mental smack, shaking the evil thoughts from his mind. Those were the exact kind of ideas that would end up ruining what little chance they had to make things right.

"So are there any other surprises I need to know?"

A small, playful grin crossed her face. "A few, but you'll have

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to wait to see what they are.”

Now there was a tiny hint of the woman he'd left behind. He wrinkled his brow, giving her a playful pout. “What? I don't even get a hint?”

Her smile filled her eyes. “There's one thing I could show you.” He watched her cast a quick gaze around the room before lifting her shirt just a little. He looked down to find a jeweled bellybutton ring and almost growled at the sight of it. Did she know how damn sexy that was?

She let go of her shirt and leaned into him, brushing several soft kisses along his jaw. “I missed you, Clay.”

Not nearly as much as he'd missed her. For months he'd worried about her walking away without him being able to do anything about it. He knew divorce was another hazard of being in the military, but it wasn't supposed to happen to him.

“I missed you, too.” He reached for her and slipped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. The movement was slow, graceful, and full of nervous anticipation. With their lips mere millimeters apart, he paused. It had been a year since he'd last kissed her. For months, he'd yearned to taste the sweetness of her flesh, to smell the flowery perfume she wore. Now he was getting that chance, but for some reason it was different—she was different—and he wasn't at all sure what to expect.

“Clay?”

Hearing his name snapped him from his trance and he looked down at her. Curiosity and anticipation skittered across her face. He smiled. “I'm sorry, honey. I was just thinking about the last time I kissed you.”

“That was too long ago,” she replied, placing her hand on his chest. “Let's start making new memories.”

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Before he could reply, her mouth hovered at his, their lips a hair's breadth apart. He felt her hesitation between kisses; the way her hand shook as she cupped his cheek and realized this wasn't just some mind game she was playing. She was as nervous as he was.

He opened his mouth slightly and swiped his tongue across her bottom lip, beseeching her for more. She responded with a whimper, followed by a slip of her tongue as her mouth opened and allowed him the entrance he craved. Stifling his moan of pleasure, he tangled his fingers through her hair and pulled her closer, deepening the kiss. He'd dreamed of this, the taste of her, the intimacy of the moment, the unbridled passion that exuded from her. Yeah, he'd missed all of it and much, much more.

Remembering where they were, Clay somehow managed to keep control. Though he couldn't begin to know how, when all he could think about was burying himself between her luscious legs. His contrary libido screamed at him, begging him to take her right where they sat. *No*. As much as he wanted to do that, getting off in some dark booth in a bar would cheapen the experience and disrespect what they were both trying to accomplish. That wouldn't do.

Breathing heavily, he pulled away and rested his forehead against hers.

"I want you, Clay," she declared. Her ragged breathing served to accentuate her point.

"I know. I want you, too, baby, but not here. Not like this."

She traced a line along his jaw with her index finger. "Then let's go up to our room."

He snagged her finger in his hand and kissed the tip. "I have a better idea. Let's go to dinner first. We've waited this long,

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hanging on for another hour or two can only make it better, right?"

* * *

Amy blinked while she worked to clear her mind of the sexual fog that had consumed her brain. The moment reminded her of the *Seinfeld* episode where George and Elaine were denied sex by their partners, and George grew smarter and Elaine grew dumber. Right at the moment, she felt a lot like Elaine. "You want to eat?" Her question sounded stupid even to her ears. "Um...I mean—"

He pressed a finger over her lips and grinned. "I want to prolong the moment, increase the tension, until we can't take it anymore."

Little did he know she was already there. Finding him standing next to her at the bar had set her insides on fire. If she had one thing to thank the military for, it would be their demand of physical fitness. Beneath the dark blue polo shirt and khaki pants he wore, she knew he possessed a hard body with lean lines and she couldn't wait to get her hands on him.

"Okay," she managed to reply without sounding too disappointed. "Let's go."

He slid from the booth and reached for her hand, which she willingly gave. It wasn't just the fact she'd been without sex for so long that made her hot for him. No, it was much more. Several times over the past twelve months she'd had the opportunity to feed her need, but the idea of sleeping with anybody but Clay had left a bad taste in her mouth. They had a connection unlike anything she'd ever experienced with another person. Even in her despondent and confused state of mind, she hadn't been willing to cheat. At the very least, he deserved better than that. Not that her

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letter had been much better, but if they'd divorced, she wouldn't have felt like a total scum.

Not that any of it mattered now. After the accident, all she could think about was patching things up with him. Many a night she'd dreamed of being cocooned in his arms, protected from the world. She knew that at some point she'd have to come clean, though. Despite her own misgivings, she hoped their connection still existed and would remain intact after she confessed her sins. He'd have every right to walk away, but if he did, she wasn't quite sure how she'd go on.

She felt the frown that claimed her features and fought to make it disappear before Clay noticed. He'd start asking questions and she wasn't prepared to answer them, yet. Oh, he'd find out soon enough, when he saw the scar on her hip, but explaining the accident would be much easier than explaining her wandering eye.

Fighting to push away her negative thoughts, she walked into the restaurant with him and waited while he pulled out a chair for her. The gesture, as simple as it was; made her want to cry. He was a man of honor and deserved better than her, better than this relationship.

As he took his seat across from her, he glanced up and frowned. "What is it, honey?"

She swept the emotion from her face and shook her head at him. "Nothing. I was just thinking how sweet it was of you to pull out my chair for me."

"Then why were you frowning?"

Her eyes widened. "I was frowning?"

"Yes. Now, do you want to tell me what's really wrong? I hate seeing your pretty face all scrunched up with worry lines."

"It's just...well—"

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“Hi, I’m Tori and I’ll be serving you tonight. Can I get you something to drink while you look at your menus?”

Amy looked up at the waitress, then back to Clay. This was wrong and she needed to stop it now. “I’m sorry, Clay.” She pushed away from the table and stood. “I can’t do this.”

Before he could reply, she turned and ran from the restaurant. Tears streamed down her cheeks and her heels clicked across the lobby’s marble floor as she rushed for the elevators. Clay called for her to stop, his voice echoing in the cavernous space behind her.

She turned the corner and pressed the button for the elevator, praying it would open in time. It didn’t, and she felt his hand come down on her shoulder. His fingers dug into her flesh as he spun her to face him, almost taking her off her feet in the process.

His face carried a confused anger, which made her want to cry even more. “Don’t do this, Amy. Don’t walk away from me now, not when we’re on the path to working things out.”

Guilt ate her up inside. Unable to look him in the eye, she cast her gaze over his shoulder. “Don’t you understand? You deserve better than me. What I did to you was wrong on so many levels. If you’d just signed the papers and walked away, I could’ve told myself I got what I deserved.”

The elevator doors opened, and he nudged her inside. “I could’ve signed the papers, but why would I want to when all I’ve wanted since I got your letter was for you to change your mind?”

She gave him a cautious glance. “So you’re not angry with me?”

“Oh, I was angry. I was angry at you for not waiting until I got home to tell me you wanted a divorce, and I was angry at myself for ignoring your pleas and putting you in that position to start with. Not all of this is your fault, Amy.” He raised a hand to her

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face and brushed away her tears with his thumb. “I didn’t talk to you about joining the military. I just did it and then expected you to hop on board because it was what I wanted. It wasn’t fair of me to do that to you. You might have married me, but you didn’t sign on for everything I’ve put you through.”

She couldn’t believe her ears. Was he actually taking some of the blame for what she’d done? “I love you, Clay, and I should’ve been more supportive.”

He smiled. “And I should’ve been more understanding.”

The elevator doors opened at their floor. “Since we’re here...” Clay motioned to the empty hall. “Want to take this to our room?”

She smiled through her remaining tears and pulled the keycard from her pocket, handing it to him. Maybe things would be okay after all.

CHAPTER 3

Clay fumbled with the keycard, sliding it in the slot three times before the red light turned green. “I still like real keys better,” he mumbled as he gained access. He pushed on the handle and opened the door, then motioned for Amy to step inside. She walked past him into the room, her face still flushed from the tears she’d shed moments ago.

Clay let the door slam shut behind him and watched as she toed off her heels. For the first time all night, he noticed the ankle bracelet and toe ring she wore and his heart began to pound faster. The woman who stood before him spoke with his wife’s voice and carried her scent, but looked nothing like the plump, unhappy housewife he’d left behind a year ago.

Worrying her bottom lip between her teeth, she stepped toward

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him.

Instinct prodded him to reach for her, pulling her against him. The movement was rough and fast and caused the breath to whoosh from her. She looked up at him, doe-eyed. “Make love to me?”

He laced his fingers through her hair and tilted back her head. “All night long,” he whispered against her ear.

He reached for the edge of her shirt. Ever since he’d laid eyes on her in the bar, he couldn’t wait to feel her love wrapped around him, to touch the new breasts she displayed with pride. Now, he was getting his chance. She raised her arms over her head, allowing him to strip one barrier free from her. There, staring back at him, were two round, plump mounds, peeking out from behind the sexiest pink lace bra he’d ever seen. His mouth went dry and a lump formed in his throat as he set to working on the hooks.

Within seconds, the pink lace slackened and fell away, leaving nothing standing between him and his goal. Dark cherry in color, her pert nipples stood at attention, waiting for his care. He raised his hands to cup her where her bra had been, his eyes taking in every inch of her.

“Now you’ve seen them up close, do you still like them?” Her voice was low and carried with it a husky quality that told him she, too, was aroused.

He answered with a swipe of his tongue across first one taut peak, then the other. Her breath caught on a gasp and she grabbed his shoulders in response.

“You like that?” he whispered as he returned to the first mound and sucked.

“Yes,” she whimpered and arched into him.

Still cupping her with his hands, he brushed his thumb over one

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nipple while he continued to ravage the other with his mouth. God, it had been such a long time since he'd had the pleasure of touching her, tasting her. He hadn't even reached the good part yet and already his body hummed with need, his cock springing to life on the promise of a satisfying completion.

Her hands traveled down his chest and tugged at his polo. Despite his reluctance to let go, he did and shrugged out of his shirt. Her eyes widened and she reached out for him, her nails grazing over his flesh.

Desire raced through him, causing his dick to jerk against his zipper. Thank God he'd decided to wear boxers and not go *au naturel*. It would have been a bitch having the metal zipper rubbing against his shaft.

She gave him a wry smile. "I forgot how damn sexy you are."

"That goes double for you, baby."

Before he could touch her again, she backed away and turned out the light that had been on when they came in. For several seconds the room was dark, then his eyes began to adjust. With the balcony curtains standing halfway open, the three-quarter moon bathed the room in a soft glow. He watched her cross the room, strip and climb onto the bed. Sitting on her knees in the middle of the mattress, she looked like an angel and a temptress all in one. "It's been too long, Clay. Don't make me wait any longer."

How could he deny a request like that?

He stepped out of his shoes and shucked the rest of his clothing, letting the garments fall where they may. Nothing in the world was more important right now than this moment and the woman he loved.

He climbed onto the bed and felt it sink under his weight. Resting on his knees, he pulled her to him. Their torsos touched,

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skin to skin, while their fingers twined and their mouths linked. His cock, already hard as steel, rubbed against her belly and his balls bumped against her mons, causing even more blood to flow south. The scent of her, the lovely aroma of roses, surrounded him, caressed his senses and fed his desire.

Clay slid a hand around her neck and pulled her close. She tilted her head back and closed her eyes, as if in anticipation of the kiss to come. He lowered his mouth to hers and softly nibbled on her bottom lip. She parted them on a sigh and he slipped a gentle tongue inside. With slow, rhythmic thrusts, he mimicked everything he wanted to do to her, deepening the kiss and consuming her mouth as if it was the last kiss he'd ever receive.

Several long seconds passed before he pulled back, breaking their contact. Amy blinked and her lips curled up into a knowing smile. "I forgot what a damn good kisser you are."

He mouthed the soft skin along her jaw, carving a path to her ear. "Kissing isn't the only thing I'm good at," he whispered in her ear. His hand slipped farther down, tweaking her nipple between the thumb and finger while he kissed his way back to her mouth.

She gasped and he swallowed her moan, knowing he'd never get tired of hearing her make that sound. Lower he trailed, his fingers on a mission to find the elusive sweet spot he knew she had, the one that would make her purr like a kitten, then scream like a banshee. He dipped between her legs and came in contact with smooth, wet skin.

"Love the hairless look," he said. "So damn sexy." He punctuated the last word by shoving two fingers into her pussy.

"Oh, God, Clay." She grabbed his shoulders, and he swore she grew wetter, flooding his fingers with her juices as he pushed farther inside. He withdrew and moved a knuckle through her

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swollen folds, covering her with her own lubricant. She arched her hips, her lustful eyes locked on him. He returned his digits to her center, only long enough to gather more of her sweet essence before stroking again up over her clit. With every moment, he watched her, gauging her reaction and adjusting accordingly.

“Please!” Her words were breathless and needy as she spoke.

Hearing her beg stoked his fire that much more. “What, baby? Tell me what you want me to do.”

“I...I want you to fuck me. Now!”

No way was he going to let a request like that go unanswered, especially when his dick felt as if it was going to break in two if he didn’t find some release. With two fingers lodged deep in her pussy and his thumb stroking over her sensitive nub, he plundered her mouth. Within seconds he felt her channel clamp down and she mewled as her orgasm overtook her. Her fingers dug into his back as she throbbed around his. He held her steady, and when she began to come down, Clay lowered her to the pillow.

He smiled down at her. “My turn, baby.”

With a look of mild satisfaction, she grinned and let her knees fall apart, opening herself to him. The proof of her need glistened in the moonlight, and Clay nearly forgot to swallow.

He nestled between her legs and in one long, slow thrust filled her. A moan passed over his lips as he dropped to his elbows. He couldn’t help himself. Being gloved inside her tight, wet core was something he’d missed so much. She wrapped her legs around him, the angle allowing him to slide even deeper inside her heated center. This was heaven, pure, sweet heaven. For several seconds he didn’t move at all, simply enjoying the feel of her silky heat surrounding him, then, when his own restless need began to grow, he moved his hips back and forth, starting a measured rhythm.

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He dropped his head down and rasped his tongue over her erect nipple. She groaned and reached down to seize her own breast. Squeezing, she offered it up to him as if it were some sort of delicious dessert. Taking as much of her into his mouth as he could, he sucked and pulled, his teeth grazing over her erect bud as he let her breast loose from his mouth. She grabbed the other one, repeating the process, and Clay couldn't help but smile. Never before had Amy been so active in bed or so willing to show him what she liked.

Questions formed, swirling in his head, mixing with his desire, blending to create the perfect storm of need. His balls ached for release and his dick throbbed. Even buried deep inside her wasn't enough. He couldn't remember the last time he'd needed to come this badly.

As his speed built, he rose up, gripped her hips and his hand grazed across a raised strip of skin on her left hip. For a split second, he wondered what exactly it was he felt, but the thought fluttered away as the pressure in his abdomen began to grow.

Beneath him, Amy panted and quivered as her hips rose to meet his thrusts. Her eyes remained locked with his, forming a familiar connection. Through her ragged breaths, she smiled and much to his surprise and delight, her hands covered her breasts, and she fondled herself, tugging and pulling on the swollen nipples that only moments ago he'd happily tortured. The picture was so damn erotic it pushed Clay right over the edge.

With one last long thrust, he buried himself deep inside her pussy and held there, his hips rotating in small circles as liquid lightning rocketed down his spine and out the end of his cock. Each pulse provided him with an almost painful release, as if he were being milked for his seed.

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Somewhere, lost inside his own orgasm, he heard her cry out and felt her slick walls contract, the action furthering his own pleasure. Twelve long, sexless months, eight of them steeped in worry, and his desire and need culminated in this one moment. His vision tunneled and nearly went black as his body released every bit of pent up energy he'd been carrying.

"Oh, fuck!" He groaned when the last echoes of his climax finally began to subside. His body went limp and he collapsed on top of her, his head coming to rest in the crook of her neck. Unable to do much more than move his lips, he mouthed the sensitive flesh beneath her jaw. "I love you, baby," he whispered.

"I love you, Clay," she replied, her words carrying with them a replete bliss that made him smile.

* * *

Completely sated and unbearably happy, Amy lay in the dark, ensconced in her husband's arms. She'd dreamt of this moment, playing it out in her mind over the course of the last year. Except for her gnawing guilt, it had played out better than she'd envisioned. She still wasn't quite sure why she felt so guilty. After all, it wasn't as if she'd actually cheated on Clay. Still, she shouldn't have allowed her then co-worker to kiss her.

Even now, her stomach pitted at the thought of another man's lips on hers. During the months that had followed, she'd questioned her motives, analyzing her feeling and thoughts, and had come to one conclusion. She'd gotten exactly what she deserved that night.

Intent on not spending another New Year's alone, she'd went to the party looking for companionship, longing for the soft touch

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and gentle caresses she should have been receiving from Clay, but wasn't. She knew if he'd been home, they would have probably spent the evening making love, which made the situation that much harder to bear. If he'd been at home, it wouldn't have been necessary to send him the letter.

She'd had a moment of weakness that ended with a New Year's kiss she'd never forget. In a darkened corner at the party house, her co-worker Rick Kline backed her up against the wall. "You look gorgeous tonight, Amy."

"Thank you, Rick, but I really need to get back to the party."

"Why, when we can make our own party right here?" His hand shot up her skirt the same time his mouth covered hers in a sloppy, drunken kiss.

Mortified at his behavior, she'd pushed at him. "I'm saying, no, Rick."

"But you really mean yes, baby. Otherwise, you wouldn't have come to this party alone, dressed for easy access. Why don't you just let me give you what we both know you want?"

Her hand pushed harder against his arm and she dug her fingernails into his flesh. "Stop, Rick. I'm a married woman."

"Only on paper, baby. Your husband is a huge ass for leaving you alone."

"Don't you dare bad-mouth him when he's overseas serving his country. Now get off of me." She'd fortified her words by slamming a knee into Rick's groin, sending the jerk sprawling to the floor on a howl that brought many of the partygoers to investigate. Embarrassed and ashamed, she'd gathered up her things and left the house inebriated, upset and in no shape to try to drive home. That was where her memory of that night ended.

Somehow, she'd lost a week of her life in the days that

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followed and when she finally began to remember, it was of a hospital room, nurses and a pain so powerful it caused her to faint.

She turned her head and stared at the man she loved more than anyone in the world. His eyes remained closed and his breathing had regulated. If she hadn't known better, she would have thought he was asleep.

When she'd come up with this idea to save her marriage, she hadn't expected him to agree. Now that he had, she knew if wanted any shot at keeping him, she'd have to come clean. That thought scared her to death. Would he understand and forgive her for her transgressions or would he pick up and leave?

As if he'd felt her staring, he opened his eyes and looked at her, his face twisting into a contented smile. "That was amazing."

She urged her thoughts from her head and returned his grin. "I know. It was so much more than I could've ever imagined."

He moved and his semi-hard shaft slipped free of her, giving Amy an odd, empty feeling. She wanted to protest, but he was growing a bit heavy and her arm had started to fall asleep.

Clay slid up the bed and motioned for her to join him. She inched her way to him, snuck beneath the covers and settled against him, his cock nestled between the cheeks of her ass.

Silence filled the room as they lay together, the quiet serving to perpetuate her guilt once again. "I'm so sorry, Clay," she said as she tried desperately to choke back the tears that burned her eyes.

He kissed the back of her neck as he slipped a hand over her belly. "It's okay, baby. Please don't start crying again."

She shook her head. "No, it's not okay. I couldn't handle the situation anymore and instead of seeking some sort of professional help, I bailed. It was wrong of me to put all of this on your shoulders while you weren't here to do anything about it."

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She sucked in a breath, struggling to maintain her composure. “I was just so lonely, Clay. It seemed everywhere I turned I encountered happy couples, and it hurt to know I couldn’t have what they had.”

“Stop, honey. Please don’t do this to yourself. I told you, I’m as much at fault as you are. I never once gave any thought to how this would affect you. For what it’s worth, I was just as lonely and missed you just as much.”

“That only makes me feel worse,” she replied as she wiped a tear from her cheek. “When the holidays came around and you weren’t here, I got angry. I’d already lost one year with you to the army and now I was losing a second. It didn’t seem fair to me. I wanted more. I wanted to have the person I loved with me during the special times in my life, to go to bed wrapped in his arms and wake up every morning to his kisses.

“After a horrible Thanksgiving, watching my sister and her newlywed husband suck face half the day, I broke. If you weren’t going to give me what I needed, then I was going to look elsewhere. It was that night I went home and wrote the letter telling you I wanted a divorce.”

His hand trailed lazy circles around her belly button as he continued to cover her back in soft kisses. “I have to admit that getting your letter right before Christmas did hurt. I was angry with you for not waiting until I got back so we could work things out, but I was also angry at myself for re-enlisting. I should’ve listened to you when you pleaded with me not to go back. You had every right to do what you did. I’m just glad you changed your mind and was willing to give us another chance.” The hand he’d been caressing her belly with slid lower. A single finger glided through her lips and over her clit, causing her to let out a small gasp.

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“We have a lot of catching up to do,” he whispered as he rubbed over the tiny nub.

Desire spiraled up from her belly, flooding her with warmth that had her tossing the covers aside. He gripped her thigh and raised it up and over his leg. She felt the head of his cock brush at her entrance, then slip inside. Still lubricated with his seed, he slid in easily and growled in her ear. “God, you feel so damn good, honey. I swear I could stay lost in you forever.”

* * *

Morning light filtered through the still partially open curtains, creating a soft glow in the room. Clay yawned and stretched, his arm coming to rest on warm skin. He opened his eyes and smiled. Amy lay next to him, curled in a ball, lightly snoring. Her auburn curls draped across her pillow, reminding him of leaves in the fall.

He leaned over and brushed a gentle kiss across the skin on the back of her neck. She responded by mumbling incoherently and snuggling back against him. God how he’d missed the feel of waking up next to her in the mornings. It had been ages since he’d partaken in early morning sex and right about now he was up for changing that.

He slipped a hand down her side and wove it through the open space between her arm and body. He cupped her gently and brushed a thumb over her nipple about the same time he planted a kiss right below her ear. “Good morning, sweetheart.”

She turned into him, opened her eyes and smiled. “Good morning to you, too.”

He continued to knead her breast, then pinched her nipple between his thumb and finger. “I couldn’t possibly talk you into a

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little morning nookie, could I?”

Her smile widened. “Maybe, but I’d have to get a shower and brush my teeth first.”

He let go and leaned up on one arm to gain a better look at her. “Way to kill the mood, babe.” He laughed.

She snaked an arm around his neck and pulled him down to her. “You forget,” she whispered as she planted loving kisses along his jaw, “the shower is big enough for two.”

“I like your thinking, Mrs. Storey.”

“Good, then give me a couple of minutes of private time to take care of business.” She tossed the covers off and sat up. “When you hear the water start, come join me.”

“I can do that,” he replied, watching her rise from the bed. As she turned to head toward the bathroom Clay caught sight of what he’d felt the night before and frowned as he studied the long, pink scar that marred the skin on her hip. “Amy?”

She paused at the doorway and looked back at him. “Yeah?”

“What happened to your hip?”

The smile on her face faded and she cast her gaze to the floor. “Um...I was in a car accident and broke a bone in my hip. The doctors had to do surgery and fix the joint so it would heal properly.”

Disbelief raced through him as he ripped the covers from the bed and scrambled to her side. How could she have been involved in an accident serious enough to break her hip and he wasn’t notified? “Wait a minute. What accident?” He tugged on her hand, pulling her back to the bed.

She sat on the edge and took in a deep breath. “It happened on New Year’s Eve. A friend from work invited me to a party. I didn’t want to be alone that night so I went, but I ended up having a

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horrible time. It was about one in the morning when I decided to head home. I'd probably had more to drink than I should have to be behind the wheel, but nobody could talk me out of it. The next thing I remember was waking up in the hospital several days later."

His ears had to be deceiving him. No way could he have heard her correctly. "Honey, why didn't you have a message sent? I could've come home to be with you for a little while."

She looked up at him, tears welling in her eyes. "I couldn't, not after sending you the letter. The accident was my own stupid fault, and I couldn't ask you to come home and take care of me after telling you I wanted a divorce."

He brushed the hair from her face, tucking the stray pieces behind her ear. "I really wish you'd let me know. I can't imagine you going through this alone, baby."

She shook her head and stared at the wall in front of her. "At that time, I felt as though I deserved to be alone. That it was God's punishment for my misbehavior. Besides, I had my parents and since it was my first offense, I was able to go to an alcohol treatment facility in lieu of jail. I had mandatory counseling there, so I was able to talk out a lot of my problems and get to the core issues."

Clay drew in a deep breath and held it as he absorbed her confession. Anger and frustration dueled inside his head as he tried to keep a tight grip on his composure. Getting upset and yelling about something already done and over was pointless. It would only make her feel worse for something she already harbored immense guilt over. Still, as her husband, he had a right to know what was taking place here while he was gone. He should have been there, by her side, offering her comfort and working to get through their issues together. Instead, she'd intentionally chosen to

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keep him in the dark and that knowledge cut him deep.

"I'm very glad you got the help you needed. I'm also more thankful than you'll ever know that you weren't killed and didn't hurt anybody else, but damn it, Amy, I had a right to know."

Tears trickled down her cheeks as she cast her gaze to the floor once again. "I'm so sorry, Clay. Please don't hate me. I just reached a point where I realized telling you would only cause more pain and I'd done enough of that already. I didn't want you to hate me."

"Amy, look at me." When she continued to stare at the floor, he curled his thumb under her chin and forced her to look at him. "I could never hate you, but I am hurt. You intentionally cut me out of your life when I was in a position where I couldn't do anything about it. Answer me this one question."

"What?"

"When did you decide you wanted me back?"

She wiped the tears from her cheek. "When I was in rehab. All I could think about was how much I missed you and how I'd never be able to find the connection we share with any other man."

"You never answered any of my letters."

"I know. I wanted to, but after everything that happened I didn't know what to say to make it right. That's when I came up with this idea. When I was well enough to start working again, I took a second job and saved up all those paychecks. When I had enough money saved, I had the breast implants done. After my physical therapy ended, I joined a gym and started working out every day. I took up swimming and yoga and worked to build up my body. I didn't want to be the wife you left behind, I wanted to be the wife you were proud to come home to."

"But I am proud of you, especially after hearing all of this. You

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have a lot of strength to go through all that alone. I wish I'd been here for you, but I'm glad you found your way despite the fact I wasn't."

She smiled a little. "I wasn't alone. My friends Pam and Rachel from work helped a lot. Pam would always bring me food and help me keep the house clean and the laundry done, and Rachel would drive me to my doctor's appointments, physical therapy and even to the grocery store. I don't know how I'd have made it through without them."

"They sound like good friends. I'll have to meet them sometime so I can thank them for helping you through this." He leaned into her and swept a kiss across her lips. "I know we have a lot of hurt feelings and open wounds to work through, baby. I promise I'll do whatever it takes to make our marriage work again, but you can't keep secrets from me."

"I know and I'm sorry. We're off to a pretty good start in mending our marriage. Let's not let this derail it," she whispered as she climbed onto his lap. "Now, how about that shower?"

* * *

The smell of corndogs and saltwater taffy mixed with the sea air as, hand in hand, Amy and Clay strolled along the boardwalk, stopping every so often to step inside one of the hundreds of stores along the beachfront.

"So you want to tell me a little more about your hip?"

"What do you want to know?"

"Well, like if you're limited in your mobility or if you have things you can't do now."

Amy turned her gaze to the ocean and watched waves crash to

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the shore as she formulated her thoughts. “I can’t cross my legs, otherwise I run the risk of popping the joint out of the socket. Rain and cold weather tends to make it ache and when I’m tired, my limp is much more pronounced. Other than that, I don’t really have anything I can’t do.” She turned back to him and began walking once again.

He squeezed her hand, shooting her a mischievous smile. “I assumed sex wasn’t an issue, since you didn’t say anything.”

She grinned. “No, that’s not a problem other than it had been way too long since I’d had any.” She glanced up at him, gauging his reaction and ran smack into another pedestrian. The impact nearly knocked her off her feet and she took a minute to regroup before turning to the person to apologize.

“Oh, I’m so sorry—” She cut her sentence short when she realized who it was.

Rick met her gaze, his expression one of shock. “Amy?”

Amy tucked a stray hair behind her ear as she nervously glanced at Clay out of the corner of her eye. He was still standing behind her, a look of curiosity plastered across his face. This was the last thing she needed right now. *Please God, don’t let him say anything incriminating*

Rick grabbed her free hand and squeezed. “Oh, my God, you look amazing.”

“Yes, well...thank you.”

“How have you been?”

“Good. I’m good and you?”

“Oh, not too bad.” He motioned to the rides littering a pier a few feet away. “I’m just here with my girlfriend and her little girl.”

Amy nodded. “That’s nice.” *Please leave now.*

Rick turned away as if he were about to leave, and she let out a

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short-lived sigh of relief, before he turned back to her. “Listen, I’ve always felt bad I never got the chance to apologize to you for New Year’s Eve. I’ve never been one to handle my alcohol and, well, I guess I misread your signals that night.”

Please, no. Amy shook her head violently. “No, it’s okay. You don’t have to.”

“No, I need to. If I’d known kissing you that night would make you so upset, I’d never have done it. I felt horrible about the accident and maybe I was a bit of a coward for not coming to see you, but I’m really glad to know you doing well.”

“Yeah, I’m doing fine.” At least she had been until she’d run into him. No way could Clay have missed that conversation and now she’d have to shift into damage control mode to try to save what was left of her marriage.

“Good. If you get the chance, maybe you and your friend would like to come over for a cookout or something. I’m sure you and Marci would hit it off.”

Amy shifted nervously from foot to foot as adrenaline coursed through her veins. She didn’t have to see Clay’s face to feel the anger growing inside him. The quicker she was able to talk to him, the better chance she had to halt the tidal wave of anger and accusations that would follow. “Um...yeah, sounds like fun. Maybe we’ll do that.”

“Great. Well, I got to run. You take care now.”

She watched him walk away, all the while feeling Clay gaze boring a hole into her back. Now was the moment of truth. It was her own fault for not telling him sooner and she had to face whatever wrath he bore. Holding her breath, she slowly turned back to face him. Anger radiated through his frame as he stared at her, unblinking. “Please let me explain.”

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He held up a hand to stop her. "I think he pretty much said it all. You said it yourself that you were lonely and despondent. You went to that party looking to hook up, didn't you?"

Her heart pounded faster. The sound of it reverberated through her body and echoed in her ears. "Not exactly."

He shook his head and turned to walk away. "You lied to me, Amy."

Stumbling to catch up with him, she followed. "I know, and I'm so sorry, but I was trying to find the right time to tell you." She grabbed his arm, trying to stop him. He ripped it from her grasp as if her touch caused him physical pain, and Amy had to fight back a flood of tears.

"The right time to tell me would have been when you were in the hospital recovering from the accident you also chose to keep from me. Are there any other surprises I need to know about?"

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she shook her head. "I swear that was the only one. Please hear me out before you walk away." She paused, waiting to see if he would give her the opportunity to explain. When he said nothing, but remained fixed in place, she continued. "I admit I went to the party because I was feeling lonely and sad. I didn't want to hook up with anybody, just find some companionship.

"Maybe I unknowingly led Rick on that night. Maybe he really was drunk and read more into my actions than what was there. Either way, when he kissed me, I knew what I was doing was wrong. Despite how I felt, I would never cheat on you. I pushed him away and left the party. That's when the car accident happened. As I'm sure you gathered from our conversation, I haven't seen him since."

Clay remained silent, transfixed in place, staring at her. A quiet

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raged filled his gaze, making her squirm.

“Clay—”

“What?” he interrupted. “I suppose you want me to forgive you for not only kissing another man, but also lying to me about it? I can’t.” He shook his head and started walking again. “I just can’t.” A quick jolt of panic flashed through her system. “Please don’t do this, Clay.”

He waved a hand at her. “Don’t, okay? Right now, I can’t even look at you. I need some time alone.”

Stopping, she closed her eyes, drew in a deep breath and opened them again, only to watch him stalk away, eventually losing sight of him in the sea of people milling about. Just when she thought she’d managed to save her marriage, it all fell apart in a matter of seconds. There was little doubt in her mind he was heading home to sign the divorce papers. She was about to get what she deserved.

* * *

Clay stormed away from Amy, anger coursing through his veins. Despite his hurt feelings at not knowing about her accident, he’d held his tongue, choosing to focus on the fact she was okay. Finding out she’d nearly cheated on him was more than he could take. How could she expect him to just give her absolution and move on like nothing had happened?

If he couldn’t trust her not to lie to him, how could they save their marriage and make it work? Intent on grabbing his bag and leaving, he headed through the hotel entrance and stopped inside the doorway, eyeing the bar. If there were ever an occasion to have a drink, this was it. Abandoning his first mission, he crossed the

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lobby into the bar and slid onto an empty stool.

“What can I get you?”

Clay glanced up to see a female bartender looking straight at him. He pulled a twenty from his pocket and slapped it on the bar. “Scotch on the rocks and keep them coming.” Much like how he felt upon receipt of her letter, anger, frustration and pain warred for space inside his head as he waited for his drink to arrive.

Asking for a divorce was one thing, but cheating on him while they were still married was something different.

The bartender set the glass of dark liquid down in front of him, only to have him down it in one gulp and ask for another. Getting drunk wasn’t going to get rid of his problem, but it would help him forget about it for a little while.

She set the second glass down in front of him and waited. “Only two kinds of people drink their liquor like that—people who just lost a bet and ones with broken hearts. Since you don’t look like the gambling type, I’m guessing it’s the latter.”

He arched a brow at her. “Is it that obvious?”

She smiled and leaned her elbows against the mahogany top. “Yep. So what happened? She run off with some guy?”

He took a large gulp. “Not exactly.”

“Ahh...then you must’ve gotten the ‘I want a divorce’ speech.”

He frowned. “You’re awful nosy.”

She raised her hands in defense and backed away. “Hey, I’m just trying to help. They always say you feel better when you talk out your feelings.”

“Yeah, who says that?” Clay asked before taking another drink.

“Only every shrink I’ve ever been to.”

He eyed her. Maybe it would help to get an objective opinion on the situation. “To make a long story short, this weekend was an

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attempt to save my marriage. Only I just found out that my wife nearly cheated on me with another man.”

She edged closer. “Nearly? As in could have, but didn’t?”

Clay nodded. “According to her, she kissed this guy, but had a sudden attack of conscience and decided she couldn’t go through with it.”

“And you’re mad about that?”

“Hell, yeah, I’m mad. While I was halfway across the world serving my country, she was kissing another man.”

The bartender smiled. “Look, I can understand you being hurt, but I think you’re missing the positives here.”

Clay knocked back the rest of his drink and held out the glass to her. “And what would those be?”

“For starters, there’s the fact she didn’t go through with it. She could have slept with another man, but instead, she loved and respected you enough to realize she couldn’t do that to you. Then there’s the fact you’re here for what I’m guessing was supposed to be a romantic weekend. I’d say you’re a lucky man.”

“How am I lucky?”

She set the next drink down in front of him. “Because she loves you enough to want to try and make things work.”

“But she lied to me. The only reason I found out about the other man was because we ran into him on the boardwalk.”

“I’ll admit it was wrong of her to lie, but put yourself in her position. You want to save your marriage and you have a secret that could end it. Are you going to blurt it right out, or are you going to try and wait for the right time; maybe a moment that would help to ease the blow?”

Clay stared down into his drink as he considered her words. “She did say she was going to tell me but hadn’t found the right

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time.”

“And let me ask you. While you were away, did you ever think about cheating on her?”

He scoffed at her words. “I was in a war zone. The last thing I was thinking about was sex.”

“What about when you had leave—and I’m not talking about when you were home—but when you’d earned two or three days to yourself.”

“Maybe,” he admitted. “But thinking about it and doing it are two different things.”

“That may be true, but that should tell you something. We’re only human. We all make mistakes and we have to live with those mistakes, regret and all. If I were you, I’d leave that drink, go find my wife and make love to her like tomorrow will never come. Because you of all people should realize you never know when it may not.”

The woman had a good point. He couldn’t deny that on the few occasions he’d managed a couple days respite, the temptation had been there. Though he’d never gone through with it, he had come close. Maybe he was being too hard on Amy.

He reached into his wallet and threw another twenty on the bar before sliding from the stool. “Thanks.”

Not having any clue of where she might have gone, Clay first headed upstairs to check their room, only to find it empty. Her belongings remained in the room, which meant she hadn’t checked out yet. He raced back downstairs and out onto the boardwalk. If he knew Amy the way he hoped he still did, she’d want to be alone. Since she wasn’t in her room, that meant she’d probably headed for the beach and away from the boardwalk.

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* * *

Amy walked along the beach, holding her sandals in her hands as the waves licked at her ankles. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she listened to the soft roar of the water crashing against the sand. She glanced over her shoulder and watched the lights from the hotel and boardwalk grow farther away with each step.

She was such a fool. Clay had given her an opportunity to make things right and she'd kept the most important information from him. In the end, she'd gotten just what she deserved.

She neared a stand-alone pier designed for fishing and started beneath the giant pillars when a noise caught her attention. With the sun now low over the water and dusk taking over, she struggled to see where the sounds were coming from. She stopped near one of the support posts and focused on a couple on the other side of the pier, up near the dunes. On a large blanket, the couple lay naked, with the man's face nestled between the woman's open legs. Moans of pleasure tumbled from the woman's lips, and Amy couldn't help but watch as the man lapped at the woman's pussy like a cat after cream.

Her own channel clenched emptily as she thought about Clay and how she'd never again feel the warmth of his mouth against her pussy, or the feel of his hard, thick cock inside her.

Amy leaned against the post and fought back tears as she studied the couple. The right thing to do would be for her to turn and walk away. After all, the couple had no idea she was watching them, invading their private moment with her voyeurism. *Though, if they hadn't wanted to be seen, they probably should have stayed indoors.* Maybe they were one of those couples who got off on having sex in public.

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That thought sent a fresh shot of liquid into her channel. The woman let out a sob, pulling Amy from her thoughts and she watched as the woman's climax engulf her.

"Like what you see?" The voice behind her caused Amy to jump in shock, but not fear. She turned her head to see Clay, his eyes cast in the direction of the couple making love.

"Um...I was walking when I stumbled across them. I didn't want to keep going and interrupt, so I stopped—"

"To watch instead," he added.

She felt the heat climb into her face and was thankful her blush would be hard to see in the dusk. "I meant to turn and walk back."

"But you couldn't help yourself," he whispered as he moved in closer.

Curious to know what he was up to, she didn't move away from him, instead allowing him the opportunity to slide an arm around her.

"I understand," he whispered in her ear as his hand snaked lower, gathering up the front of her sundress with his fingers. "Watching two people fuck can be very erotic. The question is, did you think it was hot?" The sentence ended with his fingers trailing beneath the lace panties she wore and directly into her cream.

Her knees buckled and she leaned back against him as first one finger, then a second, pushed through her folds and into the entrance of her pussy.

"Fuck, you're wet," he practically growled into her ear as his nimble fingers pumped in and out of her, pulling her juices up and over her clit. "I think you like the idea of having sex in public."

"I do," she whispered against his neck. Her words tumbled from her mouth in a rushed garble of desire and need. She didn't quite know why she was so willing to give herself over to him,

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especially after the way he'd stalked off earlier, but with her emotions in a jumble and her libido on fire, all she could think of was him assuaging her need.

"You stay right there and keep watching them," he ordered as he dropped to his knees, his hands sliding up beneath her sundress. She felt him tug at her panties, pulling the lace free from her moist flesh. She stepped out of her panties and watched as Clay slipped them into the front pocket of his jeans.

He glanced up. "I thought I told you to keep watching them, not me," he whispered.

Her eyes darted back to the couple who had now changed positions. The woman's head bobbed up and down like a dashboard novelty as she licked and sucked at the man's cock. Amy felt her own dress gathered and the cool ocean breeze kissing at her heated mound. Then Clay's mouth was there. His tongue swiped through her lips and ignited a fire deep inside her. She gasped, only to bite down on her lip in an attempt to contain it. With one hand resting on the post, she snaked the other through his hair as she struggled to keep her eyes open to watch the other couple.

The woman straddled her man and sank down onto his shaft, impaling herself with it. Uninhibited by her surroundings, she let out a cry as she began to ride him.

As Clay's nimble tongue worked at Amy's clit, torturing the tiny nub with rasp after warm rasp, his fingers trailed back, pulling her fluids toward her anus. Never, when they'd been together before, had she ever allowed him to touch her there, but right now, she knew she'd do anything he asked of her, as long as he didn't stop.

One very wet finger pushed against the opening and she started

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to tense, but another rasp of his tongue over her heated core had her gasping for more. An unfamiliar and extremely erotic burn filtered from her puckered center through her body as his finger worked its way inside. She felt a sharp shot of pain, then nothing but pleasure as his finger slid freely through the constricted ring of muscles. The nerve-rich tissue in her ass lit up as he stroked her gently. More, she wanted more.

“Clay, please,” she begged, not caring if anyone else heard.

He lifted his face away from her and looked up. The evidence of her desire glistened on his chin. “Yes, baby?”

“Give me more,” she pleaded as she looked down at him.

“Your wish is my command.”

She hadn’t even realized exactly what she was in for, until the familiar burn returned as the muscle stretched to accommodate a second finger. She panted, knowing that once he was inside the pain would pass, and it did as the second finger joined its mate.

Oh, God! Amy wasn’t sure if she’d actually said the words out loud, but realized that like this she wouldn’t last long.

His talented tongue swept over her clit, and she exploded, her tunnel locking down around his invading fingers as her entire body throbbed her release. Still, her pussy clenched emptily and she knew she wouldn’t be sated until she felt his large length buried deep inside her.

He must have been think the same thing because he slid his fingers free of her, unzipped his jeans and pushed them, boxers and all, to his knees. His glorious cock sprang forward, ready and waiting for satisfaction...a satisfaction she was more than happy to provide.

He lifted her up, instructing her to wrap her legs around him as her head and upper back rested against the pole. “Tell me you’re

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mine, Amy,” he ordered, his words a bit breathless.

“I’m yours, Clay.”

He slid deep into her, and she whimpered at the wonderful feel of him filling her.

“Forever, Amy,” he said, his words sounding more like a declaration than a statement.

Her gaze met his. “Forever,” she repeated as he pounded into her.

The fire in her belly raged higher, burned hotter. It wouldn’t take much for her to again topple over that precipice, but this time she didn’t want to go without him. The sound of wet, slapping flesh mixed with the roar of the waves and from somewhere behind her came a cry of release, an echo of her own climax as it barreled over her. Her pussy clamped around his thick shaft and it took everything she had not to yell out her own release.

Clay growled in her ear and bit her shoulder as he drove himself into her and held there, his hips moving in small circles as hot spurts of semen filled her channel. For several seconds, neither of them moved; even words were beyond her ability.

“I take it you’re not mad at me anymore,” she finally managed to ask.

He lifted his head to look at her. “No, I’m not mad anymore.”

She wiped a bead of sweat from his brow. “What changed your mind?”

He smiled. “A very nosy and helpful bartender, who so graciously pointed out that we all make mistakes. It’s what we do about those mistakes that’s important.”

For several seconds she studied his eyes, seeing the love radiating from deep inside. “I love you, Clay.”

He kissed her nose. “I love you, too. Why don’t we go back to

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our room and I'll show you again just how much."

She nodded as he lowered her to the ground, disengaging them in the process. Left uncomfortably empty, she couldn't wait to get back to their room and do it all over again. They might still have a long road ahead of them before their marriage was strong again, but at least he was willing to give them a chance, and at the moment, Amy couldn't ask for anything more.

MICHELLE CARY

When Michelle isn't engrossed in her favorite hobby of scrapbooking pictures of her family and friends, she usually can be found with a laptop attached to the end of her fingers. That is when she's not working to maintain a functioning household or running her two children to and from play dates.

Artistic from an early age, she spent her childhood dabbling in different artistic media. A lover of romance novels, Michelle decided a few years ago to try her hand at creating fictional worlds through words instead of paint. The result has given her an entirely new perspective on the world. Every day affords new opportunities for ideas and new ways to create the perfect happily ever after.

Raised in "small town" Illinois, Michelle now lives in New Jersey with her extremely supportive albeit somewhat neglected husband and their two beautiful children. For updates on her latest work, check out her website and blog at <http://www.michellecary.com>, or you can visit her myspace page at:

www.myspace.com/authormichellecary

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Don't miss *Don't Look Back*
by Michelle Cary & Amanda Young,
available at AmberHeat.com!

Walking away from the world's oldest profession was the easiest thing Cyndi Whitmore ever did. After five long years of selling her body to men, she vowed never to look back. Now, eighteen months later, her former "friends" are turning up dead and all fingers point to her as the murderer.

As if being framed isn't bad enough, her sudden attraction to the deputy working the "hooker murders" has her head spinning with confusion. Conditioned to be suspicious of the law, Cyndi finds herself torn between heart and mind when the sexy deputy is interested in her as more than just a suspect. If she has any hope of clearing her name, Cyndi knows she must overcome her fear and trust the only person willing to believe in her innocence.

Deputy Braden Andrews never expected to be dealt the task of catching a serial killer when he accepted the deputy sheriff's position in his small Nevada town. Nor did he expect his prime suspect to be a beautiful, alluring woman with a checkered past and secrets to hide. Braden works to gain Cyndi's trust in an attempt to pump her for information, knowing that she holds something important about the case. Instead, he falls hard for the auburn beauty. Despite his growing love for her, he quickly realizes there's a better than average chance she's being framed. But can he prove Cyndi's innocence before the killer strikes again?

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