

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



CHARMING
BY
HONOR
BOUND
Annie
ARIANNA HART

Charming Annie

Arianna Hart

As Major Annie Forbes heads home from her shift as a nurse at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, the last thing she expects is to be running for her life.

With the help of Mason “Mace” O’Keefe, an injured helicopter pilot, Annie must find a way to save the hospital from being blown up by a fanatic terrorist group. As the danger heats up, so does the attraction between Mace and Annie.

Now they just have to survive long enough to see if their smoldering attraction is just adrenaline or something more.

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Charming Annie

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CHARMING ANNIE

Arianna Hart

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank all the men and women who serve in the armed forces in whatever capacity. Know that those of us here at home appreciate you.

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Please note, I took some creative license with the floor plan of Walter Reed Army Medical Center to fit the story. Any and all descriptions of the hospital come from my imagination, as do the characters.

Dedication

This book is dedicated with enormous thanks to my sister Patti, for all her help.

Also to my “partners in crime”, who created such a wonderful family to draw inspiration from. Thanks Denise and Kate (and Bree and Martha) for making me part of the family.

Thanks also to all my online buddies who support and encourage me while I’m writing. You always know when I need a pat on the back or a kick in the pants and I’m grateful for both.

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Chapter One

Walter Reed Army Medical Center

Taking the stairs in the parking garage at midnight probably wasn't the smartest thing to do, but Major Anne Forbes had an aversion to elevators that went back to the days when her brother would lock her in the closet as a joke. Blayne had thought it was funny to hold the door closed while she screamed and kicked. She didn't find it all that amusing. To this day, being stuck inside a small, enclosed space bothered her to no end.

Annie had just about made it to the floor where her car was parked when the ground quivered and shook beneath her feet, knocking her down the last two steps.

"What the hell was that?" Annie rubbed the spot where her head thumped against the door and cautiously opened it.

To a scene out of a nightmare.

A car had exploded and smoke was blanketing the garage. Several men in black clothes with ski masks over their faces were poised at the elevators with assault rifles. Annie saw one civilian nurse bleeding from a head wound, and several other people crying and whimpering as they were hauled off the elevator. Fire alarms blared, and the noise echoed against the cement walls adding to the chaos.

Her brain had gone on hold, flashbacks to her tour as a field nurse in Iraq raced through her head. Visions of bearded men with fanatical eyes and gleaming knives assaulted her as the smell of smoke and gasoline washed over her. Annie was caught in a vicious film loop of pain and destruction that played over and over again.

She couldn't move. Her fingers froze on the door handle, immobile and helpless. A small voice in the back of her brain screamed at her to shut the door and run for help, but her body wouldn't move. Fire, smoke, the screams of the injured and the shouts of

the attackers mixed together until she couldn't tell what was real and what were memories.

A hooded head started to turn, and Annie watched it in slow motion. Suddenly, a hand covered her mouth, and an arm pulled her away from the door. Panic clawed in her belly as she slammed into a hard, male chest.

No! She wouldn't go down without a struggle. Turning her head she tried to bite the hand that held her. Annie fought back using her training, but her captor was too strong.

"Lady, I'm on your side! Calm down, we gotta get out of here." Annie stopped struggling.

As soon as she calmed down, the hand dropped from her mouth and she turned around. And saw the best-looking man she'd ever laid eyes on.

"Come on, we need to go before they decide to start checking the stairwells." Her sexy savior gave her a quick once-over, pausing briefly at her breasts.

"Who're they? And who are you?"

"Later! We don't have time for twenty questions now." He grabbed her arm and dragged her up the stairs behind him.

Annie's brain started working again, and she raced to keep up with the man yanking her arm out of its socket. He was barefoot, wearing pajama pants and a johnny, and she could see the tape from his dressing over his ribs.

Some Army nurse she turned out to be, getting saved by a patient. "Could you at least tell me your name?" Annie asked between gulps of air. How many flights had they already gone up?

"Mace. Mason O'Keefe, Captain, Aviation."

"Major Annie Forbes, Medical." Like her hospital whites didn't clue him in on that. "Where are we going?"

“To the roof. If we can reach the roof before they secure it, we can get out of here and get help. Do you always talk this much?”

Annie shut up and saved her air for the effort of climbing. She’d lost count of how many stairs she’d gone up, but if this hotshot could keep going, barefoot and injured, then she could too.

They were rounding yet another landing when the door above them opened. A scrawny figure in black aimed a rifle in their direction and fired.

“Get down!” Annie yanked Mace’s arm back off the steps and dragged him towards the nearest door. Bullets zinged around their heads like pinballs, the noise exaggerated by the cement walls.

Annie hauled open the door and dragged Mace out of the stairwell. She ran blindly through the tunnel that led to the hospital and burst through the first door she came to. Looking around she realized they were in the administration wing. Where could they hide here? She tried to think of a place safe from the lunatic on the stairs.

“Come on, we can hide in one of the offices.” She pulled his arm and jiggled the handle on the first door. Locked. The next one down the line was locked too. Panic sliced through her as a drop of cold sweat slithered down her back. That guy had to be on his way down the stairs and they were out in the open.

Running down the hall, Annie’s heart pounded furiously in her chest. They were sitting ducks if they couldn’t find a place to hide soon.

Finally! An open office. A mop lay in a puddle in front of the partially open door. One of the maintenance workers must have been cleaning the office when he heard the explosion.

“What are we going to do in here? Wait for them to find us and kill us?” Mace held his side a bit, but was barely winded.

“I don’t know, but it seemed like a better idea than charging a lunatic with a gun.” Annie gasped for air. The adrenaline running through her system made her jumpy and had all her nerves standing on end.

“Whose office is this anyway? Talk about high-class.”

Annie looked around for the first time and realized she’d busted into Colonel Michaels’ office. “The Chief of Staff, Colonel Michaels. He’s a good guy; I don’t think he’ll mind.”

“Does he carry a gun?” Mace asked, crossing to the desk and opening drawers.

“He’s a doctor. I don’t think he’s carried a gun in years.”

“He’s still a colonel. I’ll bet he has something here.” Mace continued to rifle around in the drawer.

Annie peeked out the door. “Shouldn’t they be following us? I mean it’s not like we went that far.”

“If they’re still securing the upper floors then they won’t bother with us until they have more time. Once the hospital is locked down, they’ll hunt us down like rabbits.”

“Gee, that’s comforting.”

“Aha!” Mace held up a knife that was easily six inches long. “I knew I’d find something. Come on; let’s look for a way out of here.”

He hadn’t taken two steps around the desk when the stairwell door slammed open.

“So much for your theory, now what?” Annie asked over the thunder of rifle fire.

Mace shot a glance at the window. It was sealed tight with Plexiglas. “Damn. I can’t break this with only a knife. We’re going to have to try the ventilation shafts and hope they hold our weight. If I give you a boost, do you think you could get in there and help me up?”

“Considering my life depends on it, yeah I can do it.” Annie waited for him to pry the grate off the wall and shove it into the ventilation shaft. All the while her ears strained for any sound of the terrorists coming closer. Adrenaline made her knees weak and her heart pound with every passing second.

“It’s off.” He laced his fingers together and squatted down. “Step in here and I’ll give you a boost.”

“Just like climbing into a hayloft.” Annie stepped into his cupped hands and used his shoulder for balance.

“On three. One, two, three!”

Annie practically flew up to the vent with the force of Mace’s boost. Boost? It was more like a launch. Although fit, she wasn’t tiny by any means, and he flung her up in the air like she was a toddler. Scrambling to find a purchase on the slick walls of the shaft, she felt a hand on her butt, pushing her inside.

Tucking her legs under her, Annie squirmed and wiggled around until she could poke her head and shoulders out of the shaft. “I’m ready when you are.”

Mace put the knife between his teeth and reached up for her outstretched hands. His grip was steely and confident, and she braced her feet against the sides of the shaft so he wouldn’t pull her out. Pulling with every ounce of muscle in her body, Annie fought to drag him up.

He must have found something to push himself off with, because one second she was yanking on his hands for all she was worth, and the next he was tumbling in on top of her, crushing her beneath his weight.

“I’m too big to turn around; you’re going to have to put the grille back over the vent so they won’t know what happened to us.”

Annie bit her tongue to keep from reminding him that she had the higher rank. She might be a major, but battle operations weren’t exactly her area of expertise. For the time being she’d follow his lead.

Sliding the grille cover out from under Mace’s legs, Annie wedged it back into place the best she could. Mace was sliding down her, and she could feel every inch of his muscled body against her back and legs. A sudden jolt of desire rocked her system, driving away the screaming pain in her arms from hauling that same muscled body into the shaft.

This was not the time for her libido to remind her that it was alive and kicking! She pushed away the unwanted heat and tried to ignore the moisture between her legs as she turned herself around to follow Mace.

“Do you have any idea where these things lead?” He looked over his shoulder at her.

“Not a clue. I know we’re in the west wing, and that’s about it.”

“Then we’ll follow the shaft where it leads us. With any luck at all we’ll be able to find a junction that will lead us up to the next level.”

“You really think that’s going to happen?” Granted, Annie didn’t know too much about crawling along in ventilation shafts, but she didn’t think they went up to the next floor.

“Hey, these old buildings are quirky; you never know what you might find.”

Mace used his arms and feet to push himself along the shaft. Annie was small enough so she could crawl on her hands and knees, but after scraping her back on the top of the shaft one too many times, she gave up and slid along on her belly. This was going to get old fast.

* * * * *

The stitches in his side were pulling with every inch he moved. Mace tried not to let Annie know about the pain he was in, but he was pretty sure his wound had started bleeding again. If this kept up he’d pass out from blood loss long before he could get out of the building.

There had to be some sort of junction somewhere. The vents couldn’t keep going in circles, could they? He felt like he’d been crawling around these dusty shafts for miles. Another grille was just up ahead; maybe she’d recognize the location.

“Hey, Major, we’re coming up on a ventilation grille, can you look out and see if you know where we are?”

“Sure.”

Her voice sounded a little winded, but she was still moving. Mace slid to the side, careful to keep the knife in front of him and pointing away. He already had one knife slash on him, and he sure as hell didn't want another one.

Rolling over to make some room for Annie, Mace couldn't help but wince at the pain in his side. Hopefully it was too dark for her to see his face, because he didn't want her thinking about him, he wanted her alert and watching for the enemy.

She wormed her way up to him, rubbing against his torso as she tried to see out the grille. Her ass was pressed against his cock in the tight space, and he had to clench his teeth to keep from groaning at the sweet torture.

This was a life or death situation, he shouldn't be thinking with his cock! He had to focus on the mission, staying alive and getting out, not on the sexy number rubbing up against him.

"Do you know where we are?" His voice was a little strained.

"Yup. We're in the office next to Colonel Michaels'. We made a complete circle."

"Shit."

"Well, what's Plan B?"

Plan B? He'd been operating on the seat of his pants for Plan A. He hadn't thought any farther than getting out of the building. Annie squirmed around until she was facing him, and he sucked in his breath.

She really was gorgeous. Big blue eyes stared out at him from an angel's face. Her long blonde hair had long since fallen out of the military bun it had been in and was hanging around her face in wisps. She was covered in dust and still looked sexy as hell. Why couldn't she have been *his* nurse?

"So, what do we do now?" She looked at him like he held all the answers.

Before he could admit to not having a clue, the door to the office below them burst in with a shattering of glass. Two men ran in, spraying bullets across the room. Mace

pulled Annie to his chest, muffling any noises she might make. Her body trembled against him, so he squeezed her closer.

“I tell you, I heard voices coming from in here.” A tall goon said to the other shorter one.

“I think the tension is finally getting to you. There’s no one in here.”

“The two I saw in the stairwell didn’t just disappear; they have to be on this floor somewhere.”

“Well, they’re not in here. After your little commando impression, they probably hit the stairs again. Come on, this floor is secure, let’s set the charges and move on. We’ve got a lot of territory to cover before morning.”

Mace looked out over Annie’s head and watched the shorter one walk out the door. The tall one stood there, looking around, then a smile crept over his face. Pointing the gun up to the ceiling, he let loose with another round of bullets.

Wrapping his arms and legs around Annie’s body, Mace tried to protect her from any stray bullets that were flying around. He could hear the plink, plink of them bouncing through the shaft around them.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Mace watched through the grille as the shorter one pushed the gun out of the taller one’s hands.

“Are you trying to announce to everyone where we are?”

“I’m just giving them something to think about. If the two of them are crawling around up there, I might have got lucky and hit them.”

“And you might have gotten hit by a ricochet bullet too. Dumbass. You are too damn trigger-happy with that thing. Come on, you go first this time, and keep your finger off the trigger.”

With his arms still wrapped around the woman shaking in front of him, Mace counted slowly to one hundred. When he was as sure as he could be, he let go of Annie and whispered in her ear.

“I think they’re gone, but whisper; sound carries in these things.”

She nodded her understanding. “What are we going to do?”

“We’re going to wait them out, then seek and destroy.”

Chapter Two

“Wait them out? In this little tunnel?” Annie hoped the panic didn’t show in her voice. Sliding around in the dark tunnels was starting to get to her. The danger of the situation had kept her mind off the fact that she was in a tiny space, but she wasn’t sure how much longer she’d hold it together. Not only that, if she didn’t stand up soon, she’d have a permanent kink in her back.

It had to be even worse for Mace, he was so broad and tall that he didn’t have half of her wiggle room. The two of them jammed together took up most of the shaft. Her breasts were squished against his chest, and it was like being smashed against a brick wall. An incredibly good-looking, muscular, brick wall.

“We can’t stay in here until morning, it’s only a matter of time before they get bored and decide to start shooting all the ceilings. We need to find a place to hide. Not an office, maybe an alcove or janitor’s closet or something.”

Annie’s stomach clenched at the thought of being trapped in a closet, but it would be better than this tiny space. She wasn’t really claustrophobic; she just didn’t like small spaces. And if she kept telling herself that, maybe she’d actually believe it.

“I think there’s a closet at the end of the hall, on the other side of the door from the stairs,” Annie whispered.

“Okay, I’ll go first, you follow. Try to be as quiet as you can, and be careful when we pass the grille openings.”

“Yes, sir.”

Annie almost groaned as he slid his body past hers, teasing every place he touched. When his waist moved past her, she couldn’t help but notice the impressive package he had between his legs. The nearly naked, impressive package.

Her body hummed in awareness, making every atom of her being stand at attention. She was so flustered from the full-body caress, she didn't see the pool of blood on the floor until her hand practically landed in it.

She grabbed his bare foot to stop him and slid up close enough to whisper to him. "Did you get hit? Or has your wound reopened? You're bleeding."

"Don't worry about it, it's only a scratch. Let's get to that closet first, then you can patch me back up."

Letting him slide away from her, Annie tried to see if he was lying to her about the extent of his injuries. He was moving along better than she was, so if that was any indication, he was doing just fine.

Stray bullets clinked against the sides as they passed them. They had been damn lucky so far. Hopefully their luck would hold until they made it to the closet.

What if the closet didn't have a way into the shaft? It wasn't like the janitor's closet would need to be air-conditioned. Doubts chased themselves around and around in her head until she was almost dizzy from worry. Annie bit her lip to keep from voicing any of her fears. She was combat-trained; hell, she'd done her time in the sandbox, she shouldn't be so afraid. But she was. Working as a field nurse hadn't prepared her for this.

It didn't matter. She had to hold it together. As far as she knew, she and Mace were the only two people free in the whole hospital. If she fell apart Mace would have to watch over her and wouldn't be able to go for help. It was imperative that he not know what an emotional basket case she was.

Hell, her father had survived being a POW in Vietnam; she'd damn well survive this.

"Are you sure there's a janitor's closet near the stairs? The end of the shaft is coming up and I don't see any light."

"Maybe it doesn't have a ventilation grille. I mean, it's only a closet."

“If it’s a cleaning closet, it should have some way to ventilate it or the fumes from the cleaning products will build up.”

“Makes sense. Maybe there’s no light on in it and that’s why we aren’t spotting it.”

“Good thinking! Run your hands along the sides and see if you feel it. I might have already missed it.”

Annie ran her fingers along the walls, trying to feel for any changes. It was so dark in here she could have already missed it and not have even known.

“We’re almost to the end of the line; if you don’t feel it, then we’ll have to backtrack until we do.”

If there really was a grille. They were assuming it was a cleaning closet and needed ventilation. Annie fought down the doubts. Just when she was sure it wasn’t there her finger got caught in something. The grille! “I got it! My finger is caught in the bars.” Relief swam through her for a blessed second. They were going to get out of the tunnels.

“Stay there, I’ll come back to you.”

Annie rolled and squished herself up against the wall, trying to give the much larger Mace more room. As he slid down next to her, she felt every inch of his skin against hers. She had never really thought of her back as being an erogenous zone before, but the feel of his body against her back was doing a number on her libido. Sparks of desire shot through her, straight to her crotch.

Large arms encircled her, and his hands ran down her arms until they reached her hands. A shiver of awareness went through her at the contact. Was adrenaline an aphrodisiac?

“I’ll get your hand loose, then try to work out the vent. We want to be as quiet as possible; they could still be out there.” His whispered words brushed against her ear, and a flood of fluid went straight to her pussy.

“Roger.” Her nipples tingled as they pushed against the fabric of her sports bra, and her breath was coming in gasps. She was running for her life and she’d never been so turned on. Annie felt surrounded by Mace’s heat and it was doing strange, wonderful things to her insides.

Warm hands twisted her fingers until they came free.

“I’ve got the knife out, so be careful where you move. I’m going to work on the bottom corners and see if I can free it up enough for us to slide out without taking it off completely.”

“I’ll push as you pry.” *Focus on the mission, not your hormones!*

“On three,” Mace counted off and Annie braced her hands against the grate, ready to push on his signal.

“Almost got it,” Mace grunted in her ear, sending hot bursts straight to her groin.

A screeching rasp sounded as the grille came loose. Annie’s heart was in her throat waiting for discovery. She could feel Mace’s heart beating fast against her back, and knew hers was keeping time.

When no one came to investigate the noise, Mace pushed the grille open a little more.

“Do you think you can fit down here?” Mace asked her.

“Sure. I wish I knew what I was landing on, though.”

“Yeah, if wishes were horses.”

“Beggars would ride. Okay, you are going to have to move a bit or I won’t be able to turn around.” Annie tried to peer into the darkness of the closet but couldn’t see anything.

Mace slipped down, his face brushing up against her rear end and the backs of her thighs. Annie had to clench her teeth to keep from gasping at the contact. She was about to be lowered into God only knew what, and her body thought that this was a good time to get a serious case of lust. Her timing left a bit to be desired.

Tucking her feet up to her chest, Annie stuck her legs through the opening. She squirmed around until her legs dangled into the emptiness below her. Taking a deep breath, she slid further down, kicking out to feel anything with her feet. It was so dark she could be four feet in the air or about to touch the ground and she wouldn't know.

"I've got your hands. I'll lower you a little bit at a time. Let me know if you feel anything."

"Okay." Annie's stomach scraped over the side, her shirt bunching up under her breasts. Thank God it was pitch-black in there! Her feet were still swinging in the emptiness when her shirt halted her progress.

"Stop!"

"Did you find something?" Mace gripped her hands tightly.

"No, but my shirt is caught on the vent and it's wrapping around my neck. If I don't loosen it, I'll choke before I land."

"Can you rip it?"

"With what? You have both my arms. If you unbutton it I can slip out of it and put it back on when you come down."

"Okay, hold onto the edge, I'll try to do this as quickly as possible so you don't fall." Mace let go of one hand, and she had to quickly grab onto the edge of the vent.

"I can't see a freaking thing!" Mace's fingers fumbled around her face, then drifted lower to brush against her breast.

He quickly shifted until he found the buttons that fastened the shirt. The knuckles of his fingers brushed her breasts again, making her nipples tighten painfully. Annie was surprised her blush didn't light up the room.

"Why do they make these things so damn small?" Mace growled, still fumbling with the button.

Annie heard a grunt, then the ping of a button popping off her shirt. Suddenly she was free and started to slide.

“Let go! I don’t want to drag you down!” Her grip on the side was slipping. She felt Mace let go, and slid right out of her shirt.

She vaguely heard a tearing sound as she jumped back and fell onto the floor. Her hand landed on something wet that smelled like bleach, and a bottle hit her on the head.

“Are you okay?” Mace whispered from above her.

“Yes. I wasn’t that far off the ground. Not the most graceful landing though.”

“Any landing you walk away from is a good landing.” The smile in Mace’s voice was clear.

“Let me find the door and I’ll take a peek out.”

“No! Wait for me to come down,” he hissed.

Annie felt her way around the closet like a blind person, totally disoriented until she felt molding around the door. Running her hands up and down, she found the handle and opened it the merest fraction of an inch.

The hallway was deserted, and the stairway had some sort of device on it with wires and a timer. That couldn’t be good.

“It’s okay. We’re alone down here, and I think we will be.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because there’s a bomb on the door next to us.”

* * * * *

Get your mind out of your pants, get your mind out of your pants. Annie had just told him there was a bomb next to them, and all he could think about was her walking around down there while he had her shirt in his hands up here.

“Are you sure it’s a bomb?” Maybe she was mistaken.

“Not positive, but it has a timer, a fuse, and what looks like C4 all wrapped together and stuck to the fire exit.”

“Hold on, I’m coming down. Can you stuff something under the door so we can turn on a light?”

“I could if I could see my hand in front of my face. I think we’ll be okay to turn on the light for a few minutes, the hallway is empty, and no one is coming out that door.”

It was a risk, but falling and breaking his leg was a bigger one. He didn’t have anyone holding on to his hands to keep him from falling all the way.

“Okay, when I get down I’ll stuff this johnny under the door.”

The light flickered on, and the weak bulb momentarily blinded Mace. Blinking back his tears, he took a look below him to see if there was a shelf or something he could use to step down.

“Hold on, here’s a stool, I’ll steady it under your feet so you don’t have to jump. You’ve done enough damage to your wound as it is.”

Mace tried to concentrate on locating the stool, but all he could focus on was Annie standing there in her bra.

“Go ahead, I’ll hold it for you.”

“I’m coming.” God how he wished that was the truth. He’d be lucky if his dick didn’t get him stuck on the edge of the shaft like her shirt did. The feel of her hands on his legs wasn’t making him shrink either.

“I’ve got you. A little farther and you should feel the stool.”

“Got it, thanks.” Mace balanced precariously on the stool until he was steady. His side was pulling at him again and he could feel the blood dripping down his stomach.

“Let me take a look at your ribs,” Annie said when he was finally touching ground again. She didn’t seem bothered to be standing there in nothing but a sports bra and white pants. Technically she was covered, but all that bare skin was more than his libido could handle.

“Ah, here’s your shirt.” The part of his brain that was located between his legs cursed at him for handing the shirt over. The rational part that was worried about getting blown to smithereens wished she’d put it on quickly.

“Okay, I’m decent. Now take off the johnny and let me have a look at you.”

The hospital-issue pajamas were filthy, covered in dust and blood. Annie’s hands were gentle as they removed the dressing and probed his side.

“You’ve popped two of the stitches, but that’s it. How’d you get hurt?”

“I was breaking up a fight between an officer and two civilians and one of them got a lucky swipe at me with a knife.”

“I thought you were in aviation? What’s a pilot doing an MP’s job?” She dabbed at the blood with a corner of his johnny.

“I am a pilot. I was on leave, just got back from dropping some Rangers.” He didn’t want to think too much about that mission. He’d been lucky to get them in and come out alive. “I was celebrating with a few other pilots who’d come stateside with me when some drunken assholes started in on us. Next thing I know my buddy is getting pummeled and a knife is flashing.”

“Made it out of the sandbox without a scratch and get cut in a bar brawl. How ironic,” she smiled wryly.

“Hey, you got to watch your buddy’s back.”

“Well, right now I’m your buddy, and I say if you aren’t careful you’ll rip this entire thing open. Hold this to your side and I’ll stuff your johnny under the door so no light shows through.”

Mace looked around the little closet and tried not to zero in on the way Annie’s pants tightened over her ass as she bent down. Looking anywhere but at temptation in whites, he surveyed his surroundings.

“This is the best-appointed janitor’s closet I’ve ever seen,” he said after a minute. Amidst all the cleaning supplies, paper towels, buckets and brooms were *Playboy*

centerfolds, tool calendars with busty women proudly showing the date and much more, and a whole box of chocolate bars.

“At least we won’t starve,” Annie said, standing up and helping herself to a candy bar. “Yum, you want one?”

Did she have to look like she was having an orgasm while she was eating? Did all women get off on chocolate? “Sure, have to keep up my energy.”

Their hands brushed as she gave him a chocolate bar. Mace felt a jolt of electricity shoot through him. She immediately let go of the candy bar and backed away.

“I wonder if he has a mini-bar hidden in here too.” Her voice was shaky and a blush filled her cheeks.

“I wouldn’t be surprised to find a bar and a TV in here. Looks like your janitor had a lot of free time on his hands.”

“That works out well for us. How long do you think we should wait?” Annie had backed as far as she could go in the tiny space. She was jumpy, and Mace didn’t know if it was because of him or the situation.

“I want to have a look at that bomb, then I’ll make a decision.”

If the bomb was set on a timer, he could probably defuse it. He’d had some training, but not much. If it was any more complicated than a simple fuse and timer job they’d have to come up with a Plan C.

“Hey, look, a police scanner. Maybe we can find one of those news channels.” Annie brought the portable scanner over to him and turned it on with the volume down low.

The smell of her perfume filled his nostrils. It was light and flowery and had a hint of baby powder to it. Mace was used to women who wore heavier perfumes that were blatantly provocative. Annie’s scent sort of snuck up on him and seeped into his senses.

“— sources from the Pentagon insist this isn’t a terrorist attack, and no group has taken responsibility for the hostage situation. Walter Reed remains silent, with no ransom demands of any kind being given. Back to you, Bob.”

“If this isn’t the act of terrorists, what is it?” Annie clicked off the scanner and moved away. “We better save the batteries in case we really need them later.”

“Hell, who knows? I want to go check out that bomb. You wait here.” He didn’t want her in the line of fire if the thing decided to go boom.

“That’s okay! I’ll come with you to watch your back. You can’t focus on the bomb if you have to keep looking over your shoulder.” Her eyes darted around the room, and her body was tense.

“I’d rather not have you in harm’s way.”

“If that thing goes off, do you really think I’ll be any safer in this coffin—I mean closet?”

Her face was pinched and she fidgeted nervously with a loose button on her shirt. What was wrong with her?

“What’s going on, Annie?”

“Nothing!” she yipped. “There’s nothing going on.”

“Then why all of a sudden do you look like a spooked horse? I can’t worry about you freaking out right now.”

She stepped back and took a deep breath, then another. Finally she looked up at him and opened her mouth. “I don’t like small places. And being stuck in here alone while you are on the other side of the door bothers me.”

“Excuse me? We spent an hour crawling around a two-foot square tunnel and you were fine.” She was claustrophobic?

“That’s different, it’s not a closet.”

“You’re not making any sense; it’s smaller than a closet.”

Heaving a sigh she turned away from him. “Do you have any older brothers?”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Was she nuts? What did his family have to do with this?

“Just answer me?”

“Yeah, I have two older brothers and one younger sister. Why?”

“My brother Blayne is a good man. Special Forces, just got married and everything, but as a kid he was a terror. He used to lock me in a closet and hold the door closed while I kicked and screamed to get out.”

“All older brothers torture their younger siblings. It’s like a law or something.”

“Yeah, but getting locked in small places bothers me. As long as I can keep moving, I’m okay, but the thought of getting trapped in an elevator makes me hyperventilate.”

“So that’s why you were in the stairwell.”

“Yup, right place, right time.”

She was calmer now. He just had to keep her talking. Mace fiddled with his dog tags and considered the situation. If he insisted she stay in the closet she could freak out and attract attention. If she went with him, she’d be in danger of getting blown up. Hell, so would he, and she was right, she’d be no safer in the closet if it was a bomb anyway.

“All right, you can come.”

“Thank you!” She launched herself into his arms, and suddenly the bomb was the last thing he was thinking about exploding.

Chapter Three

Annie's body sizzled where it touched Mace. She'd been so relieved he wasn't going to leave her in the closet by herself that she just jumped into his arms without thinking. Now it was too late for any intelligent thoughts to find their way into her brain. His body was rock-hard and her breasts tingled from the contact.

His mouth lowered to hers, and her breath caught in anticipation. He grazed her lips with his, once, twice, then finally captured her mouth in a mind-numbing kiss. Annie's eyes closed and she couldn't help but let out a little moan as desire spiraled through her body. Her pussy was growing and swelling with each second, and when his tongue probed her lips for entrance, she gladly let him in.

Dueling tongues tangled together and Annie wrapped her arms around Mace even tighter. She wanted to climb on top of him, to touch him everywhere, to feel everything he could show her. Mace growled against her mouth and pulled her leg up around his waist, pressing her pussy against his raging cock.

The friction sent her already heightened senses soaring, making her nipples harden into over-sensitized points. Mace moved his lips from her mouth to the column of her throat, nibbling his way to her ear. Annie let her head drop back so he could have better access. Shivers chased their way down her spine, exploding in her soaking wet pussy.

Mace pulled her hips against his, rubbing against her already throbbing center. As he leaned back against the shelves behind him something crashed. Liquid splashed against her leg and broke the spell that had her enthralled.

"Holy shit! What happened?" Mace had jumped back and was in a defensive crouch.

"Spontaneous combustion?"

Annie looked down at the bottle of cleaning solution that was splattered against her leg and spreading all over the floor. She quickly bent down to clean it up, hoping the action would cover her blush. Her body was still humming from the contact with his and she couldn't find it in herself to regret her actions. Maybe in a rational world when she wasn't fighting for her life and the lives of every other person in the hospital she wouldn't try to jump some guy she'd only just met. This obviously wasn't normal behavior for her, although she'd never been around a man as good-looking as Mace before either.

"It's just a bottle of glass cleaner," Annie said, breaking the tension.

"Okay. Let's check out this bomb, stay behind me."

"You got it." She had no desire to be any closer to explosive devices than she had to.

Following Mace out of the closet, Annie did her best not to stare at his tightly muscled ass. What was wrong with her? This was life or death and she was fixating on some guy's butt. There was something seriously wrong with this picture.

Mace let out a low whistle as he examined the contraption on the door.

"Looks like you were right, this is set to go off in six hours." Mace looked closely at the bomb, but didn't touch it.

"Can you defuse it?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe? This isn't fixing a bicycle chain here, either you can or you can't. There's not a whole heck of a lot of room for error."

He shot her a look over his shoulder. "If you'd be quiet and give me a little room to move I could get a better look at it and figure out whether or not I can defuse it safely."

Annie stepped back and shut up. She tended to shoot off her mouth when she was nervous, and this whole situation had her jumpier than a mouse on espresso beans. Mace looked at the wires from different angles without touching them. Every once in a

while he'd mutter something to himself or let out a curse. Annie was dying to ask him if he had any idea what he was doing, but bit her tongue. The last thing she needed was for him to try to play hero and blow them up.

Stepping away silently, Annie went to investigate the rest of the hall. She kept Mace in sight at all times. It only made sense for her to keep an eye out for the terrorists that were roaming the building. And if having a little space gave her hormones a chance to calm themselves, well that was just a side benefit, right?

Her shoes made no sound as she walked down the corridor looking in all the offices for any sign of the attackers. What could they want anyway? They spoke English, so it wasn't a foreign group trying to make headlines. This was a hospital for heaven's sake!

"Annie!"

She turned around at the sound of Mace's voice. She'd gone farther than she realized and was down the other end of the hall. Jogging back she waved to him.

"I'm here, I was just doing a recon."

"Could you let me know if you are going to take off? One minute you're yammering my ear off, the next I can't even see you. Did you find anything?"

Annie bit her tongue before she said something she'd regret. They were in this together, and bickering wouldn't help. "No, I didn't see any sign of them. I didn't even see where they had trashed any of the offices other than the one next to Michaels'. They must be concentrating on the wards."

"That or they figured this little number would take care of anything they didn't get to. There's enough C4 here to take out the whole floor."

"Who do you think is behind this? They're Americans. Why would anyone want to do this to their own countrymen?"

"Who knows? Maybe they're extremist wackos, maybe they're contracted mercenaries. All I know is, they know their way around a bomb."

"You can't defuse it?" Annie felt her heart drop to her stomach.

"Nope, not for sure."

"And if we open the door?"

"Do you want to take that chance? It could have a motion sensor and go off if we open the door."

"And if we wait?"

"It will go off in six hours."

* * * * *

Mace watched the expressions chase across Annie's face. He really wished he could be a hero and defuse the bomb, but he wasn't certain enough about all the wires to risk it.

"So what do we do now?" Annie asked.

"We can look for another way off this floor, but I have a feeling all the stairways are similarly wired."

"I was afraid you'd say that." Annie slumped against the wall.

Damn, he hated the look of defeat on her face. It pissed him off that he couldn't deal with the situation. If it was only his life at stake he might chance it, but he couldn't put Annie in danger too.

"Why don't we go back to the closet and see if we can pick up any more information on the scanner?" Doing something concrete should help keep her distracted.

"Yeah, I guess we don't have to worry about running down the batteries now."

So much for distracting her. Mace knew how he'd *like* to distract her. He was still achingly aware of her nearness. He hadn't meant to kiss her before, but her body felt so good in his arms, and her lips were so close, he couldn't help but take a little taste. And one taste led to another until he wanted to eat her whole. If he hadn't knocked the bottle of cleaning stuff over he'd have probably taken her against the wall right then and there.

His cock reared up to full attention at the thought. Great, just what he needed in these thin pajama bottoms, a raging hard-on.

Annie had turned and headed for the closet, so he followed her. There wasn't much else they could do. He had to think of a plan, find some way to get them out of this situation. Dying was not an option. There had to be some way out.

Closing the closet door behind him, Mace moved as far away from Annie as he could in the tiny space. He looked anywhere but at her. Who'd have thought pictures of naked, airbrushed women would pale in comparison to a woman in military white scrubs?

Fiddling with the scanner, Mace tried to find the frequency the terrorists were using for their radios. It was a crapshoot as to whether or not he'd be able to pick up their conversations on this tiny scanner, but he didn't have anything better to do right now.

Annie bent over to look at something on one of the lower shelves, and Mace's body sprang into full awareness. Her sports bra pressed up her breasts, and he had a delicious view of her deep cleavage. Choking back a groan, he focused on the scanner again. It was too dangerous to be roaming around in the halls or he'd leave the little room and take a breather.

"So what were you doing in the stairwell anyway?" Annie asked him, her blue eyes looking right into his.

"I had been waiting in the emergency room for one of my buddies to come and get me. The doctors wouldn't release me without someone there to sign for me."

"That's standard procedure; they don't want you getting into an accident or something after you've been given anesthetic."

"I guess so. Anyway, I was waiting for one of the nurses to give me my clothes so I could wait in the lobby when a bunch of guys in ski masks crashed the ER and started firing at anything that moved."

"How'd you get away?"

Mace felt embarrassment curl in his belly. "I was in the john, they missed me so I slipped into the stairway while they were ushering everyone out of the room." He turned his head, unable to look her in the eye.

"Some hero I am. Gunmen are shooting at innocent people and I'm taking a leak."

"Hey, don't be so hard on yourself. It wasn't like you planned on being in the bathroom when they came in, it just happened that way." She laid her hand on his arm, and the gentle contact traveled straight to his gut.

"At least you were smart enough to get away when the opportunity presented itself instead of trying to take on a bunch of armed psychos."

"I still feel like there was something I could have done differently."

"Like get shot? I'm glad you escaped; you probably saved my life. I was in shock when I saw what was going on. I would have stood there like an idiot all night if you hadn't grabbed me when you did."

Mace thought about it for a minute. Maybe she was right, there wasn't a whole lot he could have done against a bunch of lunatics wielding automatic rifles then. And she had been standing there like she was frozen in time. That reminded him.

"What was that all about anyway? Shock?"

"Flashbacks." Her face suddenly closed off and she looked away. "I was in a field unit in Iraq. The last week of my assignment, a group of extremists attacked the place."

"What happened?" The medical units were usually kept away from the action and well protected.

"Not a whole lot actually, it was over pretty fast. There weren't that many of them, and their weapons were ancient. They lobbed a few homemade grenades at us that did some damage to the mess tent and the triage area. A few of them got close enough to attack, but the guards got them before anyone was seriously hurt."

"It's still scary getting shot at." It was his turn to comfort her, and he laid his hand along her cheek.

“Tell me about it. I thought I was over the worst of it, but seeing the car on fire and the men with guns screaming at people brought it all back.” She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself.

Mace hated the lost look on her angelic face. He pulled her into the circle of his arms and held her against him. It was meant to be comforting, but he had to angle his lower body away from her to keep from rubbing his erection against her.

Annie shook her head and looked up at him. “You know the worst part? The reason they attacked us wasn’t because we were treating American soldiers, it was because we were treating the locals too. Whatever faction had the guns that day didn’t want us keeping their enemies alive. I just don’t get it. We’d have treated them too if they asked, but instead of taking advantage of the medical care, they’d rather kill everyone.”

She buried her head in his chest, and he felt her shoulders shake with silent tears.

“We can’t understand everything about them. Their culture is so different than ours. All we can do is offer the help; we can’t force them to take it.”

Sniffing a little, Annie looked back up at him and gave him a watery smile. “It’s the old you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink dilemma?”

Mace laughed. “Yeah, I guess so. People have to make their own decisions, you can only offer to help them, it’s up to them to decide if they want it or not.”

She sighed and stepped away from him, he suddenly felt empty and cold without her next to him.

“You’re right. It just seems like such a waste some times. I was doing better with it after I came home. Working twelve-hour shifts has a way of keeping your mind off things.”

“I’m sure.” Mace watched her pull herself together, and admired the way she handled herself under pressure. Except for that one lapse, she’d taken the events of the last few hours in stride.

“Have you been able to get anything on the scanner?”

He looked down at the forgotten scanner in his hand. “No, either they aren’t talking or I can’t pick it up. I’ll try again in a little bit.”

Annie looked at her watch. “It’s close to three in the morning. I should be tired, but I’m wide awake.”

“It’s the adrenaline; it’ll keep you hyped up for a while yet. I’d tell you to try and take a nap, but it’s useless. When the adrenaline wears off, you’ll crash whether you’ve had enough sleep or not.”

“I don’t know where I’d take a nap anyway. There’s only this stool here to sit on, and not even that much ground room if I wanted to lay down for a nap.”

He laughed. “You’ve been in the Army how long? And you can’t fall asleep anywhere after all this time?”

“I’ve been in ten years, and no, I can’t fall asleep standing up. Can you?”

Mace almost told her he could do a lot of things standing up when there was a muffled thud and the lights went out.

Chapter Four

Pitch-black! She was in total and utter darkness. For a split second, Annie was transported back to her childhood when Blayne locked her in the closet and whispered warnings about the hanger monsters strangling her. A whimper clawed its way to her throat but she fought it down. She was a grown woman for crying out loud! There was no reason to lose her mind over this.

“What happened?” Annie tried to keep the panic from her voice.

“The probably took out the power supply. Fairly standard procedure if you’re trying to confine a big group of people. Cut off the electricity and the phones and they can’t call for help or communicate with each other. It also increases the hostages’ feelings of isolation and fear.”

“Oh, makes sense.” It was doing a hell of a lot to increase her fear.

“I’m going out for a recon. You stay here. Do you hear me? I don’t want you setting foot out of this room in case it’s a trap.”

Stay here? Alone? “I’ll come with you. You need backup!”

“No. If this is a trap I’ll need you to bail me out.”

“Why don’t I go look around and you stay in the closet?” Annie tried to hide the panic in her voice.

“How much do you know about electrical systems or ground operations?”

“Not much.”

“That’s why I’m going. I’ll be gone five minutes tops. If I’m longer, it means I ran into trouble.”

Five minutes. She could handle five minutes. By herself. In the closet. Before she could muster another argument Mace was out the door.

Annie tried counting the seconds off in her head. She tried saying the alphabet backwards, doing her times tables, anything that would keep her mind off the blackness engulfing her.

Surrounding her.

Suffocating her.

The walls were closing in! She couldn't breathe! Annie's heart was beating so fast in her chest she thought it would jump right out. Cold sweat dripped down her back, and a whimper tore out of her mouth. She was going to die in this airless coffin!

Lights danced in front of her eyes. She was going to pass out!

"Annie! It's okay! It's just me. You have nothing to be afraid of." Mace's voice may have been gruff, but it was the most beautiful sound in the world to her.

"What did you find?" Annie was breathing as hard as if she'd run a marathon. Relief washed through her in waves making her knees weak.

"I could smell burning wires, but the emergency lights were on. I think they only got the main power supply, but left the generator backup alone."

"That's good, right?"

"Well, it means we're not completely without power. It also means they plan on sticking around here long enough to want some electricity."

"Where does that leave us then?" Annie inhaled deeply. Mace's scent filled her nostrils with each breath.

"We need to stay put a little while. Cutting the power might just be a way to draw us out. We have to stay low so they think we escaped, then we can go after them."

"Stay here? For how long?" Panic reared its ugly head at the thought of spending the night in the tiny room.

"Hey, don't freak out, I'm right here with you." Mace pulled her to him, gathering her against his solid frame.

Some parts of him were more solid than others. The steely hardness of his erection grew against her stomach, swamping the fear with waves of lust. His obvious signs of desire set off corresponding signals in her own body making her pussy lips swell and moisten.

Without thinking of anything other than the need to touch him, Annie pulled his head down and planted her lips on his. Anything to keep the darkness at bay.

He needed no further encouragement, and crushed her to his chest, attacking her lips with the voraciousness of a starving man at a feast. His hands were everywhere, kneading her behind and pulling her closer to his rock-hard cock.

Needing to touch his skin, Annie ran her hands up his bare rib cage. Ever since she'd taken off his johnny to check his wound she'd been drooling over his gorgeous body. With the lights off she couldn't see it, but her fingers were telling her what she was missing.

The hard ridges of his abs felt like mountains under her hands, and she was ready to do a little mountain climbing. His skin was slick with sweat and her fingers slid easily over him. She wanted to see him, all of him, but it was too dark. She'd have to rely on her fingers to show her what she was missing. Cream drenched her panties and she hadn't even gotten his pants off.

"God! I wish I could see your body," she murmured against his neck as she nipped down his throat to kiss his chest. She barely had to bend at all to lick at his tight nipples.

"Not half as much as I want to see yours." Mace pulled the shirt off her arms and yanked the bra over her head.

Her breasts sprang free and she felt the heat of his hands on them, his thumb teased her aching nipples. She dug her fingers into his back, holding on to sanity by the thinnest of threads.

"We shouldn't be doing this, I barely know you." Sanity tried to assert itself.

"It's the situation; extreme stress produces extreme emotions and need." Mace pulled her head back and licked his way down to her breast, drawing her nipple into his mouth.

"Works for me." She'd worry about later when she knew there was going to be a later.

Trailing her fingers down his chest she skirted his wound and went straight for the laces on his pajama pants. She couldn't believe how hard his muscles felt. There wasn't an ounce of spare flesh on his body.

Wrapping her hand around his shaft, Annie felt the velvety smooth texture of his skin covering the steely hardness of his cock. He was definitely rock-solid all over. Her fingers played over his length, making him groan into her ear as he nibbled on her neck.

Annie was so busy exploring every inch of his length, she didn't even realize Mace had unbuttoned her pants until she felt his fingers probing her pussy lips. Even his fingers were thick! Her muscles clenched around him and spasmed at his touch. He was stretching her, filling her, and this was only his finger!

"You're so hot for me, so wet. I want to be in you."

"I'm in-line with that plan," Annie gasped as his knuckle rubbed up against her clitoris, sending shockwaves through her system.

"I don't have any protection. Hell, I don't even have any pockets." Mace's voice was close to a whimper.

"I'm on the pill, and I'm clean as a whistle." Annie struggled to get her pants down her legs and kick off her shoes without letting go of Mace. Dear God, if he stopped now she would die!

"Me too."

Maybe the military's regular blood tests were a good thing after all.

Mace lifted her onto the stool and she balanced on the edge, waiting to feel him inside her.

“Hurry, hurry!” Annie had never wanted anyone so badly before in her life. The wait to feel him inside her was excruciating. Her core was throbbing, and she could feel her juices sliding down her spread thighs. Her legs quivered in anticipation, aching to have him fill her.

“Yes, ma’am!” Mace drove into her, pushing past walls that hadn’t felt a man for months.

Annie felt stretched to the limit. She couldn’t see Mace, but she could feel every inch of him inside her, filling her to the hilt.

“Good God you’re big!” Annie tried to relax her muscles to make room for him.

“Good God you’re tight. And hot. And feel so good.” Mace peppered his words with kisses to her face and neck.

A volcano of feeling was bubbling under the surface of Annie’s body, wanting to erupt. The sensations were flooding her mind, washing away any thoughts but how wonderful Mace’s body felt inside hers. When he nipped her shoulder then licked the spot, Annie felt the volcano bubble higher.

“Come for me,” he growled in her ear.

“I-I don’t know what to do.” Her embarrassment was no match against the feelings Mace was creating inside her.

“Just let go, I’ll take care of the rest.”

Let go? Who was holding on? Annie’s body had long since taken control and she was following along for the ride. She was tempted to ask him what he meant when she felt his finger stroke her clit.

Instantly the volcano erupted, shooting wave after wave of pleasure through her body. Hips bucking, Annie held on to Mace’s shoulders with all her might. Every infinitesimal quiver of her pussy touched his length and pulled him closer inside her, and even then it wasn’t enough. She wanted this feeling to go on and on.

"That's how you do it." Mace pulled a nipple into his mouth, and the pressure set off a new bevy of quivers inside her.

"I guess so." Grabbing his arms for better leverage, Annie thrust her hips up and squeezed her inner muscles at the same time.

The initial explosion was gone, but the aftershocks were still powerful enough to keep her off balance.

"If you keep that up, this won't last very long."

"Oh, I think you've got long enough well covered."

Something he demonstrated by hammering her almost to her womb. Squeezing him even tighter, Annie held on while Mace grabbed her hips and slammed into her again and again. Her world was focused on feeling him between her legs. The hair on his legs rubbed against her inner thighs, sending her nerve endings into overdrive. He was hard, and hot, and felt so good inside her, she never wanted it to end.

His hands tightened on her behind, pulling her harder against him, and he let out a muffled shout before lowering her back against the stool. His cock pulsed inside of her, matching the beat of her racing heart. Before Annie could fully recover from the roller-coaster ride her libido had been on, Mace pulled out of her.

"Shh, I hear something." He covered her mouth with his hand and held her next to him. His body was tense in anticipation.

Mace lifted her off the stool and placed her gently on the floor, pushing on her shoulder in a silent signal to crouch down. Annie curled into a ball, and reached out for some clothing. One minute she was recovering from the first orgasm of her life, the next she was trying to find something to cover herself in case gun-toting lunatics barge through the door. Talk about a buzz kill.

A ray of light from the hallway emergency lights shined weakly through the door as Mace opened it a crack. The light gave Annie a glimpse of Mace as he searched for danger. The part of her mind not absorbed with trying to cover her nakedness marveled at the sheer masculine beauty of the man in front of her.

Broad shoulders she'd only just clung to like her life depended on it were covered in mounds of muscles. She could see his six-pack abs leading to narrow hips and ropey thighs. The shadows hid the package between his legs, and Annie shook herself out of the urge to crane her neck to get a better look.

Arrows of pure lust shot straight to her pussy, singeing her with need. She'd only just had the first real orgasm of her life and already the heat was spreading through her at the sight of him. At this rate she was more in danger of becoming a sex-starved maniac than getting shot by the lunatics patrolling the halls.

"It's nothing. Must have just heard something through the vents." Mace shut the door, cutting off her study of his attributes.

"So what do we do now?" Annie found her bra waded up near her pants, but her shirt was nowhere to be found. She'd have to wait until the power came back on to find it.

"We'll listen to the scanner again. Maybe the news has something to report."

Annie could hear the sounds of him pulling on his pants. If they lived through this, she was going to get a better look at all of him. A nice long look.

Fumbling around on the shelves, Annie found the scanner and turned it on. All she got was static.

"Damn, I must have moved the dial when I grabbed it. Hold on, I'll try to find the right channel." Her hands shook as she turned the knob slowly. Trying to find a frequency in pitch darkness wasn't the easiest thing to do.

"All charges are in place and patients evacuated."

"Stop there!" Mace ordered.

Annie's hand froze on the dial. They must have intercepted the terrorists' radio transmissions.

"Have you separated the civilian employees from the military?"

"Yes, sir."

“Good. Find one soldier to make an example for the press, then we’ll deliver our demands.”

“Yes, sir. And if they aren’t met?”

“Then the hospital is blown sky-high in the morning.”

* * * * *

His gut clenched at the coldness in the voice on the radio. Mace had no idea what their demands were, but he knew the government wouldn’t meet them. Giving into hostage demands only encouraged wackos to keep trying. They had a few hours until daylight to get out and save all the people in the building.

Hell, he couldn’t even save himself and Annie, how was he going to save the hospital?

“Do you want me to try to find the news station or keep it here?”

“Leave it there, we don’t want to take the chance of losing it.”

“That’s what I thought. What are we going to do?” Her voice quivered a bit.

Mace resisted the urge to pull her into his arms and comfort her. That’s what he’d meant to do when the power went out; instead, he screwed her brains out in a janitor’s closet. Prince Charming had nothing on him.

“I’m going to take another look at that bomb.”

“What do you think you’re going to find out this time?”

“It seems to me if they are dumb enough to talk on radios that can get picked up by a cheap police scanner, I might have given them more credit than they deserve when it comes to the bomb.”

“What exactly does that mean?”

“It means I want another look at the bomb. I think some of those wires are decoys.”

“And if you’re wrong?” She didn’t sound very confident in his reasoning.

“Then I won’t touch it, but if I’m right, we might be able to get up those stairs.”

“And do what?”

“Divide and conquer.”

“Using what?” she snorted. “We have one knife between the two of us.”

“First we need to see if we can even get off this floor, then we’ll worry about how to take out the unfriendlies.”

Mace opened the door to the closet to let some of the light from the hallway in. He didn’t want to go searching for the knife blindly. Annie was standing right behind him wearing only the sports bra and her pants. He felt his cock stir yet again. Damn, how could he want her so badly when he had just spent himself inside her?

Her blonde hair was completely loose now and it hung down in a shimmering fall. What the hell was wrong with him? He was supposed to be concentrating on a freaking bomb, not the way the sports bra seemed to push her breasts upward. The adrenaline must be getting to him or something. He’d never had this much trouble focusing on a job before.

“Come on, let’s look at that bomb again,” he said more gruffly than he intended.

Grabbing the knife off the shelf, he turned and walked out. Annie followed him silently. At least she wasn’t tossing out sarcastic comments.

His brain had been churning ever since he heard the scanner pick up the terrorists’ transmissions. These guys weren’t that sophisticated if they didn’t know their conversations could be overheard with regular police scanners. Either they didn’t care that anyone could listen in, or they didn’t have the ability to scramble the signal.

The more Mace thought about it, the more he realized he might have been suckered. C4 was incredibly stable. Hell, the guys in ‘Nam used it in their fires for fuel. There was a good chance he could defuse that bomb; if he could focus his mind on it and not the way Annie’s body had milked his.

Don’t go there, buddy! Now was not the time to be thinking about sex. If he thought with his dick instead of his brain he could blow them to kingdom come! Another whiff

of Annie's perfume invaded his senses. Maybe this was why the Rangers didn't allow women to join? One whiff of perfume and even the best-trained soldier lost his head.

Mace turned to look at Annie. "Stay behind me, and don't go running off without telling me. We don't know that these guys can't get back down here somehow and I don't want you to get grabbed."

"Yes, sir!" She gave him a mock salute, reminding him that essentially she did outrank him.

"I'm not trying to be bossy, I just don't want to have to worry about you, and I will if I think you are putting yourself in danger." Why was he explaining himself?

"I'll stand right by the door and keep my mouth shut. I don't want to do anything to compromise the situation."

Mace turned around and closed his eyes. He needed to get focused and devote all his brainpower to the bomb. Using the same ritual he employed when getting ready for a mission, Mace pulled himself into his zone.

Taking a deep breath in, he held it for a count of three, then let it go slowly. He did that three times before approaching the door. Looking at the bomb again, he noticed that the wires didn't have any recognizable pattern.

Initially, he had taken that to mean that the terrorists had created a sophisticated pattern that he didn't understand. But maybe they were just decoy wires put there to confuse him. If he could find the one that connected the timer to the fuse and disconnect it without detonating the C4, they'd be home free.

If it picked the wrong one, they were dead.

Put that out of your mind. Don't think negative thoughts. The guys he knew on the bomb squad had always told him it took more ego to do bombs than to fly helicopters. If you thought for one minute you'd blow yourself up, your confidence was shot and you wouldn't trust yourself.

Hell, he operated million dollar birds, bringing Ranger teams in and out of places most sane people wouldn't even fly over. He could pull one little wire, no sweat. *Right.*

Looking closer, Mace traced the path from the timer to the fuse. There were several wires wrapped together confusing the trail. Gently feeling each wire, he waited until he found one that was hot. Two of the wires vibrated, and the other three were cold and quiet.

Carefully scraping away the cold wires, Mace examined the timer again. If he could identify the one that led to the timer he'd be golden. He wiped sweaty palms off on his pants and looked again. Three wires to choose from. Only one of them was the right one.

"Can you get me a pair of wire cutters from the closet?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Here you go. I thought you might need a pair." Annie's hands shook as she handed the cutters to him, but her face didn't look the least bit uncertain.

He took the cutters and turned back to the wires in front of him. A drop of sweat slid down his nose. One wrong move— He couldn't think like that! Confident; he had to be confident he was making the right choice.

The three wires that were left were black, green and red. Normally it was "cut the red and you're dead", but these guys made up their own rules. This configuration of wires made no sense whatsoever. Either they were dumb as stumps or so supremely clever they were bluffing him completely.

Mace touched the wires again. All three led from the timer to the C4. The black one was hot, and the green and red ones vibrated. Holding onto the red one Mace waited for a sign. His gut was telling him it was this one, but the limited training he'd had said otherwise. The timer kept ticking away, counting down the seconds until the decision would be out of his hands.

Ticking. That's it! The vibration of the red wire matched the ticking of the timer. Mace carefully took his fingers off the wire. Could the green one be a double timer? He rubbed his fingers against his pant leg and touched the green wire.

This one had a steady vibration, probably hooked to the battery just to throw him off. The red one was it. Taking a steadying breath, Mace lined the cutters up and took a deep breath. Praying to the powers that be, he closed his eyes and cut.

The silence was deafening.

"I did it," Mace croaked out.

"I never had any doubt," Annie said from behind him.

Her face was pale and her lip showed teeth marks, but her smile was beautiful.

"Let's kick some ass."

Chapter Five

Annie used a strip from her ruined shirt to tie her hair back, and another one to strap a screwdriver to her leg. She would have preferred a knife, but the janitor didn't have one lying around. Mace had another strip of the shirt wrapped around his ribs to soak up some of the blood from his oozing stitches. He didn't seem to be in much pain, but he didn't want to leave a blood trail either. So far he hadn't showed any signs of slowing down from his injury. Screwing her brains out hadn't fazed him.

"Let's go over the plan one more time." Mace turned to her, looking intently into her eyes. His emerald green gaze blazed into her.

"It's not complicated. I act as bait and you take the guy out."

"And you don't do anything even vaguely heroic. I don't want you getting in the way of a stray bullet or trying to take the guy out yourself."

"I'm not an idiot. I think I can handle it. You just worry about how we're going to get to the next floor. If all the doors have bombs on them we are shit out of luck."

"I don't think they're motion-activated. Let me worry about the bombs, okay? Are you ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be." Annie reached forward and kissed him on the cheek. She wanted to plant one on his oh-so-sexy lips but didn't want to get too carried away. She'd never been good with morning-afters.

"What was that for? Not that I'm complaining." Mace brushed his fingers down her cheek.

"For luck. Lead the way."

There was no way she was going to tell him it was because she was afraid they wouldn't make it out of this. She'd keep her self-defeating thoughts inside. Mace had enough on his mind without worrying about her not holding up her end of the deal.

Her gut clenched as Mace opened the door, but nothing happened. Annie tried to let out the breath she'd been holding as quietly as possible. There was a reason she'd gone into nursing instead of the bomb squad. When it came to blood and guts, she was steady as a rock. Explosives were another story.

The irreverent thought that she'd never be able to tell Blayne about this because he'd laugh his ass off popped into her brain. Of course, that would be after he kicked Mace's ass for touching his baby sister. Good thing he was on his honeymoon.

Mace's bare feet made no noise as they climbed the metal steps in the fire exit. The next level up was the surgical unit. Luckily they didn't perform surgery at midnight or who knows how many people would have died.

Annie held back while Mace tested the door. When he deemed it safe, he carefully opened it.

"Follow me. I'm going to do a recon, prepare to duck and run if I give the word."

She nodded her answer and followed his broad back down the hallway. The rooms showed signs of hurried exits and there were medicine carts knocked over in the halls. Were they trying to get to the narcotics? Those were kept locked up in a computerized unit.

"Wait a second," Annie hissed at him. "I want to grab something."

Annie scurried to the narcotics unit and entered her password. Was this on the emergency energy system? She racked her brain trying to remember if the generator powered this or not.

Apparently it was, because the door swung open with a hiss. Annie grabbed a syringe and two vials of Demerol, then hurried back to where Mace was waiting.

"What are those for?" he whispered.

“Insurance.”

Mace raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything else. As they approached the nurses' station he raised a hand in warning, then shooed her under a desk. Annie crouched as low as she could and held her breath. Just because she didn't hear anything didn't mean there was nothing there. Mace had already proved his hearing was much better than hers.

Seconds passed and Annie thought her heart would come out of her chest. The blood roared in her ears until she was sure it would alert whoever it was they were hiding from. Her nerves were stretched to the breaking point when a faint echo of boot heels caught her attention.

The footsteps got closer and closer. Annie fought to keep her breathing quiet and even. The screwdriver blade was digging into her leg, but she didn't dare move it. The steps were almost on top of them now.

Then, they stopped. Biting her lip to keep from making any sound, Annie strained her ears to listen for any clue of their discovery. The sound of plastic crinkling was loud in the otherwise silent corridor, and the click of a lighter echoed like a gunshot.

A lighter? Was this guy smoking? In a hospital? Was he really that dumb? This was a surgical floor, for God's sake! There was oxygen in every room. If C4 didn't blow them to hell, this idiot would. Sure enough, the smell of burning tobacco tickled her nose, making it twitch with an impending sneeze.

Not now! She refused to blow this because she was allergic to cigarette smoke! Fighting the urge to sneeze, Annie pressed her face to her thighs and prayed. A drip of cold sweat slid down her back.

Just when she thought she couldn't hold on any longer, the footsteps moved away.

Mace motioned for her to stay still. She was happy to comply. It was going to take a few moments for her legs to reform after being scared boneless. He waved his hand in her direction, telling her to come to him. Annie shook herself out of her fear-induced paralysis and crept over.

"See if you can get him to chase you past that room over there," he whispered directly into her ear.

Annie nodded her understanding and crept out on shaking legs. It was one thing to talk big about being bait; it was another thing altogether to be the one on the hook.

Walking along, Annie tried to make her soft-soled shoes thump as loud as they could in the hall. They were made to be silent so as not to wake sleeping patients, it wasn't easy to get them to make noise. Giving up, she finally just kicked a plastic basin that was lying on the floor. It rattled loudly in the silence of the hallway.

The pounding of feet sounded coming around the corner. *It was about time.*

"Hold it right there!" The gun-toting goon still had the cigarette in his mouth.

Annie turned and ran back the way she came, praying he would chase her instead of shooting. Her shoulder blades twitched with the anticipation of getting hit by a bullet, but she ran anyway. She wasn't sure if it was her heart pounding or footsteps, but she was almost in front of the door where Mace was waiting in ambush.

"I said hold it!" A strong hand grabbed her shoulder and spun her around.

The goon had enough time to give her semi-clad state an evil look before Mace hit him over the head with a portable oxygen tank.

"Get me something to tie him up with. I'll search him," Mace ordered.

Running to the nurses' station Annie snagged a pair of restraints and came running back.

"Put him on the bed and I'll tie him down." Annie drew up a syringe of the Demerol while Mace heaved the unconscious man onto a bed.

Slapping the soft cuffs on the goon's wrists, Annie tied him as tightly as she could, then jabbed the needle into his arm.

"There. That should hold him for the next six hours." Annie brushed a loose strand of hair off her forehead and faced Mace. "What's next, boss?"

"Same thing next floor. I got his radio so we'll be able to monitor their movements."

“Could you find out anything about him?” Annie asked. She’d better grab a few more vials of Demerol. If they had to do this on every floor of the hospital she was going to need a lot more drugs. She grabbed a towel off a nearby cart to hold her supplies.

“From what I could find out before your bondage tendencies came out, I think he’s probably in some group of fanatic militia.”

“Militia?” She would not even think about the image he called to mind when he mentioned bondage tendencies.

“Yeah. You know, radical fanatics that stockpile weapons and canned goods out in Utah somewhere for the day the government collapses and there’s anarchy. Only I think this group decided to give things a little push and try taking over the government early.”

“You figured that out in the minute it took me to go get the restraints?” She was amazed at his discoveries.

“Well, he had a tattoo on his ankle that said ‘anarchy’ and another one with two crossed guns on his arm. Makes me think of a militia group, but I won’t know for sure until I see the next guy.”

“Right. The next one. Let’s go.” Annie wasn’t sure how many games of cat and mouse her nerves could take.

The sound of a gun ratcheting made her jump. Mace had the goon’s automatic rifle and was checking it out. The sight of him in hospital pajama bottoms with a knife strapped to his leg and a weapon slung over his shoulder sent a shiver of fear down her spine. He seemed all business now, no longer the sexy lover in the closet.

“Keep that radio on low; let’s see how chatty they get.” Mace swung the gun over his shoulder.

“Well, there’s one fewer to talk now.”

* * * * *

Mace's gut squeezed painfully as Annie walked down the hall to attract yet another unfriendly. How the hell had these guys managed to take hostage an entire hospital when they were dumb as freaking stumps? This was the third time they'd used the same trick, and the idiots fell for it every time.

It didn't say much for their leader. So far the radio had remained silent, no one was checking in to see if all locations were secure. He'd managed to defuse two more bombs and incapacitate three of the enemy. It would be a little easier if he knew how many of them were in the hospital.

The squeak of soles trailed back to Mace and he prayed that this wouldn't be the exceptionally smart unfriendly who shot first and tried to catch her second.

It galled him to use Annie as bait. Prince Charming strikes again. When this was all over, if they got out of it alive, he was going to show her all the manners and charm he had at his disposal.

What was he thinking? They were in the middle of a mission, he shouldn't be thinking about how to get back into her pants!

"Hey!"

Footsteps thumped rapidly down the hall and Mace prepared to jump out and coldcock the next guy. Crouching by the door, his heart leapt into his throat as he watched Annie get tackled by a black-clad man.

Grabbing the knife Mace jumped out and tried to get a shot at the guy, but couldn't find an angle that wouldn't put Annie in jeopardy. Annie was thrashing around, trying to keep him from pinning her to the ground, not making Mace's job any easier.

Finally, Annie must have got a lucky shot in with her heel, because the guy let out a high-pitched squeal and rolled over, clutching his balls. Mace put him out of his misery with a hit to the temple and helped Annie off the floor.

"Are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

“No, just roughed me up a little. I’ll live. He did radio in though as he was chasing me. They know at least one of us is loose.”

“Shit, I didn’t hear anything.” Mace checked the guy’s ankle for the tattoo that had been on the other guys. Yup, it was here too. Definitely a militia.

“Maybe they’re changing frequencies or something. We better hurry, reinforcements could be coming.” Annie jabbed the guy’s arm with the needle. “How much longer are we going to have to do this?”

“I don’t know, but I think this trick is done.” Mace wasn’t about to tell her his heart couldn’t handle seeing her thrashing under a man twice her size again. He’d have to come up with a new plan, one that didn’t require Annie to be front and center in the hot zone.

The sound of feet pounding down the staircase jolted him back to his senses. “Get in the bathroom; we’ll climb into the ventilation shafts again.”

Annie followed his orders without question while Mace finished tying the guy up. Mace shoved him under a pile of spilled laundry to hide him a bit longer and buy them some more time.

Running into the bathroom he saw Annie standing on the sink working the grille off the ventilation shaft. Wrapping one arm around her slender middle, he pulled her off the sink and wedged the knife in the vent to pry it off.

“I’d have gotten it eventually.” She shot him a disgruntled look.

“Whatever. Just get in.” At least the sink gave him a boost so he didn’t have to strain so much to get up this time. His stitches burned like fire, but he couldn’t check them out again in front of Annie. While she was catching unfriendlies, he’d been stuffing gauze under the strip of shirt she’d tied around his waist. Blood had soaked through the makeshift bandage and he was afraid he was going to leave a trail.

“Shh, I can hear them in the hallway.” Annie had scooted a few feet down the shaft and was listening at the next opening.

Mace belly-crawled his way over to her trying to keep the weapons and radio from clinking against the shaft.

With her finger to her lips, Annie motioned him over to the grille.

“Jud? Jud? Where are you?”

Mace turned his stolen radio off just in time as the guy on the ground keyed his up.

“Command, this is Terminator, I can’t find Jud anywhere.”

“How many times have I told you not to use names on the air? These bastards have all sorts of devices for intercepting transmissions.”

Yeah, Mace called them ears.

“I don’t give a shit. We’re the ones with the weapons and the ones with the hostages. Let them listen and fear.”

Annie rolled her eyes and twirled her finger around next to her head with the universal gesture of crazy.

“You don’t know what these brainwashed commies are capable of. Now where is Jud— Justifier?”

“I don’t know. He isn’t at his post. I didn’t catch his message, either. I think there’s someone out there.” The guy looked around nervously. “I think we should pair up.”

“Negative, that’s a negative, Terminator. I’m Command, and I say remain at your posts. Our example has been made and the demands delivered. Hold steady to the mission.”

“What about Jud?”

“In every war there must be some casualties. He’ll be remembered for eternity for his sacrifices.”

The Terminator looked like he was going to throw the radio against the wall, but didn’t. “Roger. Over and out.”

Mace craned his neck to try to follow Terminator’s progress. Motioning Annie to stay where she was, Mace slid back down until he could crawl out of the shaft again. If

he'd timed it right, the guy should be checking out the room next to the bathroom right about now.

Every thump and clank against the walls of the shaft sounded like thunder to his ears. Good thing he was still barefoot or it would be even louder. Mace had just climbed down from the sink when the bathroom door slammed open.

Terminator pointed his gun, and Mace saw his life flash in front of his eyes. Diving to the side, Mace swiped the guy's legs out from under him and wrestled for the gun. If the automatic rifle went off in the tiny bathroom the ricochet would kill them both.

His side burning; Mace fought for possession of the gun, struggling to keep it from pointing at the ceiling where Annie was hiding.

Or should have been hiding.

"Hold it right there, Terminator, or you'll be the one splattered across the floor." Annie had one of the stolen weapons pressed against the guy's neck and her knee was pushing his shoulder down.

"I thought I told you to stay up there." Mace carefully got up off the floor and grabbed Terminator's weapon.

"Yeah, well, I don't take orders from subordinates. Are you going to bitch about me coming down or are you going to question this guy?"

"I'm not telling you anything. You're just a bunch of communist sellouts! It's because of you we have fags and weirdoes running all over the country." Their prisoner looked almost proud to be defiant.

"Yup, that's me, risking my life so that the communist takeover can be completed. You'll talk, Terminator, or my friend here will dose you up with truth serum."

Annie caught on quickly and pulled a syringe and more Demerol out of the towel she'd put them in.

"Now this won't hurt a bit." She held up the syringe so that light glinted off the point.

Terminator's face paled and he started to sweat. When Annie pushed a little spurt of fluid out of the tip, he gulped audibly. His eyes were rolling in his head as she grabbed his arm and aimed.

"I'll tell you everything! Just get that thing away from me!"

He carried a gun around like it was a water pistol, but was afraid of a needle? There was something wrong with these guys. Mace waved her off and faced his victim. "How many men are in the hospital itself?"

"We've got fifty men spread through out the hospital. Two are guarding each set of prisoners."

"How many doorways are rigged with bombs and where are they?"

The Terminator shut his mouth tightly and Annie pushed the needle into his arm.

"Don't touch me with that thing!" His face was positively green as he looked at the syringe.

"Then tell me what I want to know."

"All the stairways to the main building are booby-trapped." His eyes were darting from side to side as he tried to pull away. Mace got closer to keep him from hitting Annie.

"Then how have you been able to get around?"

"The bombs only work on the timer, not on contact. You can open the doors without getting blown to hell."

"Where are the prisoners being held?" He wanted to get the noncombatants to safety if he could.

"The military personnel are being held in a meeting room. The civilians are in the cafeteria." He was sweating profusely now, and his body was shaking.

Mace nodded to Annie and she gave the Terminator the Demerol.

"I told you everything! Truth serum isn't going to help."

“It isn’t truth serum. Night, night, Terminator.” Annie pulled the needle out of his arm and checked his pulse as his eyes slowly closed.

“What are we going to do? We can’t take out fifty of these guys. And now they’ll be looking for us.”

Rolling the Terminator in with the other unfriendly, Mace racked his brain for a way out of this situation. They had to do something soon or they’d all be dead.

“Too bad we can’t do something with all the bombs you defused,” Annie tied the remaining vials of narcotics back up inside the towel.

Do something with the bombs. Hmm.

“That’s it! You’re brilliant!” Mace gave her a hard kiss on the lips.

“I am? What are you going to do?”

“Set off the bombs.”

Chapter Six

"I'm sorry; I must not have heard you right. I thought you said you were going to set off the bombs." Annie looked hard at Mace wondering if the strain had gotten to him.

"I did. We're going to collect the other bombs and plant them somewhere." His emerald eyes were shining brightly at her. "The enemy will think they're being attacked and rush to that area and we can rescue the prisoners and get the hell out of here. Once the hostages are taken out of the picture, we'll let the forces on the outside deal with these guys."

"Isn't that a bit risky?"

"And you running down the hall with two tons of fanatic chasing your ass isn't?"

He had a point; this whole situation was out of control. "Where are you going to put the bombs?"

"I hadn't thought that far ahead yet."

"Maybe you should." Good lord, she was actually encouraging him in this insanity.

"Let's collect the bombs, defuse them and while we're doing that I'll think of a plan."

"And you think these guys are just going to *let* us collect all their explosives?"

"I wasn't planning on asking their permission."

Annie rolled her eyes. This was crazy. They were going to end up blowing up themselves and the whole damn hospital by the time they were done. And she'd thought Iraq was dangerous!

* * * * *

Keeping her weapon at the ready, Annie guarded Mace's back. They'd already had two more skirmishes trying to collect the bombs. She didn't want any more. At least there were two fewer goons to fight.

That was two less to try and kill Mace. Her stomach clenched at the thought of him dying. Her makeshift bandage had held so far, but how much more abuse could his stitches take? Annie resisted the urge to check his bandage again. Time was running out.

Mace's muscles rippled as he hefted the bag of bombs over his shoulder. Annie forced the jolt of lust that shot straight to her core into submission and tried to focus on the problem at hand.

"Why don't we plant them in the garage? It's far enough away from the meeting room and the cafeteria to keep the prisoners safe, but will be loud enough to get their attention."

He appeared to think on her suggestion for a bit. "It could work; we'd have to be careful where we did it and how much we used. The garage might be unstable after already being hit. We should recon the noncombatants first and plan our strategy there before we set off any explosives."

"Let's go to the café first. It will have the most people, and they aren't used to dealing with volatile situations like this."

Annie tried to remember the best way to get to the café without going through the main lobby. They had to backtrack twice when she took them into older parts of the building, but eventually they made it.

"Are you going to unload that somewhere?" Annie indicated the bag of bombs he was holding. She knew in her head that it was stable, but that didn't mean she wanted to be inches from enough explosives to blow up a city block.

"I'll stash it in that closet over there. If anything happens, take it and run for the exit."

"I'm not leaving without you!" Her heart dropped into her stomach at the thought of losing Mace.

Irrational as it was, she'd formed a bond to this man and she couldn't fathom leaving without him.

"Hey, I'm not planning on dying anytime soon, but I can't concentrate if I'm worried about you getting killed. I know it sounds crazy, but I-I have feelings for you I can't explain."

Hope surged within Annie's chest. Maybe he felt the same way that she did?

"Then you'd better live long enough to figure them out. Come on."

Annie watched Mace's back again while he broke into the janitor's closet and stashed the explosives. Her blood pounded in her veins as they crept down the silent halls. The café was in the basement of the building and it was dark and creepy on a good day. With only the emergency lights on and no people bustling around, it was even worse.

Ducking into an alcove, Mace pulled her to his chest and motioned for silence. How could he know if anyone was coming or not? It was so dark she could barely see a foot in front of her. A few endless heartbeats later the sound of clumping feet echoed in the hallway.

"Hey, Brett, you see anything?" A scratchy voice came over the radio down the hall.

"Nah. Nothing. 'Course it's darker than witch's heart."

"Whadda think happened to Jud and the rest of 'em?"

These guys were darn chatty over the radio. The wait must be getting to them.

"Probably got scared and deserted their posts." Brett snorted.

"Probably. You having any trouble with your prisoners?"

"Nah, after the example we made, none of them has the guts to say 'boo'. How 'bout you? You got the commie soldiers in your group."

“Hell no. They’re afraid they’ll be the next example. I thought this’d be more interesting, ya know. It’s just waiting around for something to happen.”

“I know. Boring. I was thinkin’ of having some fun with one of the nurses.”

“Command said don’t touch ‘em.”

“I wouldn’t touch her, much. Just make her touch me, if you get my drift.”

Annie’s gut clenched again. Those were her nurses, her staff. No hick was going to rape one of her friends. She’d tear this freaking hillbilly apart with her bare hands!

Something in her body language must have told Mace what she was thinking, because his arms tightened around her and she couldn’t move. She was afraid to struggle and alert Brett to their presence, but her heart pounded in fury.

Mace continued to hold her until the goon walked down the other end of the hall. Even once he determined the coast was clear, he held onto her arm and steered her back to the janitor’s closet.

Once inside he let her go.

“Why did you stop me? I could have taken him out before he even knew what hit him!” Annie got right up in his face.

“Yeah, but could you have done it before he radioed his buddy? I’m just as pissed off as you are, but we have to think with our heads, not our emotions.”

“He’s going to rape one of my nurses! I can’t allow that!”

“Stop freaking out and use your training. You can’t let the fate of one person jeopardize hundreds of lives.”

“What do you know? You’re a man. You have no idea what it’s like to fear rape.”

“It doesn’t mean I want it to happen!” Mace stepped back from her and looked her in the eye. “Look, I’ll do everything in my power to keep your staff safe, but we’ve got to do this according to plan or we’ll both be dead.”

Annie swallowed the fear and anger and tried to focus on what he was saying. If she went charging into the café, guns blazing, she could very well end up killing

innocent civilians before she stopped Brett. Even worse, he could radio their location and reinforcements could come down.

But it could be one of her nurses! One of her friends. Annie's mind struggled with the idea of letting one of her friends get hurt. She had to put the good of everyone first, no matter how much it galled her. He was right, damn it. "Let's set the freaking charges."

"That's my girl!" Mace pulled her close and planted a kiss on her.

"But when the time comes, Brett's mine."

"No problem, as long as I get to watch."

* * * * *

Mace set the charges in the parking garage in the farthest spot he could find. The area looked a little weak, but he wanted these guys to take a long time to find out it was only a decoy.

He really wished he had paid more attention to that explosives workshop. At the time it seemed ridiculous. He was a pilot; all he needed to know was what they looked like if they were in his copter. Live and learn. He hoped. He had a lot more living to do.

Looking over his shoulder, Mace felt his breath catch at the sight of Annie holding the weapon on the door to the garage. Her angelic face didn't hold one hint of softness now. He almost pitied Brett. Then he remembered what Brett was thinking and all pitying thoughts vanished.

One of those bastards better not try to rape Annie. Mace would blow the whole hospital up before he let that happen.

Stop! He couldn't think like that. One life wasn't more important than hundreds, isn't that what he just told Annie? He looked at her again and his heart did a slow thump. She was worth more than a million lives, and he'd do anything, *everything* to protect her.

"Come on, Captain, we've got work to do." Annie headed towards the door.

“Yes, ma’am!”

Mace checked the charges one more time and followed Annie out the door. It was a good thing she knew her way around the building, because he would have been lost hours ago.

“I was thinking,” Annie started.

“Why do I think I’m not going to like this?”

“Just hear me out. I think we should split up.”

“No fucking way! There is no way I’m going to let you loose on Brett.” Or leave her open to attack.

“Then tell me how we’re going to rescue the military personnel and the civilians at the same time when they’re on two different floors? By the time we take care of the civilians they’ll have started killing off the others.”

Damn. He should have thought of that. He was no good with ground operations.

“There’re two men guarding each location, how are you going to take out both of them?” Mace’s mind raced as he tried to iron out this new wrinkle.

“The same way you planned to. When the explosives blow I’ll shoot the sons-of-bitches with this sucker.” She hefted the automatic weapon.

“You could really do that?”

“I’ve had the same basic training as you have.”

“I don’t mean physically. Can you emotionally take someone’s life in cold blood?”

“It’s down to us against them. You’re damn straight I could shoot them. I don’t want to, but I will if it means saving all of us.”

Mace looked at her beautiful face and cringed at the thought of the damage to her soul.

“We have to do this; we’re running out of time. Besides, once I take out one of them, I’m sure the civilians will come to my aid.” Her face softened and she stroked his cheek.

“We don’t have any other choice.”

She was right, and he knew it. That didn't mean he had to like it. "Fine, but I'll take the civilians; you go after the military personnel. There're fewer of them and less chance that they'll panic when the bombs go off." And hopefully they'll have already subdued the enemy seconds after the explosion.

* * * * *

Annie crouched down behind a huge ficus tree and waited for the explosion to launch her attack. She had been full of bold words for Mace, but the truth was she was shaking in her shoes. It was a whole lot easier thinking of shooting someone who was going to possibly rape one of her friends than it was going into unknown territory.

The roar of the explosion shook the building and shocked her into immobility for precious seconds. Training overcame instinct and Annie ran for the meeting room. One of the goons was running out as she got there and she fired at his legs.

The spray of bullets shooting out of the weapon was faster than she expected and the man went down hard, blood splattering everywhere. She hadn't killed him outright but if he didn't receive medical care he'd be as good as dead. That was something she'd have to worry about later. If the situation was reversed, she didn't think he'd be feeling any remorse.

Kicking in the door, Annie shot at the ceiling and dove to the side, praying the whole time. Return fire came shooting over her head and she scrambled for the cover of a table. Peeking her head over the edge she caught sight of two officers diving on top of the lone gunman while bullets flew.

Using the furniture for cover she crawled her way over to the battle. One of the MPs she recognized from night shift was lying in a corner, his face battered and bloody, and one arm bent at an unnatural angle.

Several other military nurses were clustered in a circle. Annie handed off one of the rifles to the nearest one and worked her way closer to the last goon. Another spray of bullets flew around the room, forcing her to duck for cover.

Shouts erupted and she lost track of the present battle, transported back to the one in Iraq. In her mind, bodies were torn apart by shrapnel, wild-eyed fanatics spouting guttural rhetoric charged at her with guns flashing.

The logical part of her mind screamed at her to snap out of it, but her psyche was frozen in fear. The image of a bearded man pointing a gun at her, then jerking and falling back when he was shot played over and over again. Remembered fear crawled in her belly, and she wanted to whimper with the force of it.

“Major. Major! You can put the weapon down. The prisoner has been secured.” Colonel Michaels’ voice broke through her daze.

“Yes, sir!”

“Good work, Major. Where are the others?”

Others? “Ah, there are no others, sir.”

“You did this yourself?”

“No, sir. Captain Mason O’Keefe is now liberating the civilians. We need to get out before the rest of the enemy realizes they’ve been duped.”

“Duped? You’ve got a lot to explain.” The colonel looked at her with an incredulous expression on his face.

“In all due time, sir. Now we need to leave.”

One of the other colonels got up from where he’d been tying up the goon with a telephone cord. “Let’s take the fire exits and try to get out by the side of the building. They’re bound to have most of the exits covered.”

“I’ll secure the rear.” Annie snapped her spare clip into the weapon.

Michaels looked at her again but didn’t say anything. Two of the nurses were helping the wounded MP out, and the one she had given the gun to stopped as she went past.

“What happened to the guy that went out first?” she asked.

“He’s lying in a pool of his own blood in the hallway.” Annie felt bile climb up her throat.

“Good. He did this to Scott as an ‘example’ of what would happen if we tried anything. I think he liked doing it too. I hope he dies a slow, painful death.”

Annie looked at the wounded MP who was holding his ribs with his uninjured hand and shuddered. Anyone who would enjoy inflicting so much damage they broke bones didn’t deserve her remorse.

Colonel Michaels followed the last of the nurses and held the door for Annie. She walked to the threshold and waited for him to get out of the way so she could pull the door closed.

“What are you doing? Get out of here, Major! That’s an order.”

Colonel Michaels stood in the doorway with hands on hips.

“I’m sorry, sir; you’ll have to write me up for insubordination. I have to watch my buddy’s back.” Annie saluted and ran for the café.

Chapter Seven

Mace's side was bleeding worse now than when he had gotten the original injury. If he had one intact stitch after this he'd be surprised. Blood from the wound he'd earned preventing a rape was dripping down from his shoulder making things look even worse than they actually were.

Trying to ignore the pain from where the bullet grazed his shoulder, Mace concentrated on leading the civilians out of the café. Annie had told him there was an emergency exit somewhere in these tunnels. Another stab of fear hit him in the gut as he thought about her. Was she okay? Hell, was she still alive?

Focus on the job, O'Keefe. He couldn't let emotions take over his brain right now; he had to get these people to safety. The emergency lights were few and far between in this section of the hospital, and Mace flinched at every echo of sound.

They only had a limited time before the enemy realized the explosion was a trick. Once they figured it out, all the remaining unfriendlies would be trying to recapture the hostages. As it was, Mace had taken out four more men than he had planned on.

Thank God he'd told Annie to take the smaller group. They were at ground level and had a better chance to escape without running into trouble.

The thud of a boot heel hitting the floor sounded like a gunshot compared to the quiet shuffling of the civilians he was leading. Searching for options, Mace motioned for them to crouch down behind the huge laundry bins they'd just passed.

Slipping ahead, he strained his ears trying to hear another telltale footstep. If he remembered Annie's directions right, they were pretty darn close to the exit. That noise could have come from someone guarding the door. And since none of his allies wore boots, that meant it was an unfriendly up ahead.

A slight breeze played about his face, teasing him with its coolness against his sweaty skin. If there was a breeze that meant there was probably a door. With his back against the wall, Mace slipped around the corner in time to see the silhouettes of two men standing in an open door. One of them made a pulling motion and tossed something down the hall and ducked for cover.

Shit! He must have pulled the pin on a grenade! Mace had five seconds to throw it back or they were all dead. Running as fast as he could to intercept it, Mace picked up the rolling mini-bomb. Juggling it from hand to hand, praying he had time, he kicked open the emergency exit and threw his best fastball pitch.

The grenade cleared the door, spinning through the air as it went. Mace couldn't follow its progress, his eyes were blinded by the light streaming in. Jumping away from the exit he pulled the door closed and dropped to the floor.

"Get down and cover your heads!" he ordered his followers.

His shoulder screamed in agony as he raised his arms and covered his own neck and head. Seconds dragged out as he waited for the explosion.

And waited.

And waited.

A dud. Ten years scared off his life by a cheap surplus store dud.

Laughing to himself, Mace pushed his weary body off the floor. His knees felt weak from relief, but his job wasn't done yet. He had to get the civilians out of the hospital, and now two enemies knew they were here.

"Anyone know another way out of here? If we go out that door, chances are we'll be met by two guys with machine guns."

Faces glazed by shock looked at him with blank expressions. These people had been through so many traumatic events in the last six hours, they were functioning like sleepwalkers.

"I do."

An older man with "Sanitation Engineer" on his uniform came forward.

"It'll be a tight squeeze with all these people, but there's a side door in the furnace room for repairs and stuff. We'll have to go through one at a time, but I doubt anyone even knows about it."

"Good man. Lead the way."

"Yes, sir!" The grizzled man snapped a salute and turned. "Haven't seen this much excitement since I came home from Korea!" He walked back down the hallway.

Shaking his head, Mace ushered his charges after the janitor. Wonder if it was the same closet that he and Annie had made such memories in? Mace would never be able to look at a cleaning closet the same way again.

The furnace room was indeed a tight squeeze. The exit was a tiny service door, and they had to squeeze by the burner of the furnace to get to it. Luckily with the power out the burner wasn't running or they'd be risking serious burns to get out.

It seemed to take forever for the group to file through. A couple of the heavier women had difficulty getting out, and Mace had a moment of panic picturing them all trapped in the tiny space while the gunmen picked them off one by one. Eventually, the last of them made it through the miniature door.

The janitor stuck his head back in. "Your turn."

"I'm not going." There was no way he was leaving without Annie. He handed the veteran one of the guns he carried. "Take this and get the hell away from the building. The first guy you see in a SWAT team jacket, throw down the gun and raise your hands over your head."

"Are you crazy? They're still a bunch of these guys running around. You'll be killed!"

"It's a risk I've got to take. Thanks for the help, you're a real hero." Mace made sure he had enough ammo then saluted the man and pulled the door closed.

The darkness was overwhelming, and Mace took a minute to get his bearings. Annie should have gotten her crew out by now and be with them.

Should being the operative word.

He was positive that she was still in the building. The two of them were connected in some way, and just as he knew he couldn't leave without knowing her fate, he knew she hadn't left him either.

Jogging down the corridor, bare feet slapping against the tiled floor, Mace thought about where Annie might be. She was familiar with the route he had planned on taking, so she might be headed back to the laundry area.

And if she was, she could be headed right back to two unfriendlies with grenades! Mace began to run.

* * * * *

Annie's thoughts were focused on finding Mace and staying alive. Would she be able to find him? He had insisted that she leave the building with her group, but wouldn't say what he was going to do.

The smart thing would be for him to leave and they'd meet up outside, but he was a hero and she was sure he was up to something. If he thought he was going to single-handedly save the hospital he was in for a big surprise. She was either going to help him or drag his ass out of the building.

Now she just had to find him.

Rounding the corner to the café, Annie saw the body of Brett, pants down around his ankles. She didn't even bother to check his pulse, if he was still alive there was nothing she could do to save him anyway. A shudder ran down her back as she thought about whether or not Mace had stopped him from raping one of her friends in time.

Drops of blood on the floor trailed off towards the laundry. The same direction Mace was supposed to have taken. Was that Mace's blood? Had he reinjured himself, or

was that a new injury? Annie felt her heart lodge in her throat as she followed the bright red drops.

The farther away from the café, the harder it was to follow the trail. The halls got darker and darker, and Annie's heart pounded with anxiety. Had he been shot? Was he still alive?

A sudden flood of light blinded her and she instinctively dropped to the ground. Bullets whizzed over her head as she rolled to the side and returned fire. Her eyes watered and she couldn't see what she was aiming at. Trying to look out of the corner of her eyes, she aimed at the silhouettes in the door and kept firing.

As she crawled backwards, Annie tried to think about what she could use for cover. She was painfully aware that she stood out clearly in her whites in the darkness of the hallway. Squeezing the trigger on her rifle, she fired a few more shots to keep them distracted. A muffled scream came from the door. Had she hit one of them? She still couldn't see anything.

Strong hands grabbed her ankles and yanked her back. Panic shot through her and she tried to kick against her captor.

"It's me, Annie! Calm down!"

Mace!

"I think I got one, but I can't tell. The light blinded me."

"You got them both."

That was two more down. "Are they dead?"

"I didn't check, but if they're not, they aren't going anywhere for a while. What the hell are you doing here?"

Annie rolled over and got to her feet. She could barely make out Mace's features, but his dirt-streaked face was the most welcome sight she'd ever clapped eyes on.

"I couldn't leave you. I had to know you were alive."

"When we get out of here, I'm going to show you just how alive I am."

"If we get out of here, I'll hold you to it." Desire surged through her body, augmented by the adrenaline running through her system.

"Honey, you couldn't keep me from you. Now come on, let's get the hell out."

Following his lead Annie jogged after him. As they passed one of the emergency lights she saw blood dripping down his back.

"You're bleeding! What happened?" Annie stopped him to investigate the injury.

"Just a graze, it's more of a burn than anything. Nothing to worry about."

"It still needs to be cleaned."

"Later. Come on, I'll show you a way out."

Mace led her towards the furnace room. What were they doing here?

"Do you know where we're going?" She wasn't really familiar with this area, and if they got lost she wasn't sure she could get them back.

"Yup. I found a back door. Well, half-door." He laughed at his own joke.

Maybe the strain was finally getting to him; she didn't see anything funny about the situation.

The room Mace brought her to was pitch-black and smelled like grease. It was also as small as a closet.

"You're sure we can get out of here?" A slippery shiver of fear slithered down her spine.

"Trust me, have I steered you wrong yet?"

"No. And strangely enough, I trust you with my life." Annie shut her mouth before she blurted out something stupid like "and my heart."

Whatever Mace was going to say in response was cut off by an explosion outside of the room. Dirt and debris rained down on them, and Annie clung to Mace for balance.

Mace pulled her aside just in time as the enormous furnace tumbled against the wall where they had been standing. Annie's knees shook and she bit back a whimper of fear. They were alive, but how long could they stay that way?

"What's going on?" Her voice was breathy with fear. The darkness was closing down on her and she could feel the panic stirring in her belly.

"I think the next grenade they launched wasn't a dud."

"Grenade? You didn't tell me they had grenades!"

"It was a bit of a surprise to me too. Can you let go so I can check out the situation? Will you be okay?"

No! She didn't want him to let her go. Damn it, she was an adult, she could conquer this fear. There was nothing to be afraid of, Mace was right there with her.

"Sure. I'm fine." Cold sweat dripped down her back and she was glad he couldn't see her face and know she was lying.

"I'm right here. You don't have to be scared."

"Who's scared?" *Me, me, me, me!*

"I'm going to see if I can find a flashlight. There should be something here for when they do work on the furnace."

"Check next to the door." Light would make this better. Maybe.

There was a thump and a curse, and then a clatter of something falling. A weak light flickered on and Annie gasped.

The enormous furnace had fallen and lodged itself against the door to the hallway, narrowly missing them. If Mace hadn't moved them when he did they would have been crushed under its weight.

"Oh man," Mace groaned.

"I know, talk about a close call."

"That's not what I'm thinking about. That's the way outside right there."

Annie looked at where Mace pointed. The other end of the furnace was wedged against a tiny half-door. They were trapped.

The fear she'd been holding in check by her fingertips let loose with a vengeance.

* * * * *

In the flickering light of the dying flashlight, Mace watched Annie's face crumple. Tears streamed out of her eyes and her knees buckled. Mace jumped to her and caught her before she dropped to the filthy ground.

"It'll be okay, baby. I promise I'll get you out of here."

"We don't even know what the hallway looks like out there. We might be trapped in here for days!"

She was headed towards all-out panic, and there wasn't anything he could do to stop it. He had to distract her!

Hauling her to her feet, Mace pulled her face to his and kissed her. He could taste the tears on her slack lips moments before she responded to his touch.

And respond she did. One second she was a quivering mass of fears ready to curl into the fetal position, the next second she was a wild woman clinging to him and attacking his mouth with a vengeance.

"Slow down, baby, I'm not going anywhere."

"Don't remind me!"

Oh crap, bad word choice. Mace had to keep her mind off the situation. He was still kissing her, but she was starting to pull away. Thinking quickly he drew her closer.

"Want to play a game?" he whispered as he nipped her earlobe.

"What kind of game?" Her voice had a quaver in it and he didn't know if it was from fear or desire.

"Let's pretend."

"Aren't we a little old to be playing pretend? I mean, isn't the situation a bit desperate for childhood games?"

She scoffed at his idea, but didn't pull back. Mace took that as a good sign.

"This is a great time to use our imaginations. It's just the two of us here; we can be anything we want, do anything we want."

“O-okay. What do you want to pretend?”

“Let’s pretend we’re in the desert, in a secluded tent.” Mace ran his hands lightly over her bare shoulders. He shut the flashlight off and the room plunged into darkness again.

“I was in plenty of tents in the desert, they weren’t very fun.” Her voice quivered, but she was still standing.

“This isn’t field ops; this is a sheik’s tent. Gorgeous rugs are on the floor, silk cushions are everywhere.” Mace racked his brain to think of what else would be in a tent like that. He had a vague recollection of something like this from a porno movie he’d seen once. “There’s soft music playing in the background, and a gentle breeze comes in through the top.”

It was working, she was starting to relax. Her hands were stroking his back now instead of clutching him in a panic. He just had to keep it up now.

“What are we doing in this tent?”

Oh boy. What the hell had happened in that movie? “Ah, I’m the sheik, and you’re my concubine.”

“Oh really?”

“Hey, this is pretend, and I’m making it up. When it’s your turn, you can be the sheik.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

Mace’s cock slammed painfully erect at the thought of Annie being in complete control of him. His balls were achingly full and lust was driving him hard. This better be working to distract her, because it was driving him insane!

“As my concubine, you have to do whatever I want, or you’ll be punished.”

Her breathing got faster, and he could almost smell her sudden desire. Blood pounded in his veins in response.

“What if I don’t want to be good? What if I’m a very bad concubine?” Annie’s hands stroked his stomach then moved down to cup his sac.

Desire punched him in the gut, driving the air right out of his lungs. He ran his hands up her chest until he reached the elastic of her bra. Very slowly Mace drew the fabric up over her breasts, until her creamy mounds fell free.

“I guess if you’re very bad, you’ll have to be punished.” Before she could react, Mace pinched her nipples quickly, then bent over to draw one into his mouth.

“Oh!”

Mace wished he could see her face. Her rapid breathing told him she was aroused, but he wanted to see what she looked like as he brought her up and over. Licking his way to her other nipple, he eased her pants down her legs until she was completely naked. Slowly he kissed his way to her belly button, then over to her hips, avoiding her pussy completely.

“You’re killing me!” she moaned.

“That’s the point, you’re supposed to be punished.” Standing back up, Mace used one hand to part the silken curls between her legs. She was soaking wet, her juices drenched his hand as he parted her pussy lips. Sliding one finger into her tight channel, Mace fought for control as her muscles squeezed him. God, he wanted to feel those muscles around his cock.

Annie moaned and pulled him closer, thrusting her hips against his hand.

“Oh no, you don’t. You’ve been a very bad slave.” Smiling to himself, Mace gently swatted her ass.

“Whoa! You just spanked me!” A flood of fluid washed over his hand as he pushed a second finger inside her pussy.

“And you liked it.” He slapped her again while driving his fingers deeper into her channel.

“Maybe.”

She might not admit it out loud, but her body was telling another story. Annie's hands were squeezing his pecs tightly, and her hips were rocking furiously.

"I think it's a bit more than 'maybe'. I think you're enjoying this little game. Aren't you, slave?" Mace used his thumb to rub against her clit as he spanked her again, a little harder this time.

Teeth bit into his chest as she thrust her hips against him. Mace pushed his fingers deeper inside of her and strummed her clit even faster. At last, a wash of cream flowed over him as her body spasmed.

"Holy shit!" she gasped. "I've never come so hard in my entire life. Who'd of thought I liked kink?"

"Stick with me, I'll show you all sorts of things."

Annie untied his pants and pulled his throbbing cock into her hot, wet pussy. Mace thought he'd die from the pleasure of finally being in her body again.

"I think I'll stick around for a little while at least."

"I can pretty much guarantee it's only going to be a little while."

"So much for the conquering hero." Annie planted her mouth on his and grabbed his ass in both hands. Her hot walls squeezed his cock like a wet fist making his balls ache with the need to release their load. Not yet. He had to hold off just a little longer, it felt too good to end it only seconds after he got inside her.

Reaching between them, Mace slipped a finger against her clit and rubbed. He had to stop moving to hold off his climax, but nothing could keep the desire from throbbing in his veins.

As Annie quivered and clenched around him again, he grabbed her hips and pounded into her hot wet center with everything he had. He could feel the come building at the base of his cock, getting ready to explode into Annie. The stream of semen spraying from his body seemed to go on and on. Mace held on for dear life as he emptied his heart and soul into her.

What had started as a way to distract her had become a catharsis. And an epiphany. He was never going to let this woman out of his life. They'd known each other for less than twenty-four hours, but he felt like he'd known her forever. For the first time in his life, Mace found someone who he couldn't live without.

"One of these days, we're going to have to do this in a bed," Annie said, kissing his neck as she slid away from him.

"Do you think it could be any better lying down?" He clicked on the flashlight and looked at her face to see if the panic had left. She had a satisfied smile on her face, and her angel eyes sparkled at him.

"No, but I'm willing to compare. In fact, I think we should try all sorts of positions and see if they can compare." She gave him a sexy smile.

Mace's cock began to stir again. The moisture from her body hadn't even dried off and he was thinking about plunging back in. "I think it only makes sense to try out all the options before making a decision."

"If we're stuck in here forever, we'll have plenty of time to try." She wrapped her arms around herself and turned away.

He pulled her close to him and tucked her head under his chin. "Don't panic, we'll get out of here."

"How? The furnace is too heavy to move, and no one even knows we're here except the goons who threw the grenade."

"Have a little faith. The janitor who led me down here knows where we are. When the situation is safe, someone will come looking for us. We just have to hold out until then."

"And pray we don't die of thirst or starvation."

"I think you need a little more distracting, Major. You're thinking too many negative thoughts."

Chapter Eight

Annie looked at Mace in the wavering light. Her eyes were drawn to his rapidly growing cock as it stood up hard and tall from the nest of curls between his legs. He was ready so quickly?

“What sort of distraction did you have in mind, Captain?” A curl of anticipation wound its way to her swelling nether lips.

“Turn around.” His voice was husky and shot right through her.

“Turn around?” He didn’t want her to face him?

“Trust me on this. Turn around and brace your hand on that shelf over there.”

“What? Are you going to spank me again?” Not that she’d mind. The combined sensations of having him slap her ass and slam his finger inside her had been mind-blowing.

Annie did as he instructed. The click of the flashlight sounded and the room was again plunged into darkness. Just once she’d like to make love to him when she could see his face. Of course, from this position, she couldn’t see his face anyway.

She could feel Mace move behind her, his hand on her naked behind. She felt open and very needy. Being in the dark had lost its power over her. The lust shooting through her system destroyed any smidgeon of fear before it could fully form.

She had other things on her mind.

Mace’s fingers ran up and down her back so gently it gave her goose bumps. She could feel her nipples tightening and her pussy lips swelling between her legs. Her breasts seemed to grow fuller too. The position she was in made them hang in front of her and she felt a delicious sense of wantonness spread through her.

“Your skin is so soft.” His voice was low and husky in her ear. “I never noticed before how silky it is. I was too busy trying to get between your legs to pay attention to the rest of you. Not this time. I’m going to worship every inch of your body until you beg me to stop.” His words danced around in her head, dizzying her with their intensity.

“I don’t beg easily.” Well, she never had before anyway.

“Good.”

His mouth followed his fingers, licking, kissing, and nipping at her back and shoulders. She could feel the slight abrasion of his stubble as he moved over her, and the contrast from his soft lips was erotic. Each touch of his lips sent heat spreading out in ripples through her body. His hands had drifted around and were running over her ribs, sliding up under her breasts then moving away before they reached her aching chest. A hot surge of need followed in the wake of his fingers, silently urging him to touch her everywhere.

A fresh dribble of fluid trickled between her legs, and she was sure there was more to come. Every second that ticked by made her more aware of his movements and her body was burning with eagerness for his touch. Her breath was coming in shallow little gasps. With the lights out, her other senses were hyperaware of what was happening to her, including the nerve endings in her skin. Every caress Mace gave her branded itself on her body.

Annie’s heart was beating like a drum and she was waiting in an agony of anticipation for what he’d touch next. Mace’s fingers drifted down to her hips and she felt him caress the globes of her rear end. The teasing touch of his fingers made her pussy clench and throb. He spread her legs a bit more, widening her stance and making her long for him to fill the emptiness he’d created.

His lips brushed the underside of her butt, teasing the spot where her thighs met her cheeks. A jolt of pure need shot straight to her center, pulling a cry from her.

“Anything wrong, Major?”

"Ah, no." I'm just dying in a pool of lust, that's all.

Her legs were quivering as she waited for his next move. She could feel the cool air of his breath blowing across her wet clit, sending lightening bolts of desire through her. Without thinking, she rolled her hips back to get closer to him.

"Patience, my dear, patience." She could hear the laughter in his voice. He was enjoying this too much.

But not nearly as much as she was.

Mace massaged her calves and he trailed his hands up and down her legs. With each pass he got a little closer to the hot, screaming center of her. Her pussy was so enlarged it was like a separate, throbbing entity between her legs.

A single finger rubbed her outer lips, and she whimpered.

"Ready to beg?"

Yes! Yes! Yes! "No." Her body screamed at her, but her pride wouldn't let her give in.

He stood up behind her, and Annie felt the hair of his chest rub against her back in a long caress. His erection was tantalizingly close to her core, but when she tried to adjust to get him closer he moved back.

"Not yet, baby."

One hand parted her curls and teased her sensitized nubbin, the other kneaded a breast. The dual sensations overwhelmed her lust-dazed mind and all she could think about was having him inside of her. Mace pulled her against him so their bodies touched from shoulder to thigh. Licking at the shell of her ear, he seduced her with love words while pinching her nipple and spearing her center with his fingers.

"Tell me what you want, Annie." His finger stilled on her clit as she was seconds from exploding.

"I want you to fuck me!" Her heart was beating so fast and her blood was pounding in her ears. She'd never make it if he stopped now.

“No.”

No? “I want you, damn it, Mace! I want you to finish it and fuck me and stay in my body until I can’t think of anything but you!” She almost wept with frustration. His cock was so close to her pussy, and his finger was poised on her most sensitive spot.

“No, I’m going to make love to you until you can’t think of anyone else ever again.”

With two strokes of his finger Annie came apart in a shattering climax that left her weak and panting. Before she could come down from the stars, Mace bent her over his arm and slammed into her from behind causing another storm of explosions to rock through her body. His hand continued to tease and torment her breasts as he thrust into her, never letting her come down from the stratosphere of desire he’d elevated her to.

“Again. I want to feel you come again.”

Again? She’d never come so many times in her life. Mace pulled back until just the tip of his penis was inside her, then drove into her sending her senses soaring. The heel of his hand pressed against a spot below her belly button as he rocked back and forth inside of her. A tingling sensation started almost at the entrance to her womb and spread to her entire body.

Mace thrust into her harder and pressed down a little more until she felt like she was going to explode. When he gave a nipping kiss to her neck and flicked her clit gently with his finger, she came so hard it felt like a flood poured out of her body.

Annie sobbed with release as the strength left her body in waves. Lights danced behind her eyes as Mace continued to pound into her. If he wanted her to come again he was out of luck because she had nothing left to give.

His hand tightened against her breast as he gave a hoarse shout then fell against her back. Their mingled gasps were the only sound in the silent room. Annie had never experienced such mind-bending sex before in her life. This man did things to her body and her mind that both thrilled and amazed her.

“Still scared?”

“Of the room, no. That I may never walk again, yes.”

Laughing he lifted his weight off her. Instinctively, Annie squeezed her inner muscles, holding him in her body. “Don’t leave.”

“I won’t.” He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her even closer.

Annie’s heart did a slow flip as he rubbed his chin over her head. The darkness wasn’t so scary with Mace holding her tight.

“What happens if we get out of here?”

“Not if, when.” Mace assured her.

“Fine, what happens when we get out of here?”

“We’ll have to go through a debriefing, probably have to give depositions about what we saw. We might even have to testify at the trial.”

“Not that, I mean with you. Will you have to go back to the sandbox?” She was glad he couldn’t see her face. Annie didn’t want to be one of those women who pined after a service man when he was long gone, but she had to know.

“Maybe. It depends on what happens with this whole mess.”

The thought of Mace going back into battle and maybe dying tore her heart to shreds. How could she live without him?

Hell, she’d only just met him and now she was terrified of losing him. Shock must be wrecking havoc on her brain chemistry, she did not act this way. Ever. She would not be some idiot woman who clung to a guy who was after a cheap fling.

Pulling away from Mace she searched for something to cover herself with. She couldn’t see much, but her white pants were easy to find. Hopefully her bra was nearby.

“What’s wrong? Where’d you go?” There was worry coloring Mace’s voice.

“Nowhere. I’m a little chilly so I thought I’d get dressed.”

“Oh. Okay, I’ll get the flashlight.”

“No!” She didn’t want him to see her face until she pulled herself together. “I can get dressed in the dark. We should save the batteries so I can look at your wound. Although what I’m going to wrap it up in is anybody’s guess.”

“I’d forgotten all about it until now. Guess I was a little preoccupied.” Mace’s fingers played in her hair and she couldn’t move away. His touch was so gentle, so caring, it was killing her.

“Well, I want to make sure it isn’t worse than you thought.”

“It’s not. Here’s the flashlight, you can check it out for yourself.” He handed it to her and turned around.

Clicking on the flashlight she examined Mace’s shoulder. There were nail marks in his back from their first bout, and heat shot between her legs as she remembered how they got there.

“How’s it look?”

Damn good. He hadn’t gotten dressed yet and his muscular butt was a mighty fine sight to behold. “Ah, you’re right, it just grazed you. It already stopped bleeding, just a little antiseptic when we get out of here and you’ll be right as rain.”

She clicked off the light before he could turn back and face her.

“Shh!” Mace pulled her close and crouched down in the shelter of the fallen furnace.

Annie heard the pop of gunshots being fired in the distance. Another explosion rocked the building, dropping more debris down on them and making the room shudder. There were shouts and more gunshots, and Annie prayed they didn’t get shot at by either side.

Two more explosions hit outside their door in rapid succession and she closed her eyes and prayed harder. Mace’s body thrummed with tension behind her, but he remained calm. Terror made her legs weak. She bit her lip to hold back the whimper of fear. If he could stay calm, so could she.

Mace reached around her for their weapons and handed one to her. There was silence that seemed to go on for hours, but was probably only minutes. Annie's nerves were pulled tight with the tension. If the fight was over, who had won?

The quiet stretched on until Annie thought she'd scream. At least fifteen minutes later, the scream of ripping metal came from the half door. Annie aimed her weapon at the opening, was it friend or foe coming in? And would they shoot first and ask questions later?

* * * * *

A shaft of light speared Mace in the eye as mechanical claws tore their way through the door and into the furnace. If they were using the Jaws of Life equipment to open the door, it was probably the good guys trying to get in, but he held his weapon ready anyway.

"Major Forbes? Are you in there?"

"Colonel Michaels? Is that you?" Annie answered.

Mace held her arm when she went to go towards the door.

"You don't know if it's safe, and I don't want you getting too close to those jaws."

Annie rolled her eyes, but stayed where she was.

"We've got the building secure, but there was some structural damage to this area. It's going to take a bit to get you out of there."

"No kidding, sir. The hospital's furnace is jammed against both doors."

"What?"

"During one of the explosions the furnace fell over and is now lodged between both doors."

"No wonder it wouldn't open. Now we've got to cut through that goddamn thing too. You may be in for a long wait. I'll see if I can get you some water bottles and MREs."

"Yes, sir."

Military Meals Ready to Eat weren't gourmet cooking, but right about now they sounded pretty damn good. A little bit of water to clear the dirt and the taste of fear out of his mouth wouldn't hurt either.

"Are you wounded at all, Major?"

"No, but Captain O'Keefe is. I could use some clean bandages and some antiseptic. He'll need new stitches when this is over, too."

"Who the hell is Captain O'Keefe?" Colonel Michaels did not sound happy.

"My, ah, partner, sir. He was a patient in the emergency room."

Mace almost snickered. He was sitting there butt-naked with Annie between his legs and she was talking to her commanding officer.

"God in heaven. I want the whole story when this is all over. Right now stay away from this door while we stabilize the structure and get you out."

Mace heard some muffled shouts and the colonel moved away. Annie handed him his pants, or what was left of them anyway.

"These have seen better days," she said, averting her eyes as she moved away from his embrace.

"I'll be glad to get rid of them. You're going to need a new uniform, too, Major. I don't think most nurses run around in sports bras. Too bad."

"I guess it's all over."

Why wouldn't she look at him? "Yeah, if they're using machinery to get us out of here the building must be secure. I told you that janitor would let them know where we are."

"I mean, you and me. You'll be heading back to your unit and I'll be here a few more years."

"I won't be over there forever you know." The thought of losing her sent a cold stab of fear through his body.

“Yeah, but you said it yourself, this is all just a result of the adrenaline exaggerating our hormones, or something.”

“Is that all you think it is?” The coldness was spreading. Didn’t she feel the same way he did?

“I don’t know what I think! All I know is I have never been in a situation like this before, and I don’t know how much is adrenaline and how much is real.”

“If what we just shared was from adrenaline, I’ll bottle and sell it and put Viagra out of business! This is not over, babe.”

Mace didn’t know what Annie was going to say because another explosion rocked the building. The last thing he remembered was Annie diving for him as his head rang with pain.

Chapter Nine

Mace opened his eyes and winced. He was in an olive drab tent and his head felt like it had been hit with a baseball bat. Where was he? Did he crash? What the hell was going on?

Slowly the memories started to come back to him. He and Annie had been trapped in the furnace room. The wackos had been taken care of and they were waiting to get out. What happened next?

A pain shot through his heart as he remembered Annie telling him that their time together was over. Bullshit! He'd change her mind, by God!

Flipping back the light cover over his legs, he tried to get out of the cot. As soon as he sat up, a wave of dizziness dropped him right back down.

"What do you think you're doing? You lie right back down there this instant, Captain!" Annie came running to his side and straightened the covers over him.

"You're here. I was going to look for you." Mace grabbed her hand and held it tight. She wasn't getting away from him if he could stop it.

"Of course I'm here. Where else would I be?" Her blue eyes shined down on him and she caressed his face with her free hand.

"What happened?" Mace looked around the tent, he was next to a heavily bandaged man who looked like he had gone ten rounds with a heavyweight boxing champ. There was a nurse in a camp chair next to him, holding his hand in her sleep.

"Apparently we missed one of the bombs," Annie explained. "The explosion rocked the already weakened area where we were and that section of the building collapsed. You ended up with a concussion."

“Was anyone else hurt?” Mace searched her for signs of injury. She looked fine. Hell, she looked more than fine.

“No, everyone had gotten out by that point. If you hadn’t gotten the civilians out of the café though, it would have been a different story. The entire cafeteria is rubble.”

“Did they catch the bastards responsible for it?”

“The ringleaders are in custody, that’s all I know. There’s going to be some sort of investigation to find out who is behind all of it, but right now things are still pretty chaotic.”

“What time is it? I’m so disoriented, I don’t know whether I’m coming or going.”

“You’re not going anywhere, mister. It’s a little after noon. You’ve been out for a while.”

Mace let out a low whistle. “I think I was safer in Iraq.”

Annie looked sick at his words and tried to pull away, but he held her fast.

“Are you hungry? I could get you a sandwich if you’re not too nauseous to eat it.”

His stomach growled with hunger at the mention of food. “Guess that answers that question. How about you? Have you eaten?”

“Yeah, I got something while you were unconscious. Hold on, I’ll be right back.”

She pulled away from him and slipped out the tent flap without a sound. Mace rubbed his temples as he watched her leave. Would she come back? She’d seemed awfully skittish around him. Their conversation was awkward and stiff. Was she just hanging around because she felt guilty?

Could she be the one trying to run away now that things were over? They had done things a little back-ass-wards. He normally at least bought a girl a drink before he slept with her.

Hell, he hadn’t even slept with her; he’d screwed her brains out in a supply closet! No wonder she was hell bent on getting away from him. They’d let their raging

hormones loose before they had gotten to know each other. What a shock she felt awkward around him now.

He might not know a lot about women in general or Annie in particular, but he did know that she wasn't the type that hopped into bed with every GI she met. There was something very innocent about her, and he just bet she had no idea what to do about him now.

Well, Mace knew what to do, and as soon as he could get out of bed without his brain falling out his ear, he was going to do it. His beautiful Annie deserved a Prince Charming, and he was going to make sure she got one.

* * * * *

Annie knew it was damn cowardly to avoid Mace when he couldn't even get out of bed, but when Colonel Michaels told her to go home, she ran like a rabbit. There was no way she could be around Mace without wanting to either jump him or cry all over the place.

When the support beam came down on him, her heart went stone-cold with fear. She'd been chased, shot at, and almost blown up and that didn't touch the terror she felt seeing Mace buried under a pile of rubble. That sort of gut-wrenching fear didn't come from an excess of hormones and adrenaline.

In some bizarre twist of fate, Annie had fallen head over heels in love with a cocky helicopter pilot in less than twenty-four hours.

Anne Catherine Forbes, who had never so much as kissed on the first date, had not only had the best sex of her life with a guy she'd only just met, she'd tossed all good sense out the window and fallen in love with him. And she'd do it again in a heartbeat.

Unlocking the door to her tiny apartment, Annie dropped her keys on the table by the door and stumbled to the bathroom. First she was going to take a shower, then she was going to sleep for the next three days. By then Mace would be back with his unit and she wouldn't have to worry about running into him and bawling her eyes out.

She knew all about the military brush-off. Meet a woman in one station and dump her before you go to the next. Well, she'd save Mace the trouble. She wouldn't be clinging and whining when it was time for him to leave. He could go on his way with no empty promises about getting together again when he came back.

Turning the water on as hot as she could stand it, Annie stepped under the spray and let the stinging needles work out the lump in her throat. She'd be strong and send him off with a smile instead of tears. Even if it killed her, he wouldn't know her heart was breaking.

Annie let her tears mingle with the hot water as it ran down her face. How could something this devastating happen so fast? She'd found her heart and lost it all in the same day.

* * * * *

A knock on the door woke Annie from her exhausted slumber. A bleary-eyed look at the clock told her it was ten o'clock in the morning. She'd slept for almost twenty hours! No wonder she felt like her head was stuffed with socks.

By the taste in her mouth, they were dirty socks too. The pounding on her door had stopped. Probably had the wrong address. Annie never got visitors in the daytime, everyone knew she worked evenings and slept in. Could it be the press?

Annie slipped on her robe and crossed to the door. When she peeked through the peephole no one was there. Opening up the door she poked her head into the hallway and looked around. Not a body in sight. On her doormat was a vase of beautiful long-stemmed red roses.

"Oh!" Her heart caught in her throat. Who could those be from? "Don't get your hopes up, Forbes, they're probably for someone else." Even with her cynical side trying to keep her hopes in check, a faint tremor shook her fingers as she reached for the envelope stuck into the beautiful bouquet.

It was addressed to her! So it wasn't a mistake. Her heart beating in anticipation, she pulled the little card out.

Annie –

You are cordially invited to dinner at the Officers' Club, nineteen hundred hours tonight.

Fondly,

Mason.

Fondly? What the hell was fondly? Screwing her damn brains out was a little more than *fond*! Was this his way of brushing her off? He'd treat her to a nice dinner, then tell her it's been fun, but... Probably thought she wouldn't make a scene at the OC. She'd show him a thing or two, boy. She was taking out her shortest skirt and her highest heels for tonight. If he wanted to kick her to the curb, she'd make him eat his heart out.

Picking the roses up and bringing them in her kitchenette, Annie couldn't help but stick her nose in for a deep sniff. Guilt flowers or no, they were still beautiful. Mace might be an ass, but he had style.

* * * * *

Mace was sweating in his dress uniform. What if Annie didn't come? She'd bolted from the camp outside the hospital fast enough. Maybe what he felt was all one-sided after all?

Just when he was ready to march over to her house, a murmur went through the club. A goddess in a screaming red dress and ice-pick heels came into the room. Mace's jaw dropped when he saw that the sexy blonde was Annie. His Annie!

The fire engine red dress was low-cut and only came to the middle of her thighs. As she turned to look for him, he saw that it tied behind her neck and left her back completely bare. All he could think of was one little tug and her breasts would spill free.

Looking around the room, he bet every other horny GI in the place was thinking the same thing. Standing up, Mace waved to her and watched breathlessly as she came

over. His tongue was practically hanging out of his mouth by the time she got to the table. Remembering his manners, he was trying to charm her after all, he held out a chair at the table for her.

As she sat, he caught a whiff of her perfume and a glimpse of her cleavage. His body went on immediate alert, all systems go! He had to take a deep breath to control his urge to lay her across the table and see what she had on under the dress.

Down boy! You're supposed to charm her, not attack her!

He cleared his throat before attempting to speak. "Thanks for coming tonight. You look beautiful."

She smiled brightly at him, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "Thank you for the roses, they're lovely." She looked down at the menu and not at him. "I'm surprised they let you out of the hospital so soon. I figured you'd be under medical care for a few more days."

"I promised to be careful and get lots of rest, so they let me go. I wasn't critical so I don't think they minded. The beds were needed by other folks in worse shape than me." Mace moved away from the tempting view of her cleavage and quickly sat in his own seat, hiding the boner of a lifetime.

Annie took a sip out of her water glass and looked around. "I haven't been to the OC in a long time. It looks nicer than I remember."

"Not nearly as nice as my present company."

Startled eyes turned towards him for the first time. "Uh, thank you. I suppose I'd almost have to look better now. You pretty much saw me at my worst."

"If that was your worst, I'd say you had nothing to worry about. I thought you were lovely then, and I think you're just as beautiful now."

"Oh my." She looked back down at her menu.

"Are you blushing?" Mace was amazed a simple compliment could stain her cheeks so easily.

“Seems kind of silly, huh? I mean, it isn’t like we don’t *know* each other already.”

“We do and we don’t. Our relationship started with a bang.”

“Literally.”

“And we didn’t get a chance to go through the normal stages.”

Annie looked up at him quickly and opened her mouth, but the waiter chose that moment to relay the night’s specials to them. Mace didn’t care if he ate MREs as long as he had a chance to work on Annie.

He had no idea what he ordered, but the waiter left them alone and that was all that mattered. Mace reached across the table and held Annie’s hand.

“I’m glad you came tonight. After you ran off yesterday I didn’t know if I had done something to offend you.”

“No, Colonel Michaels ordered me home to get some rest, and I didn’t have a chance to get back to you.”

“I see.” Bullshit.

Her eyes met his again. “Look, if you’re doing all this, the roses, the fancy dinner, and everything as a goodbye present, it’s really not necessary. I know the drill; I won’t put any strings on you.”

“Is that what you think this is? A goodbye?”

“Isn’t it?” She pulled her hand away and sat back in her chair.

“No, it isn’t.”

“Then what is it?”

“I like to call it a date.” It was his turn to lean back. Let’s see how she handled *that*.

“A date?” She looked bewildered.

“Yeah, you know, a guy, a girl, you have a nice dinner than I try to talk you into the back of my car.”

“Isn’t it a little late for that? You already hit a home run; it seems a little late to be trying to get to first base.”

“Now that’s where you’re wrong. You deserve to be courted, and I’m going to do it.”

“Courted? I don’t get it. You already got what you wanted; you don’t need to go through the dating ritual at this point.”

“Wrong again. I’m not even close to getting what I want.” Mace leaned forward and captured her gaze.

“And what is that?” A delicate eyebrow lifted.

“You. And not just for a quickie in a janitor’s closet. I want the whole package and I’m going to take whatever measures necessary to get it.”

“Mace, I’m flattered. Really. I had totally expected you to brush me off tonight. I can’t tell you how much it means to me that you want to court me.”

“But?”

“But I think once a little time passes and you’re on your next assignment, you’re going to change your mind.”

“Is that a challenge?” He really hoped so. There was nothing he liked more than a challenge.

“No, just the facts.”

“As you see them.”

“As they are.”

“Tell me one thing, just one thing and I’ll let this idea go.” Mace held his breath. He was gambling here. If she didn’t answer the way he thought, he was dead in the water.

“Okay, what?”

“Do you want to end things?”

Mace almost stopped breathing completely as she fidgeted with her napkin and looked anywhere but at him. Finally, when he thought he was going to have a heart attack before the soup course she looked him right in the eye.

“No. God help me, I know it’s insane, but no.”

“Then sit back and enjoy the ride, baby.”

Chapter Ten

Annie's apartment was starting to look like a florist shop. Every day for the past two weeks she'd gotten a delivery of flowers from Mace. Some were wildflowers with little poems attached, some were carnations with just his signature, and there were roses by the score, in every color of the rainbow.

Every night Mace stopped by her apartment to take her out to the movies, for a drive, to dinner, they even went to the circus when it was in town. And every night, he left her at the door with a chaste kiss.

It was driving her insane!

Her body knew what delights he could give her and was not happy about being denied them. One night they had gone on a little country road in Virginia and Mace had pulled the car over so they could look at the stars. He'd wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close, giving her a little peck on the cheek.

She'd wanted to climb on top of him and tear his clothes off!

Mace in his dress uniform was a sight to behold, but the man in a pair of faded jeans just about stopped her heart on the spot. Annie was so sexually frustrated she thought her pantyhose were going to catch on fire! If they didn't have sex tonight, she was going to have to do something desperate. Like tie him up and have her way with him.

With visions of Mace's studly body spread-eagle and bound to her bed, Annie undid a few more buttons on her shirt and put on the shortest shorts she could find. A knock at the door sounded before she could finish putting on her makeup.

Hustling to the door in case it was another delivery of flowers, Annie was surprised to see Mace in his BDUs—battle dress uniform. Pulling the door open, she got a good

look at his face. His eyes were shielded and his expression was serious. A lump lodged in her throat.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” She opened the door wider so he could get in.

“I got my orders today. I ship out tomorrow morning for the sandbox.”

The lump dropped from her throat to the pit of her stomach. “For how long?”

“I don’t know. There’s a group of Rangers that needs to be picked up. I’ve got to do it.”

She would not cry, she would not cry. “Of course you do. That’s your job.”

“I know, but you’re my life.”

Damn, that wasn’t fair. Tears streamed down her face.

“I wanted more time to convince you I was serious about you. About us, but this will have to do.”

Mace reached into his pocket and pulled out a ring box. “I had planned on giving you a month or two to get used to having me around, but the military had other ideas. I can’t leave without knowing you’ll be here when I come back. I love you with all my heart, Annie. Will you marry me?”

Opening up the black velvet box, Mace pulled out a platinum and diamond ring that sparkled in the light of the living room.

She put her hands to her mouth and gasped. Tears were streaming from her eyes as her heart stopped beating.

“Is that a yes or a no?” A tiny drop of sweat ran down his cheek.

“Yes! Of course it’s a yes! I didn’t need a month. Hell, I didn’t need two weeks! I knew I loved you the day we were rescued!”

Jumping into his arms, Annie rained kisses all over his face while tears continued to pour from her own.

“You could have clued me in, you know. I was sweating bullets all the way over here.”

“I was afraid to make a scene. I wanted to be strong and let you go with no strings attached.”

“I want the strings; hell, this is the biggest string I could find! Start shopping for a dress, baby; when I get home, we’re having the splashiest wedding this place has ever seen.”

“How about we plan it together when you get back.” She refused to say if.

“We can do that, but be prepared for a quick engagement. Once I get back, you’ll have a month to get it all organized. I won’t be able to wait any longer than that to make you mine.” He slipped the ring on her finger and kissed her hand.

“I just want you to come back.” Could she stand to lose him?

“Baby, make no mistake, I will be back. Hell, I had more injuries on leave than I ever did in battle. I’ll be back.”

“How long do you have before you have to report?”

“I have to be on base by ten tonight.”

Annie grabbed his hand and pulled him down the hall. “Then we better hurry. We only have two hours to give you enough memories to last until you come back to me..”

Pushing him down on her double bed, Annie yanked off her shirt and pulled off her shorts until she was clad in only her black bra and underwear. She’d been hoping he’d see them, now she was glad she wore them.

“Slow down, baby, I’ve wanted to make love to you on a bed since the first time in the closet.” Mace pulled off his brown tee shirt and untied his boots.

“We’ll go for style points on round two, right now I want you hard and fast.” She undid the fly of his pants and ripped them down his legs. Grasping his cock, Annie crouched down until she could pull it into her mouth. She’d never gone down on a guy before, but tonight she was willing to discover all sorts of new experiences.

“If you keep that up, I can guarantee it’ll be fast.”

Mace's fingers twined in her hair holding her to his dick despite her protests. She was dying to feel him inside of her, but wanted to give him as much pleasure as she possibly could. His breath was coming in uneven gasps, and he pulled her away suddenly.

"I want to be inside you when I come. Lay down, I have to get you caught up to my speed." Mace pulled her down next to him and captured her mouth in a blazing hot kiss.

His wandering fingers undid the snap on her bra and pulled it loose, setting her breasts free.

"Oh God, I've been going crazy wanting to touch these beauties."

"I've been going crazy wanting you to touch them!"

"I had to prove to you that I wanted you for more than your body." He sucked a nipple into his mouth and slid her underwear down her legs.

"I believe you, honest! Now fuck me before I die!"

His fingers were so close to her clit she wanted to scream. It would take the barest of touches to send her over the edge, she'd had two weeks of foreplay.

She lifted her hips, trying to get his finger to touch her in the right spot.

"Not yet, baby. I've been dying to taste you."

Taste her? This certainly was her night for new experiences.

Mace nuzzled her breasts and gave her nipple one last lick before sliding his body between her legs. His lips worked their way down her stomach and stopped at her belly button. The feel of his hairy chest against her was making her pulse with need, and the anticipation of what was to come was killing her.

Dipping his tongue into her navel, he swirled it around a few times before drifting lower. When he slid one finger inside her sheath, she almost came on the spot. Mace ratcheted the need burning through her even more by blowing over her clit.

“Mace, I love you. I really do, but if you don’t touch my clit right this very second I’m going to kick your ass!”

“Oh, a tough girl. I like it.”

The warm touch of his tongue on her nubbin shot her over the edge in record time. His finger drove in and out of her as her body quivered around it. Annie’s heart felt like it was going to fly out of her chest before she was done.

She’d barely come back to earth when she felt the tip of his cock probing her entrance.

“I finally have you under me.”

“Not for long.” Before he was fully sheathed inside her, Annie wrapped her legs around him and flipped him over.

Sitting astride him shoved his cock so deep inside her, it felt like they could never be separated. Rocking slowly she built up the pace, leaning backwards so he rubbed against all the right spots.

Leaning up, Mace kneaded both her breasts in his hands, sending her into a pleasure coma.

“Under, over, as long as I’m in you, I’m happy. Although I must say, the view from this position is fine indeed.” Mace’s smile went straight to her crotch, stimulating her even more.

“The view from up here isn’t so bad either.”

Moving forward, Annie held onto the headboard and picked up the pace. Mace fell back and grabbed her hips, driving himself up into her as she bucked against him.

“Come with me, baby.” One finger slipped between them to tease her clit yet again.

Annie felt the heat spreading out in waves from her center, growing hotter and hotter. Just when she thought she couldn’t take it anymore, Mace slammed her down on his shaft with two quick, hard jerks and she exploded in a shower of stars.

Mace gave a hoarse shout under her then his breath stilled as his cock jumped inside of her. When he opened his eyes and looked into hers, Annie could see all the love he had for her. How could she have ever doubted him?

"I love you so much." She dropped a kiss on his lips before rolling to the side to cuddle up close to him.

"It's about time."

"Hey, anything worth having is worth working hard for, right?" Annie held up her hand and looked at her ring sparkling in the fading light.

"Do you like it? I thought it suited you, classy yet strong."

"I love it. It's perfect, but it could have been plastic and I would have loved it because it came from you."

"You mean I spent all that money and I could have got you plastic? Give it back," he teased.

Annie punched him in the arm. "Idiot. You'd have to pry this thing off my cold, dead body."

"Ouch, hey, watch it, tough girl, you're damaging government property."

"You watch it, Captain. Keep shooting your mouth off and I'll tie you up and punish you." Annie thought of her earlier fantasy and snickered.

"I always knew you had bondage tendencies."

* * * * *

Annie stood silently by and watched Mace get on the cargo plane that would take him to the Middle East. She stood next to all the other wives and girlfriends that watched their loved ones leaving yet again. She prayed silently that he'd come back safely to her.

As he climbed into the plane, Mace turned and spotted her in the crowd. Blowing her a kiss, he lifted his left hand and pointed to his ring finger. Raising her own left hand, she blew a kiss back. She had his ring and his heart, God willing she'd have the rest of him too.

Epilogue

"It's time, Sweetie." Annie's father held out his arm to her and helped her out of the limousine. She was sure she caught the glint of a tear in his eye, but she couldn't hide her smile. It was her wedding day and the world was beautiful.

"You look so handsome, Dad. Thanks for wearing your dress uniform." Annie gave him a kiss on the cheek, then fixed her veil over her head. She and Mace had planned the wedding in six weeks, but it was everything she could have wanted and more.

"Guess I still know how to put one of these monkey suits on. Let's get going; your mother has probably worn out all her tissues with all that crying she was doing."

Annie shook her head and laughed. Her parents had been married for thirty-five years and they were still as in love as ever. She hoped she and Mace could be that lucky.

Her father led her down the aisle where her sister Polly and her new sister-in-law Jemma were already waiting. Blayne was standing up for Mace, an honor Mace had insisted on.

After all, Mace had declared, if it wasn't for Blayne torturing her as a child and locking her in the closet, they never would have met. She wasn't surprised that the two of them got on like a house on fire. It seemed like she was destined to be surrounded by strong military men her whole life.

Her mother was indeed crying into a wad of tissues, her eyes smiling behind the tears. She'd cried just as hard at Blayne's wedding. Annie had said it was in relief that Blayne was finally off her hands.

Mace's eyes were shining at her as her father handed her off with a salute. The butterflies in her stomach started their own flight pattern as Mace held her hand and turned towards the priest. Mace looked so tall and strong standing there, so sure and

confident. Then Annie noticed the beads of sweat popping out on his forehead. He was just as nervous as she was. Her stomach immediately calmed and she smiled up at him.

The words the priest spoke as he joined them together were a blur to her. All that mattered was Mace was there by her side. She was sure now that no matter how many times he had to leave her, he'd always return.

Her Prince Charming was here at last.

* * * * *

"Alone, at last!" Mace locked the door to the fancy honeymoon suite of the hotel and undid his bowtie. Annie watched his fingers hungrily. She wanted them undressing *her*. It had been her idea to abstain for a month before the wedding, now she wasn't so sure it was such a good idea. All night long she'd been in an agony of need every time she came within two feet of Mace. When he brushed his rock-hard cock against her pussy during their first dance together, she'd wanted to attack him on the spot.

"It was a perfect day. Just perfect, but I'm glad to have you to myself now." Annie's eyes were held captive as Mace pulled off his formal shirt and undershirt. He had muscles on top of muscles, and she wanted to touch every one of them.

"Same goes, baby. You look stunning in that dress, but now I want to see what's under it."

"Think you can handle it, Captain?" Annie smiled to herself. She had quite a surprise in store for her new husband.

"Give it your best shot, Major." He'd pulled off his pants and was standing there in nothing but black silk boxers.

She sure hoped she could pull off this striptease without cutting to the chase and jumping him where he stood.

Annie moved to the middle of the room and tossed her veil over a nearby chair. She gave Mace a sultry look and turned her back to him. Remembering the last time she'd

had her back to him sent a fresh shot of lust through her body. This might be the fastest striptease in history.

With shaking fingers she slowly unzipped her beautiful wedding dress and let it fall to the floor in a puddle of white lace and satin. Wearing only the silky slip and her high heels, she stepped out of the dress and strutted closer to Mace.

“Very nice. I like that little number better than the wedding dress.” His cock was pushing the bounds of his shorts, and Annie’s mouth watered at the thought of pulling it inside.

“You ain’t seen nothing yet.” She shot him a wink and slipped one strap off her shoulder.

Moving out of his reach, she slid the other strap off and gave a little wiggle until the slip was also lying on the floor.

The white corset and garters had been a little uncomfortable, but the look on Mace’s face made it all worthwhile.

“Holy mother of God!” Mace reached out to touch her, but she scrambled away.

“Not yet, Flyboy.”

Kicking off her heels, Annie propped her foot up on the chair and unsnapped the garters holding her stockings up. Slowly she rolled the tubes of silk down one leg then the other. When she was left in only her white thong and the corset, she took a shaky breath and went for the final tease.

“While you were away, I missed you so much. I thought about you every night, about how I wanted to touch you and have you touch me.” Looking him dead in the eye she untied the corset and let it fall to the floor. “I would get myself so worked up thinking about all the ways we could make love that I’d just have to take things into my own hands.”

Annie ran her hands up her stomach until she grasped her own breasts. Squeezing them and kneading them, she pushed them up higher until she could suck one nipple herself. Another bolt of pure desire slammed into her at her own touch.

Apparently it was working for Mace too because sweat dripped down the side of his face, and his cock poked right through his boxers. Seeing his need gave her courage to go on.

"I got pretty good at pretending I was with you, and you were touching me all over. Especially here."

One hand slipped under her thong and into her pussy. She was so far gone she didn't care that she had wanted to tease him some more first. Annie shoved her fingers inside her pussy and used the other hand to tease her clit. Pumping furiously, she threw her head back and shuddered to completion.

Before she could come back down to earth, Mace swooped her into his arms and attacked her mouth with his. She was surrounded by hot, determined, *aroused* male, and it felt delicious.

"I don't know whether to applaud you or spank you," Mace said when he came up for air.

"I'd pick the spanking if I had my choice." Annie pushed his straining boxers down his legs and grasped his cock in her hands. He was hot and hard and all hers. "But I have something else in mind."

Dropping to her knees, Annie pulled his cock into her mouth and grabbed his muscled ass in her hands. The taste of him rolled across her tongue as she sucked him deeper into her throat. His musky smell filled her nostrils and added to the need building inside her.

Mace's hands tightened in her hair as she moved up and down his length. He was so big and hard she thought she might choke, but it was worth it to know she was driving him crazy. His balls tightened below her mouth, then a spray of come shot down her throat. Annie swallowed rapidly as Mace gave a hoarse cry.

“Woman, you’ll be the death of me!” Mace groaned, pulling her up to him.

“At least you’ll die happy.” Annie gave in to the urge to touch him and ran her hands over his gloriously muscled chest. Her fingers tangled in his hair and swirled around his belly button before caressing his abs.

“It’s going to take me a little while to recover, but I’ve got an idea of what we could do to pass the time.”

Scooping her up in his arms, Mace carried her to the bed and laid her down gently. Running his fingers lightly over her breasts, he smiled down on her. “Do you know how very much I love you?”

His emerald green eyes shined into hers and sent thrills through her. “I have an idea, but you can remind me.”

Her blood had caught fire and was burning through her veins as his hands trailed across her breasts and over her stomach. His lips followed and the fire turned into an inferno.

“You are the most amazing woman I’ve ever met. I love you more than anything in the world. You are my very breath, my reason for living.” He peppered his words with kisses as he slid between her legs and moved slowly to her pussy.

“I love being with you, loving you, touching you—” His fingers parted her curls and teased lightly around the opening of her channel before slipping inside. “And tasting you.” His mouth descended on her clit as his finger pushed higher inside her pussy.

Hot, pulsing need slammed through her driving her higher and higher. The blood was pounding in her ears and her only anchor was Mace’s touch on her body.

“Mace!”

“Come for me, baby.”

She screamed as she did. Annie’s body convulsed around him as waves and waves of pleasure swamped her.

“Why don’t we try it together this time?” Mace licked his way up her body then slid his cock inside her still spasming body.

“I’m in-line with that plan.” Annie would follow him wherever he led, from this day forward.

About the Author

Arianna Hart lives on the East Coast with her husband and three daughters. When not teaching, writing, or chasing after her children and the dog, Ari likes to practice her karate, go for long walks and read by the pool.

She thinks heaven is having a good book, warm sun and a drink in her hand. Until she can sit down long enough to enjoy all three, she'll settle for the occasional hour of peace and quiet.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascafe.com.

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