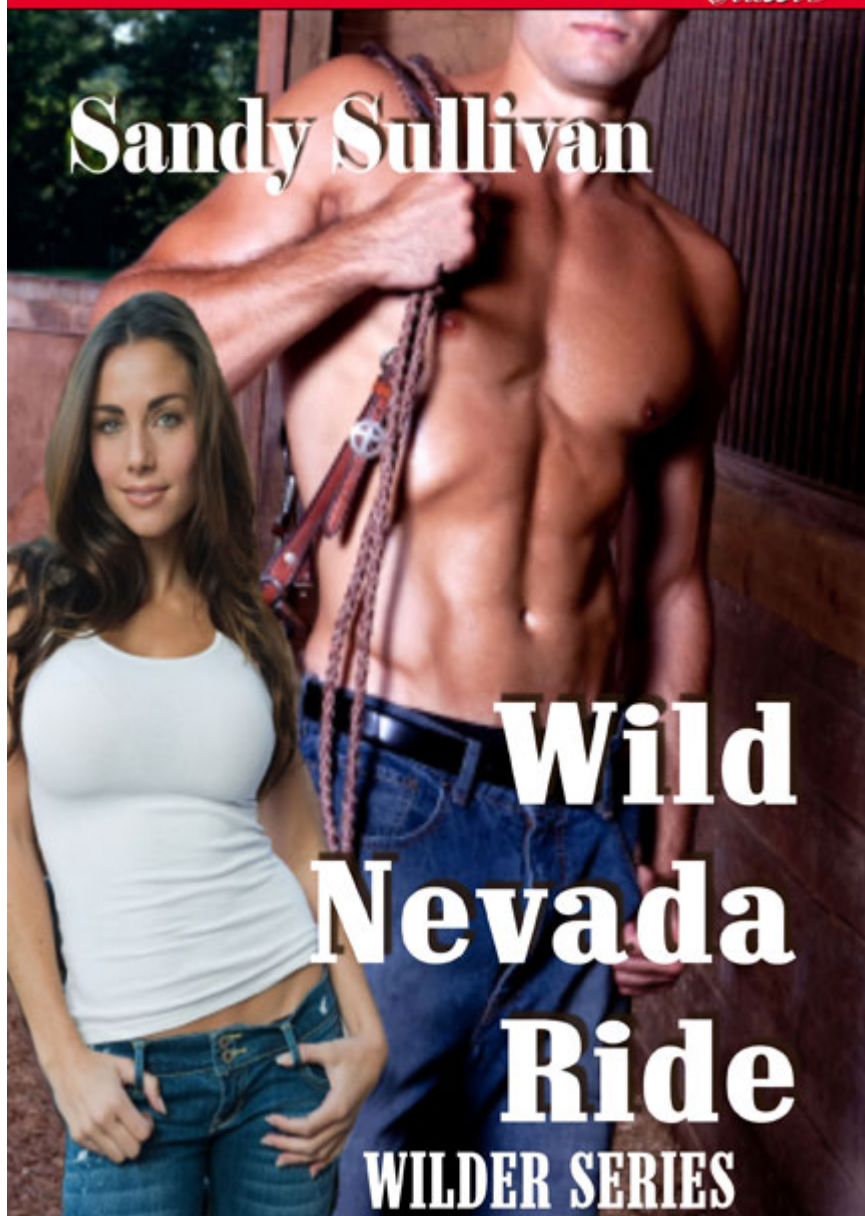


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WILD NEVADA RIDE

Wilder Series 3

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EROTIC ROMANCE



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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

WILD NEVADA RIDE

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Regarding Ebook Piracy

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Sandy Sullivan

DEDICATION

This is for my fans. God love you all and thanks so much for making my dreams come true.

WILD NEVADA RIDE

Wilder Series 3

SANDY SULLIVAN

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Chapter One

Neon lights flashed advertising everything from shows to single-deck blackjack on each billboard Justin Wilder passed. People, hundreds of people walked down the hot, dusty sidewalk of downtown Vegas. Each corner the wave of bodies moved as one across the intersection when the light changed and he grumbled under his breath. He hated going to downtown Vegas. It was the biggest rat hole in the whole state, but he had a meeting to attend with a business client at one of the casinos this afternoon. The man could be a potentially huge buyer for his cattle so he would humor him—once.

Justin hit the gas on his old Ford pickup when the light turned green, his brown eyes focused on the cars in front of him until he heard a loud screech of tires.

A bright blue convertible slid sideways into the intersection, slamming into the side of his truck.

The first thought on his mind had to be whether or not the other driver was hurt as he jumped out and raced around the front.

The summer heat shimmered off of the black pavement and he had to blink to clear his vision. Struck speechless when long legs untangled themselves from the driver's side of the car and navy blue pumps hit the asphalt road, he inhaled a steadying breath and let it out. Next, the most furious green eyes snapped fire when the woman

attached to those legs, ripped off her aviator sunglasses.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

“Excuse me?”

“You wrecked my car.”

“Listen—the light had already turned green on my side.”

“The hell it did.”

Damn, she’s got a mouth to go with those green eyes, not to mention legs that could stop traffic and what appeared to be dark brown hair pulled in a tight bun at the back of her head. He frowned as he took in her navy blue Air Force dress uniform. *Great—some no good from the base.*

“You can ask any of the witnesses here, ma’am. The light was green on my side.”

Not appearing to care what he said, she walked around to the passenger side of her car, and he had to be impressed. It wasn’t very often a brand new Mustang Shelby GT 500 KR showed up around these parts unless it belonged to one of the casino owners.

“Oh, my God. It’s ruined.” She sounded almost in tears when she surveyed the damage to the passenger side door.

“I’m sure your insurance will take care of the damage.”

“My insurance? I didn’t run the light.”

He almost laughed—almost. “Yes, you did.”

“What the hell difference does it make? My car is worth a hell of a lot more than your piece of shit truck.”

Shaking his head, a moment, he smiled at her observation. “True, but my insurance isn’t going to pay for your car.”

Grumbling, she bent over the passenger side door and pulled out a cell phone from the pocket of the purse on the seat.

He cocked his head to the side to admire the skirt pulled tight over her ass.

“Yeah—Smitty? Jamieson. Let me talk to the colonel.”

He watched curiously when she looked over the damage to her car, completely ignoring him.

“Colonel? I’m running late, sir.” He vaguely heard murmurs from the other end of her phone. “I’m sorry, sir. I’ll be there as soon as I can. There’s been an accident downtown, and I have to wait for the police to show up.”

Her eyes met his, and he almost forgot to breathe.

“I know we take off in an hour, sir. I’m very aware of the time, sir. Have Smitty get her ready.” She sighed, shutting the phone with a decisive click. “Where the hell are the police?”

“Need to be somewhere?”

“Yeah actually, I do,” she said as her hot gaze moved over his button-down shirt, his jeans, then his boots, before returning to his face. One eyebrow shot up before he flashed a dimpled smile. All he got for his trouble was a scowl.

The police arrived moments later, and the familiarity of the cop with the woman, caught Justin taken off guard when the officer greeted the woman by her first name.

“I knew you’d get into trouble in that car, Kat.”

Kat with the green eyes, Justin thought while he listened to the conversation.

“Don’t start with me, Matt, okay? Just get this done. I’m taking off in less than an hour.”

The officer shook his head while he finished up the paperwork and then handed her a copy. “It looks okay to drive, at least enough to get you to the base. I wouldn’t go much further with it.”

Slipping back inside the car, she said over her shoulder, “Thanks.”

With one last look his way, she slipped back on her sunglasses, started the car, and disappeared down the road.

“Here is your copy, sir.”

Justin absently watched the woman and the car for a second before he turned back to the officer. He looked down at the report in his hand. *Kat Jamieson*. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Anything else I can do for you?”

Curiosity got the better of him and he asked, “You know her?”

The officer chuckled before he said, “Yeah, you could say that. She’s my sister.”

* * * *

His cell phone rang in his pocket and he grumbled when he pulled it out to look at the screen.

“Hello?”

“Justin—it’s Mark. The meeting with Mr. Toyoshima has been postponed until tonight.”

“What the hell? Why?”

“He said he already has a meeting at the time you specified. He wants to meet you for dinner at Picasso.”

With a sharp inhalation, he said, “The Bellagio? I hate coming downtown. You know that. Why did I let you set this up?”

“Because I’m the best,” Mark replied with a chuckle. “You are the cattleman, Justin, and I’m the businessman. Do what I tell you to, and you’ll be the richest cattle baron in the area. Getting in with Mr. Toyoshima will guarantee you in the Kobe beef market.”

“All right, all right. When?”

“Eight... and Justin?”

“Yeah.”

“Wear a tux.”

“Fuck! You’ve got to be kidding me. I haven’t been in a tux since Cole’s wedding.”

“Well, you need to make the impression, so wear a tux. Rent one if you have to.”

“I’m going to kill you for this.”

Mark laughed on the other end of the phone. “You’ll be thanking me while you throw hundred dollar bills at me, my friend.”

“Are you coming?”

“Yeah, I’ll be there with bells on. See you then.”

Justin hung up the phone as he pulled into the long gravel

driveway of the Flying W, passing under the wide arch with his brand over the middle. He owned two thousand acres of prime grazing land outside of Las Vegas. The brown grasses stretched for miles with thousands of head of cattle, dotting the flat plains surrounding the house.

When Chase took over their parents' ranch in Wyoming, Charles and Bonnie Wilder made sure Justin had the funding for his own place—in Nevada. He hated the cold winters in Wyoming and thanked God every day for the warmth of the desert.

Stepping out of the old beat up pickup truck he used to haul supplies for the ranch, his six-foot-three frame cast a long shadow over the gravel under his feet. The door slammed with a frustrated push of his hand before he headed toward the house. *I need a nice shower and a cold beer.*

"Hey Justin, what the hell happened to the truck?" Keith shouted while he walked across the yard.

Justin chuckled when one of his best friends and the supervisor of his employees stepped up on the porch. "Some woman from the base hit me downtown. Her car got the worst of it, obviously. You could set off a bomb under this old beater and not hurt it."

"Ain't it the truth? So, what was she drivin'?"

"Oh, a sweet ride. Brand new Mustang Shelby GT 500 KR baby blue convertible."

"You're shittin' me."

"No."

"Damn! I would have loved to seen it."

"Very nice."

"You know her name?"

Kat Jamieson. "Yeah. Funny thing—her brother turned out to be the cop doing the accident report. Then she had the gall to blame me for running the light."

"Did you?"

"Hell no!"

“Well, hopefully she doesn’t know who you are. You don’t want some kind of stupid lawsuit or somethin’.”

“You can say that again. Doesn’t matter, I guess. Not like I’ll see her again.”

“Yeah—probably not. Listen, I’ll see you tomorrow. I’m headed home.”

“No problem. I’ve got this stupid dinner thing Mark wrangled me into. I even have to wear a damned tux.”

Keith just shook his head and laughed, before he walked back toward the barn, shouting over his shoulder, “Good luck. Have a good time and don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“Fuck you, Keith,” Justin grumbled and pushed open the door to the house.

* * * *

At seven o’clock, he stood in front of the mirror near the door. With his tux in place, he surveyed his appearance with a keen eye. The black Stetson sat low on his forehead, resting just above his eyebrow, shielding his face. Brushed clean cowboy boots on his feet completed the picture of the cattleman ready for a night on the town. *My feet are at least going to be comfortable, damn it!*

Grabbing the keys to the white Ford pickup, he locked the house and headed for the truck. *I probably should have tried to get a date for this thing. At least then, I would have had someone to talk to.*

The lights of the strip were bright on the windows when he passed each casino. Pulling into the valet parking for the Bellagio, he was met by the formally dress valet.

“Take care of this for me, would you?”

“Certainly, sir. Are you staying here tonight?”

“No—just have a business meeting.”

“Wonderful, sir. We’ll see you in a little while then.”

Justin grabbed his hat and headed for the glass, gold gilded front doors of the casino with the large scrolled B. The almost frigid

temperature of the air conditioning hit his face, cooling the sweat quickly forming on his upper lip. Bells dinged and lights flashed as he looked for the escalator to take him to the upper floor. He'd never been in this particular restaurant, but he knew it to be one of the best on the strip. Tugging at his tight collar, he sighed before he reached the large wooden door.

"Can I help you, sir?" the maitre d asked when he stepped inside.

"Yes. I'm meeting a Japanese gentleman here for a business meeting—a Mr. Toyoshima."

"Ah, yes, sir. Follow me."

Justin looked around at the other diners when he walked by each table. The men were dressed to the hilt in formal attire and the women's cocktail dresses varied in color from one end of the rainbow to the other. He silently thanked Mark for insisting he wear a tux. His normal business meeting attire would have been out of place. Jeans and t-shirts made up most of his wardrobe.

They stopped at a private corner of the restaurant, completely separate from the rest, where three men sat conversing amongst themselves. Mark stood nearby while two women stood off toward the back of the room.

"There he is. Justin, come in and meet Mr. Toyoshima." Mark walked to his side and ushered him closer to the one man who seemed to be in charge of the group. "Mr. Toyoshima, this is Justin Wilder—sole owner of the Flying W ranch outside of town. Justin, this is Mr. Toyoshima, our contact in Japan for Kobe beef."

"It's very nice to meet you, Mr. Toyoshima," Justin replied as he held out his hand for the other man to shake.

"And you, Mr. Wilder. I hear good things about the beef you produce. I look forward to talking with you more about it over dinner."

"Good. Raising cattle is my business. Ask any questions you might have and I'll do my best to answer them."

"How long have you been ranching?" Mr. Toyoshima asked.

“If you count my parents’ ranch in Wyoming, I would have to say, my entire life. They raised both cattle and horses, although they don’t ranch anymore.”

“You have good experience then.”

Justin chuckled and said, “You could say that.”

A waitress asked Justin if he wanted a drink as he watched Mark moved off toward the two women. His friend slid his arm around one shapely female before he escorted them back to the group.

Justin couldn’t believe his eyes when Mark moved closer and he saw who stood next to him. She looked completely different with her hair flowing in big, long curls around her shoulders and down the middle of her back. A tight, light blue dress hugged every curve, showing off the swell of her breasts to perfection and accentuating the long legs he remembered. The small diamond necklace gracing her beautiful throat twinkled in the light overhead, but it dimmed in comparison to the gorgeous smile she gave Mark. Justin got a glimpse of her smile, and he felt gut punched for a moment, before her gaze collided with his and it turned into a frown. Justin knew she recognized him immediately as her green eyes widened in surprise before narrowing into slits.

“Katrina, I’d like you to meet someone,” Mark said when he brought her closer. “This is Justin Wilder, a good friend of mine and business associate. Justin, this is Katrina Jamieson.”

He could almost hear her grit her teeth when she said, “We’ve met.”

Mark looked confused. “You have?”

“Nice to see you again, Kat.” He purposely drew out her name on multiple syllables and almost laughed when her eyes narrowed further.

Chapter Two

What the hell is he doing here? Damn it and double damn! Not willing to give him the upper hand, she plastered a smile on her face.

“Well, we meet again... Mr. Wilder, is it?”

“Justin, please.”

“Ah, Justin.”

I have to admit; he's a lot nicer looking all cleaned up. Her gaze roamed over his broad chest, straining the material of his tuxedo shirt and jacket.

“You two know each other?” The confusion written all over Mark's face, almost made her laugh. She hadn't had a chance to tell him about the accident earlier in the day. She'd barely had enough time to clean up after the training session and make it to the dinner he'd insisted she accompany him to.

“Not really, Mark. We've *run into each other*, you could say.”

“I'm confused,” Mark said, looking from her to Justin and back.

Her jaw ached from gritting her teeth. “I hadn't had a chance to tell you about my *accident* earlier. Mr. Wilder and I met in the middle of the intersection in front of the Mandalay Bay.”

“She ran the light, and dented her pretty little sports car with my truck.”

“I *did not* run the light,” she growled through a clenched jaw.

“You weren't hurt, were you, Kat?” Mark asked.

“No, I'm fine. Besides, I couldn't have gotten out of my training session even if I was. You know how the military is.”

“True.”

“What do you do in the military, Kat?” Her name from Justin's

sexy mouth, sent chills along her arms.

“Katrina, if you please, or Ms. Jamieson would be even better, Mr. Wilder. Only my *friends* call me Kat.”

“Duly noted,” he said, cocking his head slightly. His gaze moved over her frame before returning to her face. “Ms. Jamieson.”

“As for your question, you wouldn’t believe me if I told you, most men don’t.” She flipped a piece of hair off of her bare shoulder and noticed his eyes dart to the exposed area.

Damn. I never should have worn this dress.

“Try me,” he murmured so low, she almost missed it. His eyes twinkled in the light, and she caught her breath. She hadn’t been able to see what color they were before. Brown? Cinnamon? *Mmm...*

“I fly fighter jets—F 15 Strike Eagle, to be exact.”

A slow, sexy-as-hell smile rippled across his mouth before she saw the dimples peek out of his cheeks. *Holy hell!* Dropping her gaze, she brought the glass of wine in her hand to her lips with a shaky hand.

“Sounds like you are a bit of an adrenalin junkie, Ms. Jamieson. Fast car, fast plane—what else do you like fast?”

She almost choked on her wine, her eyes watering a little, and she forced the liquid down her throat.

“Sorry, Kat. He isn’t usually this rude,” Mark apologized before he shot a furious look at Justin. “What the hell has gotten into you, Justin?”

Before he could retort, they were summoned to the table when their dinner began to arrive. It unnerved her when she’d been positioned directly across the table from the disturbing man. She had really been rather hungry when they had arrived at the restaurant, but now her appetite disappeared and she couldn’t eat.

He wasn’t comfortable in this setting, she noticed, when he fidgeted in the chair and frowned at the multitude of silverware at his elbow.

Sipping her wine, she watched him curiously over the rim of the

glass. His voice had a deep, sexy timbre to it as she listened to him discuss cattle with the gentleman from Japan. He wore his hair a little longer than she normally noticed being associated with mostly military men. It brushed against the collar of his jacket, and her fingers itched to feel the texture. He'd removed his Stetson at the table and a slightly curly stray lock of hair fell across his eyebrow. She had the insane urge to brush it back into place for him. *Cowboy*, she guessed by the pointed toe boots and the hat when he first arrived.

Definitely not my type, although he does look damn nice in his tux.

He shifted his gaze to hers for a moment, his lips lifting slightly at the corner as if he knew exactly what she thought. She cleared her throat and set her glass back on the table before she picked up her fork and picked at her food. These dinners were a nuisance, but she loved Mark. When he asked her to come with him, she always went. Protecting him from prying questions came naturally to her since the two of them were close. If his secret ever got out amongst the business community, his successful business relationships would go down the tubes and fast. *Um...does Justin know?*

The dinner conversation wound to an end, and she sighed in relief. *Almost over.* The gentlemen stood and shook hands as the Japanese businessman told Justin and Mark he would be in touch. The other two men sat back down, before Justin leaned back against the chair, his gaze finding hers.

"Well, I think that went very well. What do you think?" Mark's question brought all eyes back to him.

"Yes, it did. I'm sure we'll be hearing from Mr. Toyoshima within a few days."

Kat watched the exchange with scrambled thoughts. She didn't want to notice how long his fingers were or how broad his shoulders looked in his jacket.

He's definitely confident.

Her gaze wandered over him again as she shifted uncomfortably in the chair.

Mark stood and asked, "Dance with me, Kat. No use wasting this nice music."

"Sure."

He pulled out her chair and took her hand in his, but Justin's perusal from across the table, made her more aware of the disturbing look in his eyes than she'd been of any other man in a long time.

Once they reached the dance floor, she rested her hand on Mark's shoulder and they swayed to the music. She finally let herself relax under her cousin's hand. "Does Justin—I mean, Mr. Wilder—know about you?"

"You mean, does he know I'm gay? No, and I prefer he doesn't."

"If he's your friend, he wouldn't judge. Or is it that you are attracted to him?"

Mark laughed. "No, I'm not attracted to Justin. He's definitely all about women, trust me."

She frowned, as her gaze drifted to the man sitting at the table. His gaze met hers, and he lifted his glass in a silent toast.

"Would you care to elaborate on your meeting with him earlier?"

"Not really." She sighed when Mark only cocked an eyebrow. "There was an accident. I'm not saying I ran the light or he did, but let's just say, my car has a very large dent in the passenger side door."

"Your new car?"

"Yes."

"Damn. I knew you'd get into trouble in that thing."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't you start with me, too."

"Too?"

"Yeah, Matt already gave me the third degree. I saved for my car for two years—two years of hell in Iraq. I'll do as I please with it."

"Until you get yourself killed."

She laughed. "I didn't fly hit-and-run missions over there for the fun of it. I'm just glad I'm back here."

"Me too. I missed having you around."

"Mind if I cut in?" The deep voice of the other man cut into their

conversation. Mark smiled and stepped back as she frowned, but allowed Justin to wrap his arm around her waist and take her hand in his. The tingle of awareness rippled across her arms, sending goose bumps skittering across her flesh.

Trying to think of small talk, she asked, "So you raise cattle, Mr. Wilder?"

He chuckled, flashing those devastating dimples, and she sucked in a ragged breath. "I have a few head and dabble in selling them."

Nervously flipping a curl over her shoulder, she said, "Well, you must be good at it if Mark is involved. He doesn't mess around."

"How long have you known Mark?"

"Most of my life." Swaying to the soft music with him like this sent heat right between her legs. The warmth of her hand grasped within his palm sent electricity zinging down her spine. *It's been way too long since I've been with a man if I'm getting horny just dancing with one.* "How long have you known him?"

"Oh, about five years now. I'm surprised I've never seen you two together before tonight."

"I was in Iraq until about two months ago. I don't always attend functions like these with him."

"Ah, I see. You must be very close."

Giving him a teasing smile, she replied, "Like family."

"Are you originally from Las Vegas, Ms. Jamieson?"

"Actually, not Las Vegas itself, but close by. My family moved here some years ago from Los Angeles." She studied the man, her eyes sweeping over his features, noting the laugh lines at the corners of his eyes. *Um...thirty-something?* "What about you, Mr. Wilder? Your slight accent puts you as a non-native of Nevada, too."

"Wyoming."

"Tired of the snow?"

He laughed softly. "Just a little. I like heat." His gaze moved over her face and she could feel the warmth spreading to her cheeks.

"Family?"

“Two brothers, one sister, and my parents. One owns the family ranch in Wyoming and one settled in South Dakota. My sister lives with my parents currently.”

She tilted her head and said, “No one special, I assume, since you came alone.”

“Get right to the point, don’t you, Katrina?”

Her name rolling off his tongue sent shivers down her spine again. *I’ve never heard anyone say it like that before.* “I don’t believe in mincing words. I’m a straight shooter.”

“Then let me ask you this—is there something between you and Mark?”

“Now it’s my turn to wonder at your motives for your question.”

“I’m curious.” He pulled her a little closer, his hand resting on the bare skin of her back where her dress dipped. He splayed his fingers, encompassing every bit of exposed area, scorching her with their heat. Warmth spread through her, settling low in her belly when their gaze collided.

Her voice came out a little breathless, at least to her own ears when she replied, “Mark and I are actually cousins. His mother and my father are siblings.”

Tucking her hand inside his own before placing it on his chest, his tempted lips lifted in a sexy grin, sending her heart into a rapid tempo. The warmth of his breath caressed her lips, and she parted them slightly on a sigh when his gaze slipped down. “No kissing cousins?” he whispered.

“No,” she murmured in return, her lips tingling in response to his nearness. “I have very little time for relationships of any sort, but family means everything to me.”

His gaze returned to hers. “A woman after my own heart.”

“Hardly, Mr. Wilder.”

He frowned. “You wound me. I thought we were past that.”

“Past what?”

“I thought at least we were on a first name basis now. After all, I

still have chips of baby blue paint on my truck.”

Anger flared, making her cheeks flush and her eyes burn as the hand resting on his chest balled into a fist.

He grabbed the fist and held on tight. “Uh-uh, no violence.”

Her jaw clenched tight, and she hissed between her teeth, “Let me go.”

“As you wish.” He slowly let loose of her fist and slipped his hand from around her waist. His hand purposely ran high enough to brush just under her breast with his thumb. She sucked in a ragged breath at the contact, her eyes going wide when desire raced along her nerves. She stepped back and smoothed her skirt with her hands in a vain attempt to hide the trembling. Leaving him standing in the middle of the dance floor, she returned to the table and grabbed her purse.

“I’m sorry, Mark, but I need to get going. I have to be at the base bright and early.”

“Of course.” His gaze moved over her flushed face. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. It’s just warm in here,” she said and then kissed his cheek. “But thank you for bringing me along. I’ll see you next week at Gram’s birthday party.”

“Yeah, sure.”

She turned and headed for the door of the restaurant, flashing one last look over her shoulder at the dark haired man who had turned her night upside down, before pushing her way into the crowd.

The cooler air inside the casino calmed her heated skin as she rushed toward the bathroom several feet away. Once she reached the richly adorned ladies room, she took a seat on the gold brocade chair in front of the mirror. The pretty blush of color splashing across her cheeks just made her mad. “Damn him!” Grabbing her purse, she ruffled through the contents. Searching for what, she wasn’t sure.

She sighed heavily, setting the small bag aside and looked at the beautiful woman staring back at her. The bright sparkle to her green eyes hadn’t been there before, neither had the color high on her

cheeks that made her look like she'd just gotten laid. "Shit, don't I wish."

Grumbling to herself, she grabbed her purse again and headed back out the door of the ladies room. Winding her way through the crowded casino, she finally reached the front doors and made her way toward the valet to retrieve her car.

Rough hands grabbed her around the waist, sliding them along her ass before whispering in her ear, "Hey, baby."

She turned around quickly to find a man she didn't know, obviously drunk, getting way too familiar.

"Excuse me." She pushed against his chest and slapped at his hands.

"How much for tonight?" He groped again, his hand sliding along her breast, before squeezing one tight. Pain shot across her chest as she struggled.

Her jaw dropped.

He thinks I'm a hooker?

"Get your filthy hands off me."

"Playing hard to get, eh? I like games, too." He pushed her against the wall, his hands sliding up her thighs while he attempted to bunch her dress up around her waist.

This can't be happening. Oh, God! Please don't let this be happening. Think Katrina. Self-defense. Sliding her thigh between his, she lifted her knee to jam it into the man's balls when the deep timbre of a vaguely familiar voice met her ear.

"Hey, buddy."

"Get your own mister. This one's mine," the man murmured against her neck.

"I think you've got the wrong girl there, mister. Now just let the lady go."

"Back off shithead," the man growled, but when he turned around, he was grabbed by the front of his shirt and hauled away from her.

Justin pushed the man forward and signaled for security. The

uniformed men handcuffed the loudly shouting man, before Justin walked back to where she still stood plastered against the wall. Their eyes met for a brief second, before she launched herself into his arms. He wrapped them around her, whispering, “Sshh. It’s over now.”

Chapter Three

After a few moments of holding her while she trembled, he wrapped his arm around her shoulder and walked her to the door. He handed the valet his ticket and within a few moments, they returned with his truck. Opening the passenger side, he gently pushed her forward to slide in before he shut the door behind her.

As he drove out of town, he realized she hadn't said a word since the attack. Her face appeared drawn, and her eyes held the sparkle of tears on her lashes.

First glances are obviously deceiving. Strength and determination seeps from her pores, but she's not as strong as she appears. Oh, she put up a good front. He had almost been convinced when they sparred with words in the restaurant, but right now, her vulnerability shone bright in her eyes.

He had no idea where she lived, and he wasn't sure it was a good idea for her to be alone, so he headed for his place. At least there, he could give her something strong to drink and hopefully snap her out of this before he took her home.

"Where are we?" The question hung in the air when he pulled up to the front of the house.

The two-story farmhouse with its large wraparound porch fit in perfectly with the desert landscape. Large windows graced the front and a huge double door adorned the entryway, its inviting etched glass sparkling with the lighting from inside.

"My house."

"You live here?" Her voice sounded small, nothing like the Katrina he'd met over the last twenty-four hours.

He chuckled softly. “Yeah.”

Moving around to the passenger side, he opened her door, but she hesitated.

He held out his hand and said, “I won’t hurt you, Katrina. You can stay as long as you like—no strings attached.” The trust in her eyes made his breath catch in his throat. She slipped her hand into his and stepped out to stand beside him.

Sweeping the front door open, he swept his arm aside, saying, “After you.”

Her heels clicked on the tile floor of the entryway, echoing in the vast foyer encompassing the room in front of them.

“Wow. This is really nice.”

“Thanks,” he answered, setting his keys on the table near the door. He pulled off his jacket and removed his tie before unbuttoning the top button of his shirt.

“You live here alone?”

A wry smile crossed his lips. “Yes. You were correct in your assumption at the restaurant. I’m not attached.” He motioned to the living room. “Please, have a seat, and I’ll get you something to drink.”

Moving toward the liquor cabinet, he poured her a glass of whiskey. *Something strong should break this weird funk she seems to be in.* Handing her the glass, she studied it for a moment before swallowing the entire contents in one gulp. She coughed for a moment, and her eyes watered, but she handed the glass back to him, silently asking for more.

Cocking an eyebrow, he smiled before he headed back to refill the tumbler and returned to her side. This time she sipped the amber liquid as he took the chair across from her.

“I’m sorry about the way I’ve acted since that jerk attacked me. I’m usually not like this.”

He chuckled. “I bet you aren’t.” He caught her glare from across the small area separating them.

"I'm used to being in control, and he caught me off guard. If I would have had a little more time, he would have been holding his balls, writhing on the floor."

"If he would have had a little more time, sweetheart, he would have had your dress up around your hips and his dick between your legs before you could say stop."

Color splashed across her cheeks. "Don't mince words, Justin — give it to me straight. I can handle it."

Her sarcasm wasn't lost on him. "Now that's the Katrina I know."

"You don't know me at all. Don't presume anything."

"I wouldn't mind getting to know you a little better." He caught her surprised gasp when their eyes met. "You seem surprised."

"Well, it's not like we met on the best terms."

"You think I'm not attracted to you? I would be lying if I said I wasn't, and I don't lie." He sat back in the chair, lacing his fingers over his stomach, watching her gaze fix on his hands. "You are a very beautiful woman with a fiery temper and enough self-confidence to keep *any* man interested, myself included."

"I don't want or need a man in my life." She took another drink, and he wondered what it would feel like to have those luscious lips wrapped around his cock.

"Every woman has needs and even though I'm sure you get some thrill from zipping amongst the clouds at forty-five thousand feet, sometimes there is only one way to fulfill those needs."

"Those needs, as you put them, can be taken care of in the most basic manner. It doesn't require a permanent fixture in one's life."

A half smile lifted the corner of his mouth. "Who said anything about permanent?"

* * * *

Rarely partaking in anything stronger than wine, her head started to swim from the alcohol. *Why did I accept whiskey from him?*

Feeling safe with any man was a new feeling for her. For some reason Justin made her feel protected.

His words swirled around in her head and she frowned. *He didn't just proposition me, did he? Nah... maybe?* A soft giggle bubbled from her lips and a smile quirked at his.

"Are you getting tipsy, Ms. Jamieson?"

"Nope—drunk maybe." *That was it. I'm just a little drunk. It has to be the reason I'm having this outrageous conversation with a man I hardly know, but one I'm crazily attracted to.*

He laughed. "I guess I should take you home then, if you'll tell me your address."

"Um... maybe—maybe not."

"If you don't tell me your address, I can't take you home."

"Maybe I don't want you to."

That got his attention. He stood, moving to her side and chuckled while he held out his hand so he could help her to her feet. "Now I know you're drunk. You have no idea what you are saying."

She let him pull her up, but when she stood in front of him, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "Yes, I do. I want you to make me forget slimy hands on my skin," she murmured, pressing her lips to his exposed neck where his shirt lay open. His hiss echoed through the room and his hands wrapped around her upper arms.

"Katrina..." he growled.

She pushed the collar of his shirt out of the way with her nose and licked the skin beneath her mouth, before moving closer to his ear.

Letting her hands wander down his chest, she plucked the buttons loose until all but those inside the waistband of his trousers were unfastened. Sliding her hands into the gaping material, she let the hair on his chest slip through her fingers while she nibbled her way across his cheek until their lips were a hairsbreadth away from each other.

She opened her eyes and gasped when she saw the raw heat reflected in his gaze.

"You're playing with fire, lady," he growled.

“Burn me,” she whispered.

She almost whimpered when his lips came crashing down on hers in a kiss meant to melt any resistance she might have put up, but she had no intention of backing down. Returning his fevered kiss, she slid her tongue along the crease of his lips until he moaned and opened his mouth. His hands were everywhere, in her hair, sliding along her spine, slipping over her shoulders, taking the thin material of her dress down with them as her skin burned under his touch. His mouth left hers, and she tipped her head to the side, telling him without words what she wanted. He trailed his lips across her cheek to her ear, nipping at the lobe with his teeth for a moment. Continuing down her neck, he nibbled, licked, and sucked at the soft skin until she moaned deep in her throat.

Her dress slipped down her arms and off her body, pooling at her feet. One calloused palm cupped her breast, thumbing her nipple until she inhaled sharply.

His hands moved around to her ass, cupping the soft mounds, molding them with his fingers, and pulling her tight against him until she could feel his erection against her belly. He moved from her neck down her chest until his mouth closed over her pert nipple. Whimpering, she held his head to her chest when she felt her pussy fill with need so strong, she ached for his touch. His thumbs hooked the sides of her lace panties, pulling them down as his mouth traveled down her stomach, stopping to play with the dangling belly button ring for a moment.

She stepped out of the underwear before he laid her back on the couch cushion, bringing her ass to the edge. He looked into her eyes, a small smile rippling across his mouth when his lips grazed the inside of her knee and she moaned. *I knew there was a reason I didn't wear pantyhose tonight.* The rough pad of his tongue rasped against the sensitive skin of her thigh while he moved closer to the aching need between her legs.

“God, Justin—please,” she groaned softly.

She didn't think it possible, but his eyes got even hotter and a darker brown when he settled his mouth on her clit. Lashes any woman would kill for covered his eyes as he ran his tongue in a slow lick from her quivering pussy lips back to her clit. Swirling the aching bud with the tip of his tongue in the slowest, most agonizing manner she could ever remember feeling, she almost screamed, wanting him to hurry and make her come. He sucked her clit for several agonizing moments, before dipping inside her pussy with the tip of his tongue, until she wiggled on the couch cushion. Whimpers of need fell from her mouth while she begged him to hurry and take her. When he finally slipped two fingers inside her wet pussy and sucked on her clit *hard*, a tortured groan ripped from her throat as hot cum spilled over his hand.

His mouth finally left her quivering flesh, before he kissed his way up her stomach, across her chest, stopping to suck softly on the nipple. When he took her lips with his, she could taste herself on his tongue as he slipped it inside her mouth to duel with hers.

Her hands found his chest, working the shirt off his shoulders and down his arms. Pulling her mouth away, she pushed him back as her lips found his rock hard muscles, before nibbling at his male disks until they stood up, aching for her touch. His hands wound themselves in her hair and a groan rumbled deep beneath her mouth when her fingers plucked the button at his waist. Working his pants loose, she tugged until they pooled at his thighs along with his boxers and his cock stood proud, begging for her mouth.

Rolling backwards onto the floor, he pulled her with him until she lay sprawled across his chest. Her hand moved down, cupping his balls, as he hissed when her mouth moved across his chest again. His stomach quivered under her when she licked her way down across his washboard abdomen, following the trail of hair until it reached his groin.

Using only the tip of her tongue, she laved at the pre-cum glistening on the end of his cock. His hips lifted slightly, telling her

what he wanted. He fisted her hair when she opened her mouth, taking him inside and swirling her tongue around him. Rocking his hips to her rhythm, it wasn't long before she could feel him swell inside her mouth.

"Kat—stop." He pulled her up by her shoulders, settling her across his chest again and kissing her. "God, I want you," he growled into her mouth, before he flipped her over onto her back.

He took her nipple between his lips, sucking and nipping until she squirmed beneath him, begging with her moans. Two fingers slipped inside her pussy while he worked his pants off. She whimpered when he pulled his fingers out and whispered, "Don't move." His eyes sparkled in the light of the room when he reached for his pants, pulled out his wallet, and retrieved a condom.

Quickly encasing his hard cock, he moved between her legs as she wrapped them around his hips. With mingled sighs of pleasure, he slipped inside her. He pulled her hands together and held them above her head with one hand while she wiggled beneath him. He rocked his hips, and she almost squealed at the sensation of his cock buried to the hilt. His other hand moved between them and rubbed her clit, in a slow rhythmic dance, matching the movement of his hips.

"Faster," she whimpered and he chuckled.

"I'm in control this time. You'll get your turn."

It wasn't long, though, before he started moving faster and harder. She locked her heels behind him, begging him by digging them into his butt. He let her hands go and lifted her hips higher as he plunged inside, giving her everything he had.

Her climax built from her toes, the heat curling up her legs and rolling over her in a wave while she screamed his name. He shuddered and groaned a few short seconds after her, her name a whisper on his lips.

Chapter Four

He stood in the dark shadows of the bedroom slipping on his jeans while his gaze roamed over the woman in his bed. The sliver of sunlight filtering through the curtains turned the hair spread across his pillow to almost an auburn color. A small smile rippled across his lips when he remembered their wild night. Making love to her on the floor in the living room had just been the beginning. Once their breathing had returned to normal the first time, she'd given him one hell of a sexy look, her gaze almost begging for more, and his cock had immediately started to fill again.

It's been a long time since I made love to a woman, much less three times in one night. Shaking his head to clear the erotic thoughts before he climbed back into the bed with her, he grabbed a T-shirt from the drawer and slipped it on. With one last look over his shoulder, he quietly slipped out of the bedroom and softly closed the door behind him.

Padding into the living room, he picked up her clothes off the floor and draped them over the arm of the couch before heading toward the kitchen.

A soft knock on the kitchen door brought his thoughts back to the things needing done today. On a working ranch, there were very few days without something to do and even though he owned the place, it didn't leave him out of the work ahead.

"Hey, boss."

"How's the mare doing?"

"She foaled during the night. Looks like you've got a handsome new stud for your growing stable."

“Good. I was worried about her.”

Justin saw the twinkle in Keith’s eyes before he followed the other man’s gaze to where Katrina’s dress lay on the couch. “Looks to me like you had other things on your mind last night.”

Justin sipped the coffee in his hand without saying a word. He wasn’t going to explain Katrina’s presence to anyone until Keith’s gaze ricocheted behind him.

“Mornin’,” Keith said before Justin turned around, although he could tell by the look in his friend’s eyes who now stood behind them.

His jaw about hit the floor when he turned around to see the object of his lust-filled night draped in nothing more than his dress shirt. He didn’t think she could be more beautiful than the night before. The vision standing in the doorway with her hair in wild disarray, her bright green eyes sparkling in the light, and her gorgeous long legs bare, had his cock in overdrive.

“Sorry to interrupt, but I needed to retrieve a few things,” she said, grabbing her dress from the arm of the couch where he’d left it.

“I...uh...I’ll check back with you in a little while, boss,” Keith said before backing toward the screen door and disappearing.

“I didn’t mean to run off your company.”

“You didn’t. He was just checking in.” Clearing his throat, he asked, “Would you like some coffee?”

“No, thanks. I really need to get going.”

He started moving toward her, watching as her eyes grew larger the closer he got, but she wasn’t about to back down. When he reached her side, he lifted his hand, brushing his knuckles across her cheek. She trembled slightly under his touch and he smiled. “I’ll take you back to town.”

“I’ll just call a cab.”

“It’s the least I can do, Katrina. After...”

“The least you could do after getting laid last night?” She bristled, obviously spoiling for a fight. If that’s what she wanted, he’d give it to her. She made him hotter than the desert at high noon when she got

pissed.

He smiled. "Never let it be said I'm not a gracious host."

Flipping her hair over her shoulder, her eyes snapped as she raked him with her gaze. "Save it. You might need it later for some other unsuspecting female. I've already got your number, and I don't plan on dialing it again anytime soon."

"Are you saying you didn't enjoy yourself? I distinctly remember you screaming my name on several occasions during the night."

"You're good, I'll give you that, but I don't think I'll be requiring your services again."

"Well, I'm sure you have friends who might be interested in my attributes."

Her eyes raked him again. "Mmm...maybe. I guess I could give you a good recommendation...if someone asks."

"Well, sweetheart, you know where I am and how to get in touch if you ever feel your um...needs aren't being met by anyone else."

"Somehow, I doubt it. My vibrator suits my needs."

He grinned. "It didn't last night. I'm sure you don't scream like that using your vibrator." He let his eyes focus on her lips, adding, "Next time, bring it along. I'm sure we could have a little fun with it if you so chose."

"There won't be a next time."

"Mmm...somehow, I think there will be."

"When hell freezes over."

"Well, they may be calling for snow soon then."

"Go to hell, Justin."

"They say the Nevada desert is the gate to Hell, so I guess I'm halfway there."

Deciding she wasn't going to win this battle of words, she swung around with her clothes in hand and retreated to the bathroom, slamming the door behind her. Bracing her hands on the sink, she closed her eyes as rage whipped through her. *What the fuck was I thinking? Figures—save a horse, ride a cowboy. Wasn't that the*

saying? Well, the hell with that. One particular cowboy could rot before I'll ever ride him again.

Slipping on her dress and shoes, she finger-combed her hair as best she could before she peered at her reflection in the mirror.

"Shit!" Turning her head to the side, the purple mark on her neck just pissed her off more. *It's a good thing it's Saturday. I won't have to try to explain it to anyone.*

She heard the door slam and hoped he'd left her alone in the house until the cab came because she really didn't want to face him again.

Opening the door a crack, she peeked out into the living room before stepping into the short hall and looking around. Justin was nowhere to be found. Quickly grabbing her cell phone out of her purse lying on the couch, she dialed the number for a cab, but when they asked the address, she paused. Closing her eyes she grumbled, "Never mind."

She really didn't have a clue where his house sat in comparison to town. Chewing her lip nervously, she tried to decide how to handle this. *I can either try to find Justin, go through the drawers in the house and look for a piece of mail, walk back to town (yeah, like I can do that in heels), or sit here and wait until he comes back in the house, which could be hours from now.* "Damn it to hell!"

Pacing the room for a moment while she weighed her options, she realized she'd forgotten one very important thing. "Mark. I can call him and see if he'll come pick me up." *But, if I do, he'll surely figure out Justin and I slept together last night.*

"Well, it's either that or face Justin again," she grumbled for a moment before she flipped open her phone, found Mark's number and hit talk.

The phone rang several times before she finally heard a groggy, "Hello?"

"Mark?"

"Yeah—who's this?"

"It's Kat."

“Kat? What’s wrong?” His voice sounded nervous when he realized something wasn’t quite right.

“I need your help. I need you to pick me up and take me back to the Bellagio to get my car.”

“Pick you up? Where the hell are you?”

Silence.

“Kat?”

She forcefully exhaled before she said, “I’m at Justin’s.”

“Wait a minute. Did you say, you’re at Justin’s?”

“Yes, Mark, and don’t start with me. I’ll explain later. Just get your ass out of bed and come get me.”

* * * *

Nervous footsteps clicked on the tile while she paced the living room. It seemed like hours until she finally heard a car pull up in front of the house. Peeking through the curtains near the door, she could see Mark step out of his big black SUV and she sighed in relief.

She grabbed her purse before she pulled open the front door, trying to head Mark off so he didn’t actually reach the house. All she wanted was to get off Justin’s property quickly. *The last thing I need is a confrontation right at this moment.* Avoiding the disturbing man she’d had wild sex with the night before had become her first priority.

Stepping into the sunlight, she didn’t see the object of her avoidance until she had already pulled the door shut behind her and turned around. *He obviously hadn’t been too far from the house the whole time. Damn!*

Two sets of eyes watched, one curious and the other raking her whole body while a lopsided smirk rested on his lips. He stood next to Mark, his elbow resting casually on the top of the truck, his brown eyes twinkling with amusement.

“Let’s go,” she snapped, grabbing the handle of the vehicle.

“What? You aren’t even going to kiss me goodbye? I thought you

were a little more gracious than that.”

“Kiss my ass,” she hissed.

“Anytime, baby, anytime.”

Snapping her jaws shut before she said anything else, she glared at Mark who still stood next to the car with a dumbfounded look to his face. “Can we go, please?”

“Yeah, sure,” he said, popping the locks on the truck before he moved around to the driver’s side. “Justin, I’ll call you later.”

“Sure.” Justin stepped near the passenger door before she could pull it shut and said, “Later, sweetheart. Call me.”

Mumbling obscenities under her breath, she yanked the door shut, but not before she saw Justin flash his dimpled smile and wink.

The long driveway finally met pavement and she sighed in relief. Mark’s gaze bored into her with each passing glance. She looked at the ceiling of the truck before she turned to him and said, “What?”

“Care to tell me what that was all about?”

“No.”

“Come on. You can’t drag me out of bed at this god-awful early hour to come and pick you up at one of my best friend’s homes, whom you hardly know, and not expect me to ask questions. Never mind the fact that you left the restaurant last night alone, and then you ask me to pick you up at his house the next morning?”

A sigh left her lips in a rush before she answered, “All right. I had a run in with someone at the hotel last night who thought I was a hooker. Justin managed to dissuade said gentleman from his pursuit. I guess, I was a little out of it after it happened, and he brought me to his house.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“Don’t give me that, Katrina Anne. I’ve known you most of your life, and I’ve seen you around plenty of men. The hickey on your neck and the whisker burn on your chest suggest something happened last night, even if Justin hadn’t said what he did right before we left.”

"You aren't my brother." Her eyes narrowed, and she stared out the windshield.

"No, I'm not, but I care about you, and I don't want to see you get hurt."

"I'm not going to get hurt."

"You will if you think sleeping with Justin is going to get you anywhere."

"Don't read more into this than there is. Yes, we had sex, all right? It meant nothing. I have my career, and it's all I want. I don't want or need a man in my life, especially on a permanent basis."

"I'm glad to hear you say that."

"Why?" She glanced to the other side of the truck, trying to read his expression. The last thing she wanted would be for Mark to feel like he had to choose between her and his friendship with Justin.

"I've known Justin a long time. He likes women, loves them in fact, but he's not the settling down kind of a man."

"The last thing I need is someone like him. Trust me, it meant nothing."

"If you say so."

"I do," she answered as they pulled into the pull through in front of the hotel. "Thanks for picking me up."

"No problem. I guess I'll see you at Gram's next weekend."

"I'll be there."

"I love you. Be careful, huh?"

"Of course, aren't I always?"

He laughed. "No. That's why I said it."

Letting a smirk ripple across her mouth, she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. Shaking her head, she opened the door and slipped out of the truck, shutting it firmly behind her.

She handed the valet her parking ticket and watched Mark pull back out onto the street with a heavy sigh. *It meant nothing. It meant nothing. I just have to keep telling myself that.*

Chapter Five

Whipping her car into the driveway, Katrina wasn't surprised to see tons of cars parked nearby. After all, turning ninety years old only came once in a person's lifetime, and having her family close meant everything to her grandmother.

She pushed the car door open and stepped out. A family get-together meant hundreds of the Jamieson clan. This party wasn't any different. All eight of Gram's children, their children, and grandchildren as well as friends of each came to celebrate.

After looking over her attire, she nodded; satisfied she'd dressed appropriately for the company present. A pink tank top and white shorts adorned her form and she smiled at the pink toenail polish on her feet, peeking out from the flip flops she chose to wear. Wouldn't the guys at work be surprised to know how feminine she dressed sometimes? They rarely saw her in anything but her flight suit or her BDUs.

Locking her car, she walked purposefully toward the front entrance. Knocking softly, she pushed it open and saw her mother.

"There you are. I thought maybe you weren't coming."

"I wouldn't miss this for the world. Where's Gram? I need to give her a big hug and kiss before she gets too wrapped up in the festivities."

"She's out on the patio near the pool. Can I get you something to drink?"

"I'll get it. You have enough to do with all of this other company. Good grief! There must be a hundred people here."

"Hundred and fifty to be exact, but you know Gram loves a

party.”

Katrina chuckled. “Isn’t that the truth? I’ll be back in a bit to help you.”

“Don’t you dare. I’ve got this under control, and besides, I hired some people to help me. You go enjoy yourself. I’m sure there are several people here you haven’t seen since you’ve been back.”

“Very true.” She kissed her mother on the cheek. “I’ll see you in a bit then. Don’t overdo it.”

“Stop worrying. I’m fine.”

Katrina smiled, looking at the striking woman before she headed for the kitchen. Annabel Jamieson could turn many a man’s head even at the ripe age of fifty-five. Standing at least five foot seven inches in her bare feet, with her brown hair pulled back in a ponytail that hung nearly to her butt and hardly a gray hair to be found, she could easily pass for Katrina’s sister.

Katrina shook her head and walked toward the sliding glass doors. Sliding the door open, she walked out, pulling it shut behind her before she moved toward a large container where the drinks sat buried in ice. Grabbing a cold soda, she spotted her grandmother sitting under a large umbrella, chatting with several people.

As she made her way to her grandmother’s side, she heard, “There she is, my beautiful Kat. Come here, sweetie. I haven’t seen you in so long.”

“Hello, Gram,” she answered. Stopping next to the stately woman, she bent down and kissed her on the cheek before she wrapped her arms around her grandmother, she hugged her tightly. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too, sweetie. I’m so glad you are home and away from all of that over there.”

“I know, Grandma, me too.”

“Now—have you found yourself a nice young man yet? I want great-grandchildren soon, you know.”

“Granm!” Katrina blushed when the crowd around them chuckled

and she stepped back.

“Well, I do. You are almost thirty years old, young lady. You need to be settling down and having babies.”

I can't believe we are having this conversation with all these people around, some of whom I don't even know. “Please. Can have this discussion another time?”

“Oh, nonsense. There are even some nice looking eligible men here today. You could do worse than some of them.”

“Grandma, please. You're embarrassing me.”

Her grandmother didn't seem to hear her or chose to ignore her pleas as she said, “Look over there. Mark's friend is very handsome, and from what I understand, he's single and has a nice big place outside of town.”

Katrina sighed before she turned to see who her grandmother had picked out. Her heart stopped in her chest when his gaze met her and a smirk rippled across those tempting lips. Standing not one hundred yards from her was none other than the object of every disturbing dream she'd had in the last week, Justin Wilder. *Damn!* Her gaze moved over his form for a moment, taking in his tight t-shirt, ass-hugging blue jeans, and pointed toe boots. *He looks even better than I remember.*

Bristling under his look, she turned around and walked back toward the house.

* * * *

He had been fully aware of the beautiful woman when she appeared in the doorway of the house. She looked better than she did the last time he saw her. Her hair hung in long waves down her back, swinging with each step she took toward the older woman sitting off to the side. When she had bent over to kiss her grandmother, the view of her shorts pulled tight across her ass, almost made him groan out loud. Her laughter reached his ears and shivers raced down his spine.

It had been impossible to forget her in the last week. Her scent still lingered on his sheets, making sleeping almost a chore while he craved her touch.

He knew exactly the moment she realized he was there—when her eyes narrowed into slits and the smile slid from her face. *She's not happy to see me. Big surprise.*

Laughter bubbled in his chest when she reacted just like he thought she would. She whipped around to face her grandmother again, presenting him with her back.

"I get the impression Katrina just figured out you were here, Justin. How did you manage to talk me into bringing you?"

Justin smiled. "I can be very persuasive."

"More like you blackmailed me."

"Gentle nudging."

"Bullshit!" A frown marred Mark's face when he caught the direction of Justin's stare. "I'm warning you. Don't hurt her."

"I have no intention of doing anything of the sort."

"I know what happened last weekend. I'm sure she's realized what a big mistake she made, so I would suggest you don't repeat it."

"Oh, I plan on repeating it." His gaze raked her body, and he saw her shift her stance from one foot to the other. His body went into overdrive when he remembered those legs wrapped around his hips.

"She's not a plaything."

"Listen, Mark, she's the one who came onto me. I had every intention of taking her home, safe and sound, without touching her at all, but she started it. I just enjoyed the outcome."

Mark shook his head. "Just leave her alone. She's not your type of woman. Go find some lonely female to set your sights on."

His friend walked away, leaving him standing alone, longing for the woman standing so close, he could smell her.

When he saw her turn and walk away, he couldn't do anything except follow. He stopped at the sliding glass door for a moment, looking over his shoulder to where Mark stood glowering at him. He

shook off his friend's disapproval and slipped inside the house, softly closing the door behind him.

He followed the scent lingering in the air, pointing him in the direction she went. Trying to act casual when he met people he didn't know in the house, his eyes searched for the woman he couldn't seem to forget.

The staircase leading to the upper floor of the house beckoned. He looked behind him to see if anyone paid any attention to where he stood, but no one seemed to care while they laughed, drank, and ate.

Taking the stairs two at a time, he reached the landing, looking one direction then the other, trying to decide which way to go first. Soft music reached his ears coming from somewhere to his left. Moving toward it, he stopped in front of a bedroom where the door stood cracked open slightly and the music sounded louder.

He pushed the door open slightly, peeking through the opening to make sure the person he sought sat on the other side. The last thing he wanted was to come upon some unsuspecting guest doing lord only knows what.

Smiling, he saw Katrina sitting on the bed in the room that seemed to be more suited for a teenage girl than a twenty something young woman, especially one with the grit this one had. He leaned against the casing, once he pushed the door open, and just stared.

The music surrounded them. The swell and ebb of the rhythm pulsed through his veins when she tipped her head back on her shoulders and closed her eyes. His fingers itched to run through those silky locks. He could almost taste her lips as she parted them softly, lost in the music.

His feet carried him silently into the room before he gently pushed the door closed. She still hadn't heard him while he watched her sway slightly to the beat.

He ached for her. His body had come to full attention the minute she had walked through the sliding glass door, and now she sat in front of him like she wanted for him to find her.

“Katrina,” he said softly and her eyes popped open with a start.

“Justin. What are you doing here?”

“I came to find you.”

“Why?”

He stepped closer to the bed and she stood, eyes widening when he approached. “I’m not exactly sure. I can’t seem to get you out of my mind.”

“Well, if you expect a repeat of last weekend, forget it.” She squared her shoulders. “It was a mistake, a temporary case of insanity on my part.”

A soft chuckle left his lips. “Insanity? Well then, your insanity lasted several hours and included me in your state of mind. I don’t think you are any more immune to me, than I am to you.” Running his finger down her arm, he felt her tremble under his touch. “Your body craves mine just like mine craves yours. Last weekend was just a taste, a taste of heaven, one I want to happen again.”

“I don’t,” she whispered. Her skin quivered, and he stepped closer, close enough so that her breasts almost touched his chest.

“Your body says differently,” he murmured before he bent his head and softly took her lips. Her body stiffened for a moment, then melted against him and she moaned into his mouth.

He pulled her tight to him, his hands making a path down her back to cup her ass. Her arms went up around his shoulders, grasping at them as if she needed them to hold herself upright. His tongue moved along the crease of her lips and she groaned, opened her mouth. Their tongues met, dueled, sparred, gave, and took.

Finally pulling his mouth from hers, he moved along her cheek to her ear, nibbling the lobe with his teeth. Taking her invitation, he trailed his lips down her neck, nipping at the soft skin with his teeth as a groan rumbled deep in his chest. His hands moved back up her body, cupping her breasts and kneading the soft flesh, before moving up to touch her face.

She opened her eyes, and he could see the passion in her gaze as it

quickly raced out of control between them.

“You have no idea how much I want you right now,” he whispered before his mouth swooped down and took hers again. She whimpered under his kiss and opened her mouth. One hand moved down her chest to her stomach and slipped beneath the stretchy material of her tank top. A moment later, he skimmed back up her soft belly, and pushed her bra out of the way, before his palm rasped against her already hardened nipple.

A knock sounded on the door.

“Kat? Are you in there?”

“My mother,” she whispered, ripping her mouth from his. “Yeah, Mom,” she said louder so her mother could hear her.

“We are about to cut the cake. Are you coming?”

“Not yet,” he chuckled softly.

She punched him in the arm. “I’ll be right down,” she answered her mother.

“Are you all right? You sound strange.”

While she continued to talk to her mother, he let his mouth wander down her chest to take the nipple in his mouth.

“Yes, Mom, I’m fine.” She pushed against his shoulders even while a soft moan rumbled in her chest. “I’ll be down in a minute.”

“Okay.”

She arched against his mouth when one hand popped the snap on her shorts and slid inside. She whimpered when his fingers slipped through the curls, past her engorged pussy lips and entered her slick vagina. “Oh God,” she whispered, clutching his head as he continued to tongue her nipple and the fingers inside her began to stroke.

Another knock on the door and she whimpered before she almost shouted, “What?”

“Kat, have you seen Justin?”

She groaned. “No. Maybe he’s in the bathroom.”

“I can’t seem to find him anywhere.”

“I’ll be out in a minute, and we’ll see if we can find him together,

okay? I'm...uh...I'm changing clothes."

"All right. Grams is about to cut the cake."

"I know!"

Silence.

"I'll see you in a minute, then."

She couldn't hold herself upright anymore, and he laid her back on the bed, stripping the shorts from her in one swift motion. His lips trailed down her belly and she opened her legs. He found the swollen clit with his tongue, toggling quickly, and she wiggled beneath his mouth. Several swift licks and he felt her stiffen and cry out even as she bit her lip to silence her scream of ecstasy when her climax hit her, *hard*.

* * * *

She blinked for a moment, looking at the man kissing up her stomach before latching onto her breast. In the distance she heard, the beginnings of the happy birthday song.

"Shit! Get off!" She pushed at his shoulders until he lifted his head, his brown eyes scorching her with their heat. "Get off!"

He shifted off her, and she scrambled to her feet. Looking around, she finally spotted her shorts and underwear a couple of feet from the bed. Scooping them up, she wiggled back into them and adjusted her bra back in place, before she turned and faced him again.

"I take it play time is over." His dimples peeked out when his lips lifted at the corners in a devastating smile.

"I'm missing my grandmother's birthday."

"Yes, well, I guess that says it all." He rose from the bed and moved toward her. She could feel her heart still racing and her blood rushing in her ears even as he stopped in front of her and gently took her lips. When he raised his head again, he said, "After you."

She opened the door and peeked out in the hall to make sure no one was about before they stepped into the hall. Heading down the

stairs, she stopped at the bottom and said, "I'll go out first. If we go out there together, everyone will know what happened."

"The rosy blush to your cheeks, sweetheart, would tell anyone who cared to look what happened upstairs. I don't think us being seen together would tell them anything more."

"Just stay here for a minute, all right? Do that for me at least." She turned and headed for the sliding glass door, leaving him standing by the stairs.

She heard him follow several minutes later as she bent down next to her grandmother while the crowd laughed and hugged her, congratulating her on her long life. The crowd thinned out, leaving Katrina next to the older woman while she watched Justin move off next to the fire pit and sit down on the rock bench. The intense brown eyes never left her.

"I see you've made the acquaintance of Mark's handsome friend."

Katrina's gaze swung back to her grandmother and she blushed. "I...uh...."

"It seems you already know him, sweetie. Care to elaborate to your old grandmother?"

"We've met before, Grams, last week when Mark had a business meeting. Justin is one of Mark's clients. That's how I know him."

"Justin, is it?"

"Gram, don't play matchmaker, okay? He's not interested in any kind of a relationship, and neither am I."

"You might have fooled most of the guests here today with you coming out first, but not this old lady." Her grandmother raised a gnarled hand to Katrina's cheek. "The pretty blush on your face tells me you know him a little better than just Mark's client."

Katrina's blush deepened, and she felt the heat crawl up her neck, even turning her ears bright red.

"It's nothing more than a passing fancy. Let it go, okay?"

"The fire in that young man's eyes is bright enough to light up this whole back yard. You are a fool, young lady, if you don't grab a hold

of him and hang on for dear life. It's been a long time since I've seen that kind of passion on a man's face for a woman, and it does my old heart good to see it directed at you. Now," she said, patting Katrina's hand, "go on over there and bring him back here, so I can meet him."

Katrina kissed her grandmother on the cheek and stood. She turned back to where Justin had been sitting, but he wasn't there. She searched the crowd nearby and spotted him on the other side of the yard with his arms full of a brunette who currently had her tongue down his throat. She felt like she'd been punched in the stomach as she gasped and spun around, tears filling her eyes.

Chapter Six

He laughed and pulled the woman's arms from around his shoulders. *I don't need Katrina seeing her plastered to my chest with her tongue down my throat. Why in hell does she have to be here?*

"It's been a long time, Adrianna."

"Too long if you ask me, baby. You haven't called me in forever. Where have you been?"

"Around," he said, stepping back, but she continued to follow.

"Not around me."

He laughed again and said, "No. No, I haven't."

"Have you been avoiding me?" A pout rippled across her red lips.

"Not avoiding exactly. I've been busy."

"Well then, why don't we blow this party, and I'll remind you how good it was between us."

"I'm here with one of the family. It would be rude for me to leave." He spotted Katrina across the yard.

"One of the family? Who?"

"Katrina. We're seeing each other, Adrianna," he said, trying to move in Katrina's direction to discourage the overzealous woman.

"Well, bring her along, pumpkin. You know I don't mind threesomes," she answered while she followed.

A startled chuckle escaped his lips. He could never imagine Katrina in a threesome, and he thought it funny to even think about it.

"Katrina's not really into that kind of kink."

"I know you are though, Justin."

He had almost reached Katrina's side when she turned around. If she would have had a gun in her hand, he would have been a dead

man, by the look on her face. Shoring up his defenses, he slipped an arm around her waist and pulled her close to his side.

“Kat, sweetheart. Do you know Adrianna?”

“Let me go,” she hissed, completely ignoring the other woman except to shoot her a deadly glare.

“Now, sweetie, I know we had a little spat earlier, but I thought we’d worked everything out in your bedroom.” He nuzzled her neck with his nose, and she tried to squirm out of his grasp, but he held tight, wrapping his other hand around her waist.

“Get your hands off me, you bastard.”

He smiled at Adrianna and said, “You’ll have to excuse her. Obviously she’s still upset with me.” Katrina continued to squirm in his arms until he growled, “Enough.”

The startled look on her face and her momentary stillness gave him just enough time to tell the other woman he would talk to her some other time before Katrina started punching him in the chest. “Ouch, damn it Katrina, stop that!”

“Get your fucking hands off me this instant.”

“All right. I’ve had enough of your attitude.” He bent at the waist and hoisted her over his shoulder while she screeched in outrage.

“Damn it, Justin, put me down!”

“Not until we talk, sweetness.” He started for the door of the house until Mark stepped between them and the door. “Not now.”

Mark gave him a stubborn look, but stepped back out of the way. Justin shot a look to his right and met the sparkling eyes of Katrina’s grandmother as she smiled and gave him a thumbs up sign. He chuckled and pulled open the sliding glass door before stepping through it, closing it behind him, and heading for the stairs. They were going to talk, and talk right now. He wasn’t sure what had pissed her off this time, but he wanted to get to the bottom of it and fast. He would much rather have her melting against him and screaming his name as she came hard around his cock, than fighting with him, especially in front of her family.

Once he reached her room, he moved toward the bed and dumped her unceremoniously in the middle. She attempted to scramble off of it and race for the door, but he was quicker, reaching it and slamming it shut while he blocked her escape.

“Let me out of here.”

“Not until you tell me what’s got you in such an uproar.”

She folded her arms under her breasts, which only made him want her more as she pushed them up. “It doesn’t matter. It’s not like I give a shit what you do with other women.”

“Ah, so that’s it. You saw Adrianna.”

“Saw what, Justin?” she asked, her tone dripping so sweet it made his teeth hurt.

He moved next to her, and she tried to skirt around him, reaching for the door.

“Uh-uh.” He wrapped his arms around her and spun her around so her back was against the door as he pinned her with his body. “You don’t have anything to be jealous of with her, Kat. She means nothing to me.”

“I’m not jealous.”

“Um...your beautiful green eyes say different.”

“Tell me this—how can I be jealous of you with other woman if there is nothing between us? Come to think of it, there is no us, so if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to see to my family.” She pushed against his chest, but he didn’t budge.

“Oh, but there is, Kat. There is definitely something between us. I just haven’t figured out exactly what to do about it yet,” he whispered, nibbling at the corners of her lips.

“Stop it.” She tried to sound stern, but the words came out in a breathless murmur as his lips moved across her cheek and down her neck to the hollow of her throat.

“You really don’t want me to stop, do you?”

She sighed and tipped her head, but she whispered, “Yes.”

He lifted his head, and they stood almost nose to nose, staring into

each other's eyes before he dropped his arms and moved away. She paused for a moment then turned around quickly, pulled open the door and disappeared down the stairs.

He sighed heavily before following her. When he reached the patio, he wasn't surprised to see the disappointed look on her grandmother's face. She waved a gnarled hand in his direction and he decided he didn't want to deal with the wrath of Elaine Jamieson, so he walked in her direction.

"Come here young man," she demanded when he neared.

"Yes, ma'am." He tried flashing his dimples in hopes she would soften a bit and not rake him over the coals, but it didn't appear to be working very well. She pointed to the bench beside her, indicating he'd better sit down.

"I don't believe we've met. I know you came with Mark, but I've never seen you at any of our functions before. What is your name?"

"Justin Wilder, ma'am."

"Justin. Nice strong name."

"I believe my mother thought so, yes." He tried grinning again.

"Don't you go flashing those gorgeous dimples at me. I'm immune to your charms, but I believe my little Kat is not."

He dropped his gaze and blushed under his tan.

"You must be a strong man to tame her, but I think it's not above your abilities, Mr. Wilder."

"Call me Justin, please."

"All right, Justin." His eyes met hers again and the wisdom of ninety years shined bright in her gaze. "I've seen a lot of men come and go in her life. Most couldn't or wouldn't stand up to her and her stubborn pride as well as her temper. Trust me when I say she has her father's Irish stubbornness."

He chuckled. "Yes, ma'am, she does."

"How did you two meet? She hasn't mentioned you before, but by your interactions today, I would guess you know each other rather well."

He spent the next hour telling Katrina's grandmother about how they met, and he knew the woman saw right through him with her piercing stare. Even though he didn't give her the details of what had happened between them, he had a feeling she knew.

"I would say, you need to decide what you want from my granddaughter then. You seem to care for her."

"I don't know about that. I mean we don't know each other well enough for anyone to say I care about her."

"It doesn't take long for feelings to take root in someone's heart. If you want more than just a short term relationship with her, you need to build on those feelings."

"I appreciate the advice, ma'am."

"I'll warn you though young man, don't hurt my granddaughter, or you will deal with me."

"I'll keep it in mind."

"Now off with you. This old woman is getting tired, and I think you have some making up to do with Katrina."

He smiled and stood. "It's been nice talking with you."

"You are a charmer, Justin."

He bowed at the waist and turned to find the one woman who, in the short time he'd known her, had managed to invade his thoughts on a daily basis.

* * * *

She watched the exchange between her grandmother and Justin from her spot near the waterfall. Not able to hear the conversation, she almost shuddered at what her very loveable, but nosy grandmother must have been telling him. He had been smiling and laughing while they talked, and even though he hadn't been looking her way, the magnetism of the man drew her attention like a moth to flame. *Damn it!*

When he stood and turned in her direction, she didn't want him to

catch her watching him, so she quickly turned around to face the water.

“Katrina,” he whispered softly when he stopped behind her.

She turned to face him with a questioning arch of her eyebrow.

“I wanted to say goodbye.”

“You’re leaving?” She sounded disappointed, even to her own ears.

“Yeah. I’ve got things to do at my place, but I needed to apologize too.”

“Apologize for what?”

He ran his hand through his hair. “For what happened earlier. Things got out of control, and I’m sorry.” She dropped her gaze from his until he put his fingers under her chin, forcing her to look at him again. “I’m not apologizing for wanting you. I’m just sorry things can’t go the way we would like them to.”

“You’re awfully sure of yourself.”

He smiled, and the dimples in his cheeks peeked out, making her warm all over. “I’m used to taking what I want.”

“And what is it you want?”

“You.” He took a piece of her hair between his fingers, rubbing it like it fascinated him with its texture.

She stiffened and pulled the hair away from him, flipping it over her shoulder. “I’m not for sale.”

“I didn’t say you were—I just said I wanted you.” He stepped closer and took her lips with his in a gentle kiss with just enough pressure against her mouth, she wanted to wrap her arms around him and deepen the kiss. She could feel a moan building in her chest even though she tried to hold it in. When he released her mouth, she slowly opened her eyes as his warm breath whispered across her lips. “Until we see each other again.”

He smiled, before he turned around and quickly disappeared into the house. She shivered at the loss of his body heat, not realizing she watched his departure with rapt attention until she turned to find Mark

standing not far away with a frown on his face.

Chapter Seven

“What the hell was that, Jamieson? That was about the stupidest maneuver you’ve done in a long time. Where is your head, Major?” The voice crackled across the headset in her ears, and she sighed.

“Sorry. I’ll do better next time.”

“There wouldn’t be a next time in combat, Major. Fucking get your head on straight.”

“Yes, sir.”

She blinked back the tears threatening to fall down her cheeks. *I need to pull my head out of my ass. I just need to get Justin off my mind or make a trip out to his place, so I can get laid again. Either way, something needs to happen soon.*

The training mission continued. She banked left when she should have banked right, and she cringed when she heard the colonel’s voice crackle over her headset again.

“Get your ass down here, Jamieson, now!”

Several minutes later, she taxied in toward the hangar with Smitty sitting behind her in the weapons officer’s seat.

“Good luck, Kat. You’re in deep shit this time.”

“Thanks. You’re a lot of help.”

“Hey, it’s not me you need to worry about. The colonel’s got your number today. Not that it’s any of my business, but you seem really distracted. You wanna talk?”

“No.”

“Don’t say I didn’t offer.”

“Thanks anyway. This is just something I need to get over. How about a beer later?”

“Sure. Call me when you’re done getting your ass chewed.”

The cockpit canopy lifted, and she unbuckled her harness before she slipped her helmet off. The colonel stomped in her direction from across the hanger. *Ah, fuck!* Climbing out of the jet, she jumped onto the tarmac just as the intimidating man reached her side and she saluted.

“Major, would you care to explain your actions up there?”

“No explanations, sir. My actions were careless and not becoming of an Air Force pilot and officer, sir.”

“No, they were not, Major. Follow me,” he said before he turned around. Katrina followed reluctantly, knowing she would probably get one hell of a reprimand once they reached the office. Reaching the hangar, he continued into his office with her close on his heels. The door shut behind them, effectively blocking out any ears who might be listening to their conversation.

“Sit down, Major.” Katrina took a seat while the colonel walked behind his desk and sat in his own. “What’s going on with you, Katrina?”

“I don’t know, Dad.” She sighed heavily and looked across the desk. “I wish I did. I just can’t get my head around this right now.”

“You haven’t been concentrating well the last month or so.” His penetrating gaze met hers across the desk. He made it very difficult to keep their professional distance when he looked at her like that. Right now, he stared at her like a father, not as her superior officer. “Does it have anything to do with the young man I saw you with at your grandmother’s birthday party?”

She tipped her head back on her shoulders, unable to meet his all-knowing look. It wouldn’t do any good to deny it; he could read her like a book. “Yeah Dad, I’m afraid so.”

“You haven’t talked about him at all. Do you want to now?”

“Not really.” Her eyes met his again. “There isn’t much to tell.”

“He kissed you before he left. I would think by those actions, there was something going on there.”

“I haven’t seen him since.”

“Well, that would explain your lack of concentration.” He stood up and moved toward the window. “You need to get out of this funk. The mistakes you’re making up there could get you and your weapons officer killed.”

“Maybe I need a break. I haven’t had a real vacation in about two years.”

“Good idea. I would suggest you do something, young lady, before you ruin your career.”

* * * *

Stepping into the sunshine, she slid the aviator sunglasses on her face and headed back toward her jet. Grabbing her helmet, she started back for the hangar, but stopped when she heard her name called.

“Yeah?” She squinted, trying to figure out who walked toward her.

“Hey, sweet thing. How about you and me go out tonight? Some place cozy and intimate.”

She rolled her eyes even though she knew the man couldn’t tell. “Not interested, Parker.”

“What’s up with you, Kat? We used to be good together.”

“Used to be—optimum word there indicates past tense.”

“You know, since you came back from Iraq, you’ve turned into a real bitch.”

She made a smooching sound as she pursed her lips and said, “Thanks, lover, but I’ve got other fish to fry these days.”

“Well, if you ever get tired of whomever you’re doing, call me. I’m sure I can warm up the block of ice between your legs.”

“Trust me, it’s warmer than you ever made it.” With a wicked smile, she turned on her heel, and headed straight for her locker, whistling softly.

Three hours later, she hurried out to her car with her leave

paperwork in her hands. Sometimes it helped to have your father in an administrative position to push things through. The smile on her face was genuine when she thought about having the next couple of weeks off to relax and recuperate.

Slipping inside her car, she put the top down and unpinned her hair while she revved the engine, loving the purr that met her ears. Putting the car in reverse, she had to be careful not to peel out of the parking lot as excitement rolled down her arms.

When she parked at her townhouse about thirty minutes later, she almost couldn't contain herself when she took the stairs two at a time. Before she opened her front door, she heard a soft feminine voice call, "Well, hello, Katrina. You're home early."

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Abraham," she said, smiling at the elderly woman standing on the grass below her. She loved the old lady even though she did tend to be a busybody sometimes. Right now, Mrs. Abraham stood looking up while her little dachshund sniffed the ground at her feet. "Yes, I am early. I managed to get a few days off this week so I'm going to enjoy it early."

"That's nice, dear. You work awfully hard, I'm sure."

"Yes, ma'am."

"What you need is a nice man around."

Kat laughed before she answered, "Yes ma'am, but most men are a little afraid of a woman like me."

"Very true my dear. If they only knew how soft you really are underneath, I'm sure there would be a flood of them at your door in no time."

She had heard this little speech more times than she could remember since she had returned from Iraq. "Thank you for the advice."

"You're welcome, sweetie. Now go relax for a while. I'm sure you've earned it." The little old woman grabbed her small dog in her arms and started to walk away while Katrina watched with a smile on her lips.

Opening the door, she almost sighed as the soft pastels of the walls met her eyes. She loved having things in her home more feminine. Being tough at work took a lot of energy and her apartment gave her the chance to be a woman.

Reaching for the stereo system, she flipped on some soft music and began to take off her uniform. *Bubble bath, that's what I need.* She peeled off her clothes as she went and once she reached the bathroom, she turned on the water in the sunken tub and splashed in some honeysuckle scented bubbles. She headed back for the kitchen, pouring herself a glass of wine, before walking back to the bathroom and sinking into the warm water with a heavy sigh.

* * * *

What the hell am I doing here? He raked his fingers through his hair while he stood outside her apartment complex. *She's obviously home since her car is here.* It was the first time he'd seen her car without the banged up door and he loved it. It fit her personality to a T, sporty, sleek, and fast, but he'd seen the soft woman under the façade.

Managing to find Katrina's address from information the night before, he stood there now, wound tighter than a spring, anticipating seeing her again. He frowned when he thought of Mark. Her cousin had made it perfectly clear after their dinner meeting with Mr. Toyoshima last night that he didn't like the fact of Justin and Kat being intimate. *I suppose Mark is only trying to protect his cousin, but damn it, he needs to butt out. What happens between Katrina and me is between the two of us.*

He slowly walked up the stairs, his gut twisting into knots. *One twenty seven.* Soft music came from the apartment, and he wondered what she was doing right then. *How will she react to seeing me again? Only one way to find out.* He knocked softly on the door and waited.

After a couple of minutes and no answer, he knocked again. Hearing no movement inside the apartment, he tried the doorknob. *She is obviously engrossed in something and can't hear me.*

Pushing open the door, the sight meeting his eyes had every nerve ending in his body on high alert. He knew his mouth must be hanging open when he looked at the inside of her space. It was so unlike the Katrina most people, except those close to her, knew. The walls were painted a soft yellow, bright and sunny, capturing the light from the windows and muting them to softer tones. The furniture looked soft and plush, the fabric bright white with throw pillows scattered over the surface with pink and yellow flowers. Softly closing the door behind him, he almost tripped over the chunky black boots sitting by the door. He had never seen her wearing them, but they were obviously her work boots. His gaze moved over the plush beige carpeting on the floor, searching for the source of the music until he saw the elaborate stereo system. *Nice.*

Standing in her foyer, trying to decide where to look first, his stare picked up the crumpled clothing on the floor. Her green jumpsuit lay in a pile about halfway to the arched doorway. Like breadcrumbs marking a trail, next came her brown T-shirt and black socks lying in the hallway. The trail further intrigued him when he saw her bra several feet away and her lace panties sitting by the bathroom door. Picking them up off the floor, he crushed them in his fist as he felt his erection pressing insistently against the fly of his jeans.

The door to the bathroom sat open several inches and he slowly pushed it a little further until he could see her. He leaned against the doorjamb taking in the sight in front of him like a man starved. Lounging against the back of the biggest bathtub he had ever laid eyes on was Katrina, her eyes closed and her breathing soft and regular. The scent of her bathwater floated in the air of the bathroom, winding itself around his senses. When she reached for the wine glass on the edge, he said softly, "Mind if I join you?"

Chapter Eight

She jumped and almost spilled the wine when she brought her hand up to her throat. Her breasts now visible above the water, she squealed and sank beneath the bubbles. “Damn it, Justin! You scared the shit outta me! What the hell are you doing here, and how did you get into my townhouse? Wait—how did you get my address?”

He leaned against the doorframe and crossed his arms over his broad chest. “Information.”

“Persistent, aren’t you?”

“When I want something, yes.” Shoving himself away from where he leaned, he stepped closer and her heart jumped into her throat. She had almost forgotten how gorgeous he looked in his jeans and button-down shirt. *Liar.*

“As for your other questions, your door happened to be unlocked, and I wanted to see you.” He unfurled the panties in his hand, dangling them in front of her. “And you left a trail even a blind man could follow.”

“Give me those.” She grabbed for the underwear, almost lifting herself completely out of the water.

“Nope.” His eyes twinkled with amusement when she dove back underneath. Heat fused her cheeks while she watched him stuff the piece of silk into his shirt pocket. “A bargaining chip, you could say.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What do you plan to ask for them?”

He took a seat on the edge of the tub, and she scooted to the opposite side. “Oh, I’m sure I can think of something.” If she didn’t know better, she would have sworn he could see through the massive amount of bubbles floating around her.

“Well, I’m sure your mother raised you to be a gentleman, so if you’ll leave the room, I’ll get out of the tub and get dressed.”

His eyes darkened while a slow smile spread across his lips and her pussy clenched when the dimples flashed in his cheeks. “Uh-uh.” He toed off his boots and pulled down his socks until his feet were bare.

“What are you doing?” she squeaked when he stood and reached for the silver belt buckle at his waist.

“I’m going to join you.”

Holy shit! She sucked in a ragged breath and captured her bottom lip between her teeth when he unbuckled it and pulled the belt out of the accompanying loops at his waist. His fingers reached for the button at the front of the denim encasing his hips, slipping it free, before the rasp of the zipper echoed in the room.

Leaving his jeans gaping, he *slowly* slipped each button free on his shirt, revealing the hard muscled chest she remembered. She let her eyes follow the dark line of hair down his abdomen. *Damn, he’s a sight for sore eyes.*

“You’re drooling, sweetheart,” he whispered softly with a dry chuckle.

Her eyes returned to his when he stripped the shirt from his shoulders and tossed it to the floor. His hands grasped the waistband of his jeans and peeled them down his hard thighs. When he stood back up, his blood filled cock bobbed against his stomach. She licked her parched lips before capturing the bottom one between her teeth.

Walking toward the tub, he lifted one leg, then the other and stepped into the warm, bubble filled water. He sank down beside her with a soft groan. Leaning his head back on the edge of the tub, his arms stretched out along the rim on either side of him as he peeked at her through his lashes.

“Come here, Kat,” he whispered.

She shook her head in denial even though her breathing shortened, rasping from between her lips in a soft sigh. Her pussy clenched and

filled when he shifted and started to slide in her direction.

“Katrina,” he murmured, sending shivers along her arms where she wrapped them around her knees in a vain effort to forestall the inevitable. She wanted him—needed him with every fiber of her being. She hadn’t been with a man since he had made love to her several weeks ago and his caress of her name sent heat spiraling through her.

“Justin—I don’t...”

“Yes, you do. We both do.”

He grasped her hands, pulled them away from her knees, and maneuvered between her thighs. The hair of his chest tickled against the inside of her legs when he moved closer. His warm breath whispered across her lips before his mouth softly took hers. She whimpered a moment before returning the kiss, grasping his shoulders with her hands. Opening her mouth under the pressure at the crease of her lips, she stroked, dueled, and entwined her tongue with his until they were both breathless.

He lifted his wet, soapy hand and ran his fingers down her cheek. “Thoughts of you have been driving me crazy. I haven’t been able to get you out of my mind. Why is that?”

“I’m unforgettable—didn’t I warn you?”

He chuckled when his fingers slipped along her jaw before he wrapped them in her hair and tugged her closer still. “You certainly are.”

He nibbled at her lips before moving across her cheek to the shell of her ear. His tongue dipped inside for a moment, then took her earlobe between his teeth as she shivered. Her breasts brushed against his chest and her nipples hardened into tight little buds, seeking the friction of the hair rubbing them. His palm whispered along her shoulder and down her arm. Callused fingers abraded the skin deliciously before they found her nipple and rolled one between his fingers. *God, I love a man with calluses.*

She moaned and arched into his touch. He nipped at her neck, the

sting of his bite soon soothed by the lap of his tongue. His hand left her breast and shimmied down her stomach before two fingers slid inside her aching pussy. Sounds rushed from her lips she didn't even know she could make.

Her own fingers found his straining cock jutting against his stomach. She wrapped her hand around his girth and he moaned, his lips sliding along her skin. Up and down her hand moved while his hips rocked slightly in unison. He shuttered and lifted his head to lock his gaze with hers.

"I want inside you, Katrina. I want you screaming my name."

"Oh, God, yessss." She almost purred when he shifted his hips and slid home.

His forehead met hers as he whispered, "You feel so good. I can't get enough of you."

"Justin, please."

"Please what, Kat?"

"Fuck me!"

He chuckled and started to move, slowly at first, but when her whimpered cries echoed in the room, he rocked faster, his pelvis pounding into hers. The water in the tub sloshed over the sides, soaking the floor, but she didn't care.

The next thing she knew, he rolled over and settled her over the top of him, her hips cradling his—his cock buried deep inside her. Her hands rested on his shoulders while she set the pace, his hands grasping her ass.

She threw her head back, moaning low in her throat as she arched toward him. His fingers skimmed down her spine and his mouth found her nipple, sucking the nub between his lips, licking and nibbling until she squirmed above him.

Her hair framed them when she looked into his dark, chocolate eyes. "I love how you feel inside me."

He growled as she nibbled at his lips before she moved across his cheek and nipped at his neck.

His powerful thighs flexed and he lifted them both out of the water before he laid her back on the cold tile surrounding the tub.

“Shit, that’s cold.”

He chuckled and said, “I’ll warm you up.” His hips rocked against hers and she wrapped her legs around his back, digging her heels into his butt.

“Faster, Justin.”

“Uh-uh.” He laughed softly as his tongue found her nipple and laved at the tip.

“God, you’re a bastard,” she growled on a moan.

“You can’t control everything, baby.” His cock slipped out of her, and she bit her lips to hold in a whimper. Working his way down her chest, he stopped to flick her belly button ring with his tongue. *Good lord, I never knew having a man play there could be such a turn on.*

The hair on his chest tickled her inner thighs when he settled his wide shoulders between her legs. She didn’t realize she held her breath until it rushed out on a tortured groan the moment his tongue rasped against her clit. The whimper she had been holding inside escaped her lips as he licked and sucked until she squirmed beneath his mouth.

Her climax built on a rush, roaring over her senses like the wind whipping over the desert floor during a sandstorm. She arched her back and screamed his name as cum flooded over his tongue. He continued to lap at her pussy until she stopped trembling before leaning over her again and sliding inside to the root of his cock.

She lifted her hips and the sound of flesh against flesh reverberated through the bathroom. He lapped at her breast while his hips rocked, bringing them both closer to the edge of the abyss. When the wave hit her again, she tossed her head as he grunted and spilled his seed deep within her.

His head rested on her shoulder until their breathing slowed. She stroked the back of his head, winding her fingers in the short curls at the nape of his neck.

Lifting his gaze to hers, the look in his eyes made her heart trip over itself as it slammed against her ribs. A slow smile rippled over his lips while his fingers slid down her cheek.

“Afternoon delight,” he murmured before he took her lips in a heart-stopping kiss before his cock slipped from her warmth. He took her hand in his and slid back into the bubble bath, bringing her with him. Resting with the rim of the tub against his back, he pulled her so she lay over him, breast to chest and cradled between his thighs.

She gave into her feelings and laid her head on his shoulder, inhaling the musky smell of his skin. His fingers caressed her arm from shoulder to elbow, whispering along her skin so soft it felt like silk along her flesh.

“So why are you off so early? Aren’t you usually at the base until later in the day?”

“I screwed up on our training mission today. The colonel chewed me a new asshole and told me I needed a break. I managed to get some leave approved on short notice.” She lifted her shoulders in a shrug as her fingers continued to stroke the hair under her hand.

“You have some extra time off?”

“Yeah—two weeks.”

“Mmm...”

“What?”

“I was thinking.”

She lifted her head and met his gaze with a questioning one of her own. “Of?”

“How much I want to see if I can get you to scream my name again.”

His hand found her breast, stroking the nipple with his fingers and a moan bubbled in her throat. *Man, he can turn me on with little more than a look, much less a touch.* “Are you always this insatiable?” she whispered before the moan slipped from between her lips.

“Only since I met you. I could fuck you over and over and never get enough.”

“I bet you’ve said the same thing to every woman you’ve been with.”

“Nope.” His lips brushed hers. “What do you say we dry off,” he began, shifting slightly and finding her ear with his tongue, “and spend the rest of the afternoon in your bed?”

“Mmm.” She tipped her head when he nibbled her neck. “If you keep doing that, you might just convince me it would be a pleasant way to spend the afternoon.”

He quickly stood up, his eyes turning darker while the bubbles slid down her torso and his gaze followed them. The dimples in his cheeks peeked out when he reached over, grabbed a big fluffy towel from the rack and started to dry her off.

They stepped out of the tub onto the wet floor and he mumbled, “Sorry. I’ll help you clean it up—much later, though.”

He quickly finished drying her off and himself before he bent down and swung her up in his arms. She squealed, “Put me down, Justin.”

“Your room?”

“That way,” she said, pointing to her left with a girlish giggle.

Chapter Nine

Standing in the kitchen at the stove, she slowly stirred the sauce in the pot. Her thoughts strayed to the afternoon she had spent in Justin's arms, and she sighed before she let a small smile drift across her lips.

"What is the wicked little smile for?" Justin asked, slipping his hands around her waist and drawing her back against his chest. His lips nuzzled her neck while his fingers drifted to the underside of her breast.

Laying the spoon aside, she turned in his arms and wrapped her hands around the back of his neck. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

A grin rippled across his mouth. "I'm sure I could torture it out of you."

"Sounds like fun, but maybe after dinner."

He growled low in his throat. "What smells so good?"

"Plain old spaghetti. When I left for the base this morning, I hadn't planned on having company for dinner."

Frown lines appeared between his brows when he looked in her eyes. "Do you have company often?"

She tsked and said, "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were jealous, Mr. Wilder."

"No more so than you were at your grandmother's birthday when Adrianna stuck her tongue down my throat."

She dropped her gaze as a frown marred her face before she turned back to the food on the stove. "This is almost ready. How about you set the table?"

"Sure. Where are your plates?"

"Above your head to the right. I'm pretty sure there is still some

wine in the refrigerator or beer if you would like some.”

The clank of dishes and silverware met her ears while her thoughts raced. *Jealous. I can't be jealous. I'd have to care to be jealous.* The noodles finished, she reached for the strainer in the sink, dumping the limp pasta inside. She poured sauce in one bowl and the noodles in another before she headed for the table.

Her eyes widened at the intimate setting presented to her gaze. The sun had begun to set outside, casting the room in a soft glow of yellow. Justin had placed the plates and silverware across from each other on the small table, poured two glasses of wine, and lit a candle between them. She hadn't noticed before now, but he had even changed the music on her stereo to something softer and warmer. She put the two bowls on the table, and he stepped behind her and pulled out the chair.

“Thanks,” she whispered, knowing somehow this behavior suited him.

Every encounter between the two of them to date had bordered on innuendos and snide remarks, punctuated with sexual tension and a need so strong, she could hardly control herself in his presence. This side of Justin Wilder took her totally off guard and she didn't know what to think. This time, his personality hit on the considerate lover. *Lover? Holy shit, I guess that is what we are—at least we are now.*

“Looks good,” he murmured and took his own chair. “You must be a pretty good cook.”

She laughed, breaking the tension she had started to feel. “Not really. I usually only cook for myself.” She dished up some of the food before passing the bowl across the table. “I can get by with the basics.”

“You put up a pretty good front.”

“What do you mean?”

“The persona you give off. I bet everyone thinks you are this tough, no nonsense kind of a woman. But I've seen the other side.”

“I don't know what you are talking about.”

“Oh yes, you do. The minute I walked into your townhouse, I could tell there is a soft, feminine woman under the shell you present. The soft pastels on the walls—even the furniture gives you away.” His eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled.

She shrugged.

“Why the hard shell?”

“I have to be tough. If I gave an inch when I’m flying, the enemy or even my own competition for rank would cut me down.”

“What rank are you?”

“Major.”

“And how long have you been in?”

“Eight years.”

“You can’t be more than twenty-two.”

She laughed. “Thanks—I think. Actually, I’m twenty-eight. I did four years of college before I went into the Air Force.”

“Why did you go in?”

“I got bored with just school. Besides, I guess you could call it following in my father’s footsteps since he didn’t have a son to fill those shoes. My brother Matt avoided the Air Force like the plague.”

His eyebrows rose in surprise. “Your dad is military?”

“Yeah, he’s a colonel. He’s about to retire.”

“Was he at the party for your grandmother?”

“Yes. I don’t know if you saw him though.”

“I’m not sure.” Frown lines wrinkled the skin between his eyes when he concentrated on trying to remember.

“He noticed you.”

“He did?”

“Yeah.”

“Why do I get the feeling there is more to your statement?”

She sighed. “He saw you kiss me goodbye.”

“Ah. So he wanted to know about me.”

“You could say that, yes.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Only the basics.” *There is no way in hell I’m going to tell him he’s the reason I got chewed out for not paying attention on my training mission.*

“I’d like to meet him.”

She choked on her wine for a moment. “I don’t think you should.”

“Why? I could learn some interesting facts about you, I’m sure.”

“You probably could.” *I do not need my father taking to Justin. Shit! Dad would probably have me married off to him by the end of the conversation.* “More than likely you would learn things you really don’t need to know or things I don’t want you to know.”

“Are you hiding something?”

“No, but it’s not like we are trying to build a relationship here. We are using each other for a little sexual release. I enjoy having sex with you, but I’m not looking for a relationship.”

“Neither am I.”

“Good, then we are on the same page. Besides, my career could have me leaving town at any time.”

He smiled, and she frowned when she tried to understand why her heart didn’t like the thought at all.

“You do realize your grandmother is a very astute woman, don’t you?” he asked and then sipped his wine. Watching her over the rim of the glass, his brown eyes sparkled in the light above the table.

“Most definitely. She had our relationship pegged from the minute we both walked out of the house.”

“I thought you said we weren’t in a relationship?”

“We aren’t, but my grandmother would have us in one if she had her way.”

He chuckled. “I got the same impression.”

“She can be very persuasive.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to give into your grandmother’s wishes unless they are my own.”

She frowned again, before she stood and grabbed their plates, retreating into the kitchen. Their conversation made her anxious and

uneasy. After she had rinsed the plates and put them inside the dishwasher, she turned the dial. A moment later, Justin's hands slid around her waist and pulled her back against his chest.

"I have an idea," he whispered against the skin of her neck, and her heart started to pound. Her legs went weak when his hand slipped up and cupped her breast in his palm.

"What idea?"

"Mmm... we could stay here and have sex in your bed," he suggested, his lips trailing down to find the dip in her shoulder, "or we can go back to my place and have sex in my bed."

Shivers rolled down her arms when his warm breath caressed the side of her neck. She sighed, giving into the sensations he aroused before turning in his arms.

"I don't think I want to wait until we get to your place." She slipped her hands up around his neck and nibbled at the corners of his lips before she whispered, "Make me scream for you, Justin."

"My pleasure." His hands found her ass and gripped both cheeks before he lifted her in his arms, slipping her up onto the counter behind her.

She tipped her head back when his lips found the frantic pulse at the base of her throat. His hand slid under the edge of her shirt, working it up until it bunched between them. Lifting his head, his eyes met hers for a moment and her breath caught in her throat at the heat reflected there.

"I want you, and believe it or not, I want you more than I've ever wanted a woman in my life." He slipped the shirt over her head and moaned softly. "You are exquisite." His thumb skimmed softly against her nipple. "So passionate—so responsive." She moaned, arching toward his touch. When his mouth found her hardened nub, she almost screamed as he sucked and pulled. Liquid seeped from her pussy, wetting her panties.

His hands grasped the edges of her pants, encouraging her to lift her hips. In one swift motion, he had her pants and underwear off and

her bare ass hit the cold countertop. She inhaled sharply and he chuckled.

“I’ll help you warm up,” he whispered against her breast when he returned to her nipple and laved it with his tongue.

He worked his way down her flat stomach and stopped to play with the dangling earring at her belly button. “Did I ever tell you how incredibly sexy this is?”

“No,” she moaned softly.

“It is. I love it. It’s like a cat toy.”

He played for a moment before his mouth flittered down the inside of her left thigh and she squirmed. He avoided the one spot aching for his touch. She almost screamed in frustration. *Damn it! He’s driving me crazy!*

He continued his downward trek, nipping at her knee while she wiggled her butt on the countertop. “God, Justin—please.”

“Please what?”

“Eat me—fuck me—do something. I can’t stand this.”

He chuckled softly, nibbling his way up her right thigh. “Impatient, aren’t we?”

Swiping his tongue quickly across her clit, she groaned and reached for his head to hold him in place, but he turned his face, kissing the inside of her thigh. A second later, his warm breath flittered across her still wet clit, and she whimpered as cum seeped from inside.

When his tongue finally started to toggle her clit, she threw her head back, grasped him between her hands, and rode the wave of sensation. He slipped two fingers inside her pussy, sliding them in and out until she screamed. He continued to lap at her pussy until she stopped trembling.

Standing up, he reached for the button at his waist. With hooded eyes, she watched him release his hard cock from the confines of his jeans as he slipped his pants down around his ankles.

She reached for him and wrapped her hand around his hard length.

His eyes closed, and a groan rumbled in his chest. She loved the way he responded to her touch. Hopping down from the counter and dropping to her knees, she took him in her hand again.

He sucked in a sharp breath and rocked his hips toward her when her tongue found the tip and licked the pre-cum. Silk over steel, that's how she thought of him. He, too, maintained the hard shell of a man protecting his heart, but he really cared about those around him.

Her mouth slipped over the head of his cock, sucking as she wrapped the entire length with her tongue. Her hand cupped his balls, kneading and rolling them between her fingers while he hissed above her.

When his balls started to tighten in her hand, she wasn't surprised he forced her to stop with a tug on her shoulders. Standing in front of him, he lifted her back up on the counter. Her thighs cradled him when he stepped between them and slipped his hard length deep inside her. She closed her eyes and rested her hands behind her as she moaned.

"God, you feel incredible, baby," he whispered against her neck. "I love the way you surround me."

She whimpered and wiggled. "Move Justin—now!"

He chuckled as he began to slide in and out, his rhythm slow and steady, not hard and fast like she craved. She squirmed, grasping at his hips until he stopped. Her wide eyes met his and a slow, sexy smile rippled across his mouth.

Trapping her hands behind her back, he held her in place, preventing her from moving.

"I can't touch you like this," she whispered.

"I know."

His hips rocked, returning to the same slow rhythm as before.

"Stop torturing me."

"Trust me," he murmured against her lips.

God help her, she did. She trusted him more than she ever trusted a man before and the thought terrified her.

After what seemed like a lifetime, his movements increased. His jaw clenched tight while he fought for control before he finally released her hands and grasped her hips. The desire rolled inside her, curling through her body like fog hugging the curves of the rolling hills, shifting and churning until she thought she would go crazy. When her climax finally hit, she moaned his name as warmth rippled along her veins before it spilled from her pussy in hot, wet cum.

His own groan of satisfaction followed shortly behind hers when he let the tight rein of control he held slip, taking his own release.

As their breathing returned to normal, he let his head rest on her shoulder and she ran her hands down his back. With a hefty groan, he pulled out of her and stepped back.

“You have the next several days off, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Come back to the ranch with me.”

Chapter Ten

Her mouth hung open in shock. “You’re serious,” she said sliding off the counter and grabbing for her clothes, uncomfortable now with her nakedness and the fact that he stood in front of her just as nude.

By the time she had her own straight and turned around, he managed to slip into his jeans.

“Yes, I’m serious. What’s wrong with wanting to spend some time with you?”

She shrugged and grabbed the refrigerator door handle before she pulled it open and peered inside. Picking up two bottles of beer, she handed one to him. “Nothing, I guess.”

“You can stay as long as you want, whether it’s an hour or several days. I’d like to show you my place.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do you want to show me?”

“Because I thought you might be interested. Didn’t you say your parents had horses when you were small?”

I am interested—too interested. She frowned. “Yeah.”

“So come out and go riding with me. How long has it been since you’ve been on horseback?”

“Too long. A couple of years at least.”

He set his beer on the counter and slipped his hands around her waist. “Humor me.” He nuzzled her neck. “I haven’t gotten enough of you yet.”

She couldn’t tell him no, not when he seduced her the way he did. “All right, I’ll go, but I can leave when I want to.”

He lifted his head and smiled. "Any time you say."

* * * *

Soft candlelight lit the dining room, reflecting the crystal overhead as she watched the man across the table. She had been at his house for five days—five days of pure bliss. He catered to her every whim, making sure she had everything she wanted during the day and things she didn't even know she needed at night.

They spent the days riding along his property, picnicking under the few scattered trees while he told her stories of his childhood, his siblings, and his parents. He laughed, but didn't elaborate when she mentioned how they had ridden so far, she knew they must have seen every corner of his property.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked, watching her over the rim of his glass.

She blushed and dropped her gaze.

"You'll get dessert shortly," he murmured. The blush deepened as heat fused clear to her ears. His rich laughter sent goose bumps fluttering across her skin and released butterflies in her stomach.

"You love making me blush."

He stood and came around the table. Taking her hand in his, he brought her to her feet in front of him. His lips dropped to her neck, and she sighed, tipping her head to the side. *Damn! Why can he turn me on with little more than a look?*

"Only when you blush all over. I love to make you want me," he whispered against her skin.

"You don't have to do anything but breathe for me to want you."

When he lifted his head, he took her hand in his and pulled her into the middle of the living room. Placing her hand on his shoulder, he wrapped his arm around her waist, and brought her up against his chest. He led them in a slow dance around the room. They swayed to the music flowing around them while his cheek resting next to hers.

They danced together for several minutes before he pulled back in her embrace. His chocolate eyes sparkled with a heat and need so strong, it took her breath away.

“I...”

He put his finger on her lips, forestalling her words. “Let me love you.”

His lips took the place of his finger, his tongue dipping inside her mouth, tangling with hers. A moan slipped out of her mouth only to be swallowed by his.

A knock sounded at the kitchen door.

He grumbled and lifted his head, putting his forehead against hers. “I’m going to personally kill whoever is on the other side of that door.”

She smiled when he stepped back.

Justin left her side and met Keith when he pulled open the screen and stepped inside. “What is it, Keith?”

“Oh—sorry, Justin. I didn’t realize you were busy.”

She had met the other man several days ago on an official basis and liked him immediately, though at the moment, Justin seemed obviously perturbed at his foreman.

“I wanted to let you know the other mare is getting ready to foal, but I think she’s having a bad time of it.”

Justin raked his fingers through his hair and sighed heavily. “Okay. I’ll be out in a minute to check her.” The other man retreated out the door, and Justin turned back towards her. “Sorry.”

“What for?”

“The interruption.”

“It’s fine. This is your life and your business. I’m only a guest.”

He quickly walked to her side and ran his fingers down her cheek while the other arm slipped around her waist. “You aren’t only a guest. You’re so much more.” His mouth swooped down, taking her lips in a consuming kiss, sweeping away her senses to everything, but the man who held her. When he finally lifted his head he said, “Care

to join me?"

"Sure."

He smiled and took her hand in his, leading her out toward the large barn in the distance. She had been inside on several occasions since her arrival at his ranch, but the expansive enclosure still awed her with its size when they walked through the door together. They continued down the long corridor with the dirt floor until he stopped in front of one of the stalls. She peered through the wrought iron bars to see a beautiful palomino mare lying on her side, her abdomen rising and falling rapidly with each breath.

Justin slipped the lock on the stall and moved to the mare's side. "Easy, girl." He ran his hands over her silky coat, and Katrina thought she would come right there. She loved his hands and when they stroked the animal, murmuring soothing words, it felt like he stroked and whispered to her.

After several minutes, he stood and moved back to her side. "Is she okay?"

"Yeah, she'll be fine. The foal is large, and she's having a hard labor, but she's a big mare, so she should do all right."

She shook her head in amazement. "All of this blows me away. I thought I knew about horses and stuff like that, but I could never fathom the knowledge you hold in your mind."

He grinned and moved to her side. "No big deal. I've just been doing it so long, I guess this all comes naturally. Kind of like you flying a jet. I can't even think of the things you know to be able to do what you do up there."

Heat crawled up her neck and splashed across her cheeks at his compliment. A moment later, she tipped her head and moaned softly when his lips found her neck while he whispered in her ear, "Ever made love in a barn?"

She giggled. "No. I can't say that I have."

He licked her earlobe before he whispered, "First time for everything." Bending down, he swung her up in his arms and headed

for his office. Once inside, he kicked the door closed with his boot and slid her onto his desk.

“This isn’t exactly the barn.”

“Close enough. I don’t think you would be too comfortable with hay poking you in the back,” he murmured while his hand snaked up her shirt before his palm slid against her already hardening nipple. “Besides, I’ve dreamt of having you on this desk.”

“Have you?”

“Oh, yeah.” He lifted her shirt over her head. She realized several days ago it did no good for her to wear a bra unless they went riding. He usually had it off her within a few moments anyway.

His mouth found her nipple, his teeth grazing the hard nub, making her hiss in response. She wiggled her hips when his hand slipped up her jean-clad thigh, working his way to the button at her waist.

The cell phone in her pocket rang.

He removed his hands, framed her face with them. “Obviously forces are working against us here.”

She chuckled and pulled the phone from her pocket. “I need to answer. It’s my dad.”

He stepped back and raked his fingers through his hair. “Okay.”

“Hello?”

“Kat, it’s your mother.”

“Why are you calling from Dad’s cell?” She got a terrible feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“You need to come. Your dad is in a bad way.”

“Wait, no. That can’t be. I just talked to him yesterday.”

“Katrina, listen to me. He’s at University Medical Center. You need to get here quickly.”

“All right. I’ll—uh—I’ll be there as soon as I can.” She shut the phone with a click. Her gaze found Justin and tears burned the back of her eyelids.

“What’s wrong?”

"It's my Dad." A gut-wrenching sob shook her frame. He wrapped his arms around her and rubbed her back.

"Here. Grab your clothes. I'll drive."

She couldn't think, all she could do was feel. The terror gripping her insides sent her stomach to her toes. Slipping her shirt back over her head, she grabbed Justin's hand, and they headed for the house. Within moments, dirt and gravel flew as Justin pulled out of the driveway and onto the highway headed for downtown Vegas.

* * * *

"Daddy?" She grasped his hand in hers, and she sank down in the chair at his bedside. Justin stood behind her, his warm hand on her shoulder in comfort. *How would I do this without him?* Her eyes met his before they shifted back to her father lying still on the bed. "He's so still." She felt reassured when she saw the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest.

Her father, Colonel Alan Jamieson lay in the bed, his skin tan against the stark white sheet. All her life she thought of him as unstoppable, never faltering, never giving an inch whether it was within the Air Force he loved or with his children. His love for her flowed strong through his body, she knew it like she knew nothing else, but he had always been a man of few words. 'I love you' rarely crossed his lips. He showed her in different ways than saying it—his guidance in her career, for one.

"They have given him something to help him sleep."

Katrina's gaze found her mother standing on the other side of the bed. Annabel Jamieson stood ramrod straight, her tall frame unbending in the face of adversity. Katrina knew she could count on her mother to pull no punches with her father's health. Annabel would tell her the truth.

"What have they told you?"

"He's had a stroke, Katrina."

Kat dropped her gaze to where her hand clasped her father's still one in her palm. *This will surely kill him. He won't be able to stand losing his ability to move or speak. What if he can't fly again?* "Do they know how bad?"

"Not really. It will take a few days to know the true extent of the damage. There will be rehabilitation required, I'm sure."

Katrina stood and began to pace. "This isn't fair!" she shouted when she stopped near the window.

"Keep your voice down," Annabel snapped. "He needs to rest and your shouting will not help."

She almost glared, her eyes narrowing slightly. Katrina had never been overly close to Annabel, always preferring the company of her father to that of her mother. "I'm sorry," Katrina said with gritting teeth. "I cannot accept this. He is too strong a man for this."

"You have no choice, Katrina. It is what it is. Either he will come out of this normal again or he won't. You have no say in the matter."

Katrina's face flushed with anger as her gaze darted to Justin across the room. *I don't need to be fighting with mother in front of him.* She returned to the chair and slid her father's palm inside her own.

"I'm going to get some coffee. Why don't you join me?" Justin whispered against her ear. "You could probably use a break."

Katrina nodded and stood up to kiss her father on the cheek. "I'll be back in a little while, Daddy. You rest." Grasping Justin's hand in hers, she looked at her mother and said, "Call me immediately if there is any change."

"Of course."

As she and Justin left the room hand in hand, silence prevailed between them. Once they reached the elevator, he pulled her to his side and kissed the top of her head.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"For what?"

"The scene in there. You shouldn't have had to watch our

arguments.”

He chuckled dryly as the elevator doors slid open and they stepped inside. Thankfully, the ride down to the cafeteria could be made without others nearby. “I assume you and your mother don’t get along very well.”

“Two people couldn’t be more different.” Air rushed from between her lips in a sigh. “She wanted a petite, frilly little girl, and I’m far from being one of those. She hated when I went into the Air Force, but my father accepted and supported my decision. He has always been there for me.”

“You are obviously very close to him. I know having him here is killing you.” He stroked her arm with his fingers and her body reacted just like it always did when he touched her.

“Thank you.”

“For?”

“Being here. You have no idea how much having you here means to me.”

Before he could reply, the doors slid open. They stepped into the hallway leading to the cafeteria, but when they approached the front entrance, Mark came barreling through the door.

“Kat?”

“Mark. What are you doing here?”

“Word spreads fast through our family, you know that. I came to be here for you.” His eyes swept Justin and a frown marred his face. “Justin.”

“Mark.”

Her gaze swept back and forth between the two men, and she didn’t like the animosity shining brightly in their eyes. “Can I talk to you a minute, Mark?”

“Of course.”

She moved out of Justin’s embrace and walked several feet away before she turned around. “What is going on?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You need to stop this.”

“This?”

“I can see the change in your relationship with Justin, and I won’t have you messing up your business dealings with him over me.”

He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair before he shot a glance at the other man standing several feet away. “What’s going on between you two? Why is he here?”

“None of your business. He is here because I need him.”

“Katrina, please. Think about this. You are getting in way too deep. I told you before, he’s a ladies’ man. He likes women, and he has no intentions of settling down. Don’t get your heart broken because of him.”

“What goes on between me and Justin is none of your business. I don’t care if he’s not the settling kind. I’m not in this for a husband. We’re having a good time together and nothing more.”

“If you really believe that, you’re only trying to kid yourself. You’re in love with him. I can see it in your eyes.”

“I am not,” she insisted, not meeting Mark’s searching look. *Am I? Am I really in love with Justin?*

“Whatever. You can try to fool yourself, but I’ve known you way too long. Just don’t say I didn’t warn you when he breaks your heart.” She stood with her mouth hanging open in shock as Mark turned on his heel and disappeared out the doors.

Justin moved to her side and pulled her close. “Everything okay?”

“I guess.” A frown pulled the corners of her mouth down. Several moments later, her cell phone rang in her pocket. “Hello?”

“Katrina, your father is awake and wants to talk to you.”

“I’ll be right there.” She shut the phone with a click and looked at Justin. “My father is awake. I need to go back upstairs.”

“Sure.” He moved to follow, but she stopped him.

“Why don’t you get us both some coffee? I’d like to talk to him alone for a few minutes. I haven’t had a chance to really talk to him since I took leave, not in depth anyway.”

“No problem. Why don’t I bring the coffee back up there in a few minutes?”

“Perfect.” She reached up and pulled his head down to hers, taking his lips in a possessive kiss before she released him with a devilish smile. “I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

Once she managed to get into the elevator, she sighed when Mark’s words raced across her mind. *He has no intention of settling down.* “What do I care? I’m not the settling down kind either.” *You’re in love with him.* She shook her head in denial. “No, I’m not. I just like his company, and we are damned good in bed together.” The elevator opened, and she stepped out as she retraced her original steps to her father’s bedside.

She glared at her mother and moved toward the man lying in the bed. “Daddy?”

“Katrina?” he whispered when he opened his eyes and smiled. “Hey, baby girl. Matt’s not with you?”

“Hey, Dad.” She took his hand in hers and slid into the chair. “I haven’t talked to Matt. I’m not sure where he is. How are you feeling?”

“Like shit.”

She laughed and shook her head.

“What happened?” she asked while her gaze moved over the strongest man she knew.

“I’m not sure, baby, except I didn’t feel right earlier at the base. Your mother tells me the doctors diagnosed me with a stroke.”

Katrina’s eyes darted to the woman standing against the wall before they returned to her father. “That’s what I understand, yes, but I’m sure everything will be fine. You’ll probably need some rehab or something....”

“Kat, listen to me.” Her gaze found his, and the sadness in his eyes tore at her heart. “I’ll probably never be right again. You know it as well as I do. I can’t move my left hand or left foot. No matter how much rehabilitation I get, it will probably never come back.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s true.”

“Well, I won’t accept it, and you better not either.” She choked back a sob. “You have to walk me down the aisle.”

His surprised gaze met hers. “What are you saying, Katrina?”

“I’m getting married. I need you to walk me down the aisle in a few months, so you need to get better.”

“But, I didn’t even know you were seeing anyone. Who is the lucky fella?”

Katrina heard a hiss from behind her, and she almost groaned out loud when she turned around in the chair only to meet Justin’s surprised gaze.

Chapter Eleven

“Justin, let me introduce you to my father, since you haven’t met.” She moved to his side and took the cup of coffee from his hand. Brushing her lips near his ear, she whispered, “Go with me on this, please. I’ll explain later.”

When she stepped back and her gaze met his, she could see anger reflected brightly in his eyes. *Damn, I hope I didn’t fuck this up.* “Daddy, this is Justin Wilder. You probably remember seeing him at Gram’s birthday party.”

Her father glared at the man at her side for a moment before he held out his good hand for Justin to shake. “Mr. Wilder.”

“Mr. or should I say Colonel Jamieson?”

“Mr. is fine, son. So you’ve asked my Kat to marry you?”

“Uh—sort of. We haven’t really had a lot of chance to talk about it yet, sir.”

“What do you do for a living, Mr. Wilder?”

“Call me Justin, please.”

“All right, Justin.” Her father shifted in the bed before he continued. “So tell me about yourself. I understand you are a business acquaintance of Mark’s.”

Justin chuckled, and she began to relax a little. “Mark and I are business associates, yes, and to answer your first question, I’m a rancher, cattle to be exact.”

“Ah. You own land outside of town from what I’ve heard.”

Her startled eyes swung to her father before she exclaimed, “Daddy? Have you been checking up on him?”

Her father shot a look at her before answering, “You showed

interest, Katrina. Of course I've checked up on your friend here."

"Yes, sir, I do have a place outside of town, and I raise and sell cattle on my property. I'm originally from Wyoming, but I settled here a few years back. Got tired of the snow."

"My contacts tell me you have quite a spread out there on the Flying W."

"If you can call two thousand acres quite a spread, then I'd say you're right."

"Two thousand acres?" she asked surprised, but clamped her mouth shut with a click when her father's eyes swung to her. *No wonder it seemed like we rode for hours and never left his land. Holy shit!*

"You didn't know how much land he has, Katrina?"

She slipped her arm around Justin's waist and looked up into his face. "Well, I, uh...I never really asked, Daddy. It doesn't matter to me how much land he owns. I love him anyway." *Those words were a little too easy to say.* Justin leaned down and brushed his lips against hers.

"I know you haven't been seeing him that long, daughter. It couldn't be more than a couple of months at the most."

"I know, but I always told you it would take a special person to tame me." Justin chuckled next to her, and she felt like jabbing him in the ribs, but she held back. "Justin is everything I need."

Her father's gaze narrowed when it rested on Justin, and she could tell he stiffened next to her. "Forgive me, but I'll reserve judgment until I know him a little better."

"We probably should get going. We have some things to discuss. You know—wedding plans and all that." She slipped from Justin's side and approached her father. "We still need to set a date, but now you have to get better." She kissed him on the cheek. "I'll come back and see you tomorrow morning, okay?"

"All right, Katrina." Turning to Justin, he said, "Take care of her. She means everything to me."

“Yes, sir,” Justin replied when she returned to his side.

“Bye, Daddy. Please, get some rest. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Justin slipped his arm around her shoulders, and they walked out of the door, pulling it shut behind them. Moving several feet away, he rounded on her and almost shouted, “Why the hell did you tell him we are getting married?”

“Keep your voice down, please. Can’t we talk about this once we are out of the building? There are too many people staring.”

“Fine.” He grabbed her arm and ushered her toward the elevator. *Oh man, he’s pissed.* She didn’t even try to pull her arm out of his grasp as they continued to his truck, and he pulled open the door.

He almost squealed tires when he ripped out of the parking lot, and she saw the white-knuckled grip he held onto the steering wheel. *Holy hell. I’ve screwed up.*

* * * *

“Justin...”

“Don’t, Katrina,” he growled, shooting her a glare across the expanse of the cab.

She stiffened her shoulders and swung her gaze back out the front windshield.

The ride back to his place held a very uncomfortable silence as he contemplated how to deal with the situation. *I can’t believe she told her father we’re getting married! Yeah, we are good in bed together, but getting married? No way!*

Reaching the front of his house, he shut the truck off and angrily pushed the door open. By the time he had come around to the passenger side, she already starting stomping off to where her car sat parked next to the house.

“Oh no, we are going to talk right now.” He wrapped his hand around her arm and had to almost drag her toward the door.

“Let me go.”

“Not a chance, lady. You’ve got some explaining to do.” He opened the front entrance and pushed her inside the house before he slammed the door shut behind them. “Now—start talking.”

“I don’t owe you an explanation.”

“Excuse me? How do you figure? You just told your father we are getting married. Correct me if I’m wrong, babe, but I certainly don’t remember askin’.” He practically stomped to the refrigerator and pulled out two beers before handing one to her. Tipping the bottle to his lips, he took a long drag before indicating to her to sit on the couch with a tip of his head. She wiped her palms down the thigh of her jeans nervously before she sat down.

“I’m sorry. When he told me he probably wouldn’t be able to walk again, I had to do something. My idea was if he thought I would be getting married soon, he would try. He acted like he didn’t even want to try. I couldn’t handle that.”

The torture in her eyes pulled at his heart. He knew the kind of torture and terror she probably had ricocheting through her. He had the same type of useless feeling when his mother had gotten sick a few months back and when Cole had been in the car accident... He shook his head and sat down next to her before he pulled her into his arms. Cradling her, they sat back against the cushions of the couch, and she rested her head on his chest.

“I understand. How are you going to get out of this when a wedding doesn’t happen in a few months?”

Her shoulders lifted in a shrug. “I’ll just tell him we had a big fight or something and the wedding is off.” Her fingers drifted across his chest, fingering the buttons of his shirt before she slipped one free and moved to the next one. *Damn!* He grabbed her hand to forestall the movement. “What’s wrong?”

“Is this makeup sex?” he asked.

“I didn’t realize we had a fight. Besides, I thought two people had to be a couple to fight and have makeup sex. Does that mean we’re a couple?”

Their eyes met, and he didn't like the look he saw in hers. It spoke volumes. *It doesn't matter how much property he owns, I love him anyway.* Those were her words, and he'd be damned if she didn't sound convincing even to him.

He needed distance from her disturbing presence so he could think. Standing up quickly, he headed back into the kitchen.

Several minutes later, she came in behind him as he emptied the beer in his hand and grabbed another one.

"I guess I should go. The last several days have been great. I'm glad you let me come over and spend some time with you, but the fantasy is over. It's time for me to go home and get on with my life."

He wiped the beer from his lips and swallowed. "Fantasy?"

She shrugged. "Yeah. The one about us getting along outside of the bedroom."

"I thought we were getting along just fine."

She waved her arm indicating the room around them. "It's not real. I have my life—flying jets, traveling, trying to be the best pilot the Air Force has ever seen, and you have yours here raising cattle, horses, and I'm sure children at some point in your life."

"Why does there have to be future things involved? Why can't we just keep on like we are? I like you, and I'm assuming since you don't seem to have trouble with my company—you like me well enough..."

"That's the problem."

"Problem?"

"I like you too well."

"I'm confused." His gaze swept her enticing figure.

She started to pace while she chewed on her fingernail nervously, but wouldn't look at him. *I wish I knew what the hell she's talking about.*

When she finally stopped, she stepped in front of him. "I don't want this to end."

"What to end, Katrina?"

"Us...this." Wrapping her hand behind his head, she pulled until

their lips met and she slanted her mouth over his. Her tongue swept along the crease of his lips, and he opened his mouth to take her inside. He groaned when their tongues danced. Gripping her butt with both hands, he lifted her in his arms, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. He slid her ass up on the countertop as his mouth left hers and trailed kisses down her neck.

"Make love to me, Justin," she whispered when he lightly bit her neck.

He lifted his head to look into her eyes. *When had it gone from 'let's fuck' to making love?*

"Kat, I think we may be getting in way over our heads," he said as he stepped back, but the look on her face tore at his heart. He could handle her anger and her passion. He couldn't handle the look of love shining in her gaze.

A veil of indifference came down over her face and she jumped off the counter. "Thanks for the good time. I guess I'll see you around."

She left him standing in the kitchen. A few moments later, the growl of her car and the sound of gravel flying met his ears.

* * * *

"How could I be so fucking stupid!" she yelled, her voice ricocheting off the leather upholstery in her car. "Good job, Katrina. 'Make love to me, Justin.' Just great! Why didn't you just tell him you're in love with him? That would have just sealed the deal, and he would have dumped you in a heartbeat."

Her heart stopped in her chest, and she pulled the car over onto the side of the road. She closed her eyes and laid her head against the steering wheel as tears burned behind her eyelids. *When exactly did I fall in love with him?* "It doesn't matter," she said, wiping the tears from her cheeks. "He doesn't love me. I'm nothing more than a fuck-buddy."

She pulled her car back out onto the highway, and when the dim lights of the Vegas strip came into view in front of her, she shored up her pride and headed home.

Slipping into her parking spot, she shut the lights off and turned off the ignition. Her gaze found the living room window of her apartment. The lonely darkness of it mocked her. She grabbed her small bag from the passenger seat and headed up the stairs. Once the door swung open, the deafening silence greeted her as she walked inside. Her gaze wandered around her space. Every corner now sang of Justin's presence even though he had only been there for one afternoon. She could picture him making love to her on the kitchen countertop, how he had carried her down the hall into her bedroom after he had found her in the tub, and how the table had been set so romantically when she served dinner.

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she sank down on her couch. She choked back a sob and wrapped her arms around her waist while she tried desperately not to completely fall apart.

Sunlight shone bright through the window next to her front door, bouncing off her eyelids when she peeled the gritty surfaces open with a groan. *God, I feel like shit! That's what happens when I cry myself to sleep, I guess.* She moaned softly when she stood heading toward the bathroom. *A nice hot shower, that's what I need. Then I need to see Daddy. I have to explain about Justin.*

She stepped into the hot stream of water, letting the soothing liquid sluice over her head and down her chest for a moment before she grabbed the shampoo.

After she had finished with her shower and combed her hair, she slipped on some shorts, flip-flops and a T-shirt. She grabbed her keys and her purse before heading for her car.

The drive back to the hospital seemed to take forever, while she tried to come up with a logical explanation for the absence of her supposed fiancé.

When she stepped into her father's room, she smiled brightly and

walked to his bedside before she kissed him lightly on the cheek.

“Morning, Dad. How are you feeling today?”

“All right, I suppose. Where is Justin?”

“He...uh...had some business to take care of this morning, so he couldn’t come with me.”

“Good.”

“Good?” she asked confused.

“I wanted to talk to you without your mother or Justin here. Just the two of us.”

The seriousness of his voice made her pause. He didn’t usually talk like this with her unless it had something to do with her career.

“What is it?”

“You can’t marry Justin.”

What the hell? “I don’t understand.”

“You have to think of your career, Katrina. You are one of the best pilots I’ve ever seen when your head is on straight. Ever since you met him, you can’t seem to concentrate. You need to forget him and get yourself back on track.”

“But Dad...”

“But nothing. Your life is the Air Force, just as mine has been.”

“You had mother.”

“There are things you don’t understand about my relationship with your mother, things I can’t go into right now.”

“I...”

“Do you love him?”

She paused and looked deep into her father’s gaze. It wouldn’t do any good to lie to him. He would see right through her, he always could. “Yeah, Dad, I do.”

He shook his head and sighed. “I’m going to tell you something no one else knows because you need to understand. You can’t give up your career for love. Flying is in your blood, in your genes. If you give it up for the love of a man, you’ll regret it for the rest of your life.”

“Dad, please...” She rubbed her temples as a headache formed behind her eyes.

“Your mother—I mean Annabel Jamieson...” The flow of words stopped for a moment and fear gripped her heart. “Annabel isn’t your mother.”

“What?”

“She’s not your mother, Katrina.”

Chapter Twelve

“Wait a minute. You’re telling me my mother isn’t my mother? How does that work?”

He closed his eyes. She wasn’t sure he would explain until the words started to flow. “I met Patricia right after I finished my training. She’s a pilot too.”

“You mean General Patricia Langston?”

“Yes. We had a wild relationship right out of pilot training. I couldn’t help my attraction to her. Her brown hair and bright green eyes—they made my heart stop in my chest.” His gaze swept over Katrina, and she knew without him saying anything.

“She’s my mother.”

“Yes. She got pregnant a few months into our relationship. I wanted to marry her and live the rest of my life with her, but she didn’t want to. She refused, saying her life consisted of flying and she wouldn’t give it up, not for me and not for a child.”

Katrina stood and began to pace as the information penetrated her mind. “How did you end up raising me then?”

“As I said, she wouldn’t give up her career for anything. Once you were born, she gave me complete custody of you. I met Annabel when you were still very small. Patricia signed over her rights as your mother and Annabel adopted you.”

“Why in hell haven’t you told me before now?”

“I didn’t think it necessary. You had your head on straight, and you were headed in the same direction your mother and I both took—the Air Force and being the best pilot out there. Now...”

“Because I’ve fallen in love with Justin, you had to tell me?”

“Katrina, you have to understand. A relationship with someone outside of the force is extremely difficult. Spouses just don’t understand the need we have to be amongst the clouds. They can’t compete with that need.”

“How is it you’ve managed a relationship with Annabel then?”

“I don’t tie her down. She does as she pleases, and so do I.”

“What are you saying? Are you telling me she has lovers and so do you?” He didn’t have to give her an answer. She could see it in his face. He cared for Annabel, but not like he loved Patricia. “Oh, my God! I don’t believe this. It all makes sense now. The animosity Annabel shows toward me. She hates me.”

“She doesn’t hate you, Kat.”

“Yes, she does. She always has. I always wondered why she seemed to prefer Matt to me. I just thought it all stemmed from me not being the frilly little girl she wanted. She hated me because I’m not her daughter.”

“Annabel cares about you.” Katrina snorted disbelievingly. “I’m sorry you had such a rough childhood. I know she’s not the best mother figure for you.”

“She never acted like a mother. I’m not sure what is worse—having her as my mother or not having a mother at all. Obviously, Patricia made her choice, and she’s lived with it ever since.”

“Patricia has kept track of you, even if you didn’t know it. She’s proud of you, Katrina.”

“Proud? How can she be proud of someone she doesn’t even know—didn’t care enough to even want to get to know?”

“She will have to live with her decision for the rest of her life. Would you be surprised to know how much you are like her? Obviously, in looks, you take after her. You have her hair color and her eyes, but also your personality, the strong warrior type of woman. You don’t take things lying down and you’ve made one hell of a career for yourself.”

“Great! I resemble a woman I don’t know.” She chewed her

finger nail nervously. "I guess I'm more like her than I realized even if the few times I've met her, it didn't click in my head that she's my mother."

"What do you mean?"

Just tell him. Tell him you've broken things off with Justin. "It doesn't matter, Dad. Justin and I are done."

"Care to explain?"

You had a big fight—tell him. "Justin and I had a huge fight last night after we left here." *That much is true.* "He couldn't understand my need to fly." *Yeah—he'll buy that.* "He wanted me to give up the Air Force and stay home raising babies."

Her father's eyes traced her face while she stared back. If she held his gaze, he would believe her and hopefully he wouldn't see her heart shattering in her chest.

"Well, maybe now you can get your head back into your career."

"Yeah, maybe."

* * * *

She had been back to work for over a week now—a week without Justin. The nights were filled with longing while the days shone bright with his smile and her heart ached for his touch.

Patricia Langston. General Patricia Langston.

Katrina walked into the hangar and headed straight for a corner office where she knew the one person she had to talk to sat. She softly knocked on the door and wasn't surprised to hear a commanding, "Come in."

The green eyes that met hers when she pushed the door open slid down her frame for a moment before they returned to the paperwork in front of her. "What can I do for you, Major?"

Katrina saluted before she twisted the flight cap in her hands and stepped toward the imposing woman. She cleared her throat, but her voice came out in a squeak. *Damn it! I'm not going to cower in front*

of her. She's my mother!

"Can I speak frankly, General?"

"Of course." Patricia didn't raise her gaze, but continued to jot notes on the paper in front of her. When Katrina didn't move, Patricia looked up for a moment before her gaze returned to her notes and said, "Major, sit down before you fall down."

Thankfully, Kat took the chair across the desk. "I need to speak with you, ma'am."

"I got that impression, Major, from the first bit of your conversation. Would you care to clarify what it is concerning?"

"My father."

Patricia's head snapped up and her eyes narrowed a moment before she sighed heavily and leaned back in the chair. "I see."

"You know he had a stroke last week."

"Yes, Major, I'm aware of the fact."

Anger raced through Katrina at the indifference in the other woman's voice. *Didn't she care at all?* "Does he mean so little to you?" She jumped to her feet and moved toward the window to stare out. The deserted expanse of the airfield met her eyes.

"I care more than you'll ever know."

Katrina whipped around to stare at the green eyes behind the desk, the eyes so much like her own.

"Since you are here, Major, I'm assuming Alan told you about our past relationship."

"Are you asking if he told me you are my mother? Yes, he did."

Patricia seemed to age before her eyes. Her shoulders slumped, and she rubbed the back of her neck before twisting it back and forth like she wanted to loosen the muscles beneath. "You will never know how sorry I am that I made the decisions I did, Katrina."

"Why didn't you tell me? The few times we've met in the past—never once did you let on you were my mother. How could you walk away from me? Did you care so little about your own child? Was the Air Force all you cared about?"

“At the time, yes. My career was on the fast track. I wasn’t about to lose my chance because I loved a man and carried his child.”

“You loved him? How can you say you loved him? You walked away from him,” Katrina demanded.

“Because it’s the truth. I never stopped loving your father. I have always regretted my decisions to leave both of you behind.”

Katrina snorted.

“I followed your career when your father told me you came into the force. From everything I’ve heard you are one of the best pilots out there. I’m very proud of you.”

“How could I not be when both my parents are fighter pilots? As Dad said, it’s in the blood.”

“Why are you here, Katrina? Do you want me to say that I regret the choices I made?”

“I don’t know exactly why I’m here. I guess I wanted to know if you would acknowledge me if you were face to face with me instead of hiding the fact that I’m your daughter.”

“I wouldn’t deny the fact.”

“But you weren’t about to announce it to the world either.” Katrina quickly walked to the door. “It doesn’t matter. I never had a mother—not you nor Annabel Jamieson. It’s no wonder I don’t know how to love, and I wouldn’t know what love looked like if I hit me square in the face. Thanks for nothing, Mom.”

* * * *

She sat on the balcony of her townhouse, a full glass of red wine in hand while she watched the sun dip below the ridge of the hills off in the distance. When she had poured it, she had every intention of getting roaring drunk, but as yet, she hadn’t even taken a sip. She swirled the deep red liquid in the glass and her thoughts drifted to Justin. They hadn’t seen each other in several weeks now and she felt each hour tick by like every second sliced a bigger hole in her chest.

The request slip in her pocket mocked her. Pulling it out, she opened it and read the top of the paper. *Request For Transfer*. She looked at it for several minutes before she slipped it back into her pocket and stood up. With a heavy sigh, she headed into the house to change clothes. *I need to talk to Justin. I need to know how he feels before I make a decision that could cost me everything.*

The soft pastels of her bedroom warmed her soul usually, but tonight nothing could thaw the block of ice around her heart—nothing except the man who had turned her life upside down since she had met him. She slipped on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt before donning her tennis shoes and grabbing her car keys.

Locking the door behind her, she almost felt giddy when she thought about seeing him again. Would he welcome her with open arms or shut the door in her face? She didn't know, but she wanted to find out.

Before she knew it, she pulled into the driveway in front of his place. Lights were ablaze and several cars lined the manicured front entrance. *A party? Crap! This is a bad time.* She didn't have time to react as she pulled up in front and a man obviously set to valet cars swept the door open.

"Can I park this for you, miss?"

"Uh...sure," she replied and stepped out of the car. She almost laughed at the eager expression on the man's face when he surveyed her car. "Scratch it, buddy, and you're toast."

"Yes, ma'am."

She made sure he parked it safely before she headed for the front entrance. Taking a deep breath, she rang the doorbell and waited.

* * * *

Good lord, he hated parties, but this one held a special place in his heart. Keith had asked his long time girlfriend Amanda to marry him and he had asked Justin to host the engagement party. There were

probably two hundred people at his house tonight without a spare corner for Justin to hide in. They spilled out into the back lawn from the living room while Keith and Amanda made the rounds to greet the guests. There would be a good haul for the two of them to start their life together. The table in the corner almost groaned under the weight of the gifts.

I need a drink.

He headed for the bar sitting in the corner.

“What can I get for you, sir?” the bartender asked.

“Whiskey straight.”

“Coming right up.” The bartender poured him a generous amount in a tumbler and Justin picked it up, throwing the entire contents into the back of his throat.

“Hit me again.”

Without a word, the man poured another glass and Justin took it before moving off in a vain attempt to find somewhere to nurse his broken ego.

“Where do you think you are disappearing to?” The petite brown haired woman’s voice stopped him in his tracks when he headed for the kitchen door. *Damn!*

“The barn. There’s a mare I need to check on.”

“You are such a liar, Justin. You should know better than to try to lie to me. I’ve known you way too long for that.” She folded her arms under her breasts and leveled him with her brown eyes. “Why don’t you just call her? You know you want to.”

“Let it be, Jamie.”

She tsked and shook her head. “Sorry, no can do. I love you too much, brother, to see you so miserable. You’ve been like a wounded bear walking around here.”

“You can go back to Wyoming anytime, you know.”

She chuckled as the tell-tale Wilder dimples peeked out of her cheeks. “And leave you here to be miserable all by yourself? Not a chance. Besides, it’s kind of nice seeing different people for a change

and Samantha is having a blast chasing your cows around.”

Justin chuckled when he thought of the young girl. His niece had spent almost every day trying to catch one of the calves he had near the house. If he confessed, he kind of liked having the little squirt under foot.

“Chase is always hovering and it’s driving me crazy. I can’t even meet anyone without him giving the guy the third degree. Even Abby can’t get him to lay off.”

“He’s only protecting you, sis.”

“Yeah I know, just like you and Cole, but guess what? I’m a big girl now. I can make my own decisions on who I want to be with.”

“Like your decision to be with Samantha’s father?” The hurt look in her eyes cut him to the core. “I’m sorry. That wasn’t fair.”

“It was a long time ago. I’ve made mistakes, but I think I’ve grown past those, and I know better now.” She took his hand in hers as they moved to the kitchen table and sat down. “Now tell me about her.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

She shook her head and rolled her eyes. “The only time I have ever seen you act like this, it had to do with a woman, so fess up big brother.”

He stared into the eyes so much like his own. She would understand—he knew she would. Jamie always had a heart of gold and when she loved, it was with her whole heart. That’s why she had lost it to the no good guy when she had been in high school. The guy dumped her when he found out about her pregnancy and had left town so fast, no one knew where he went. The Wilder boys had been on the lookout, but he never showed his face around Laramie again.

“Her name is...” The doorbell rang, interrupting his words. “I wonder who that could be. Everyone Keith and Amanda invited is already here.” He stood and headed for the front door as Jamie came up behind him.

He pulled open the door and his heart slammed against his ribs,

taking his breath away and her name fell from his lips. “Katrina.”

Chapter Thirteen

Good God, he looks good. “I...uh...”

A smaller version of Justin stepped around him and stuck out her hand. “Hi. I’m Jamie Wilder, Justin’s sister. And you are?”

“Oh, sorry. Katrina Jamieson.”

“Well, Katrina, come on in. Did you come by for Keith and Amanda’s engagement party?” Jamie ushered her through the door and past Justin without a backward glance. Katrina almost laughed at the look on his face as he stood stunned in front of the door long after Jamie had escorted her into the living room.

“Well, I...actually, I came by to see Justin.”

By this time, he had joined them. “And why is that, Kat?”

“I wanted to talk to you, but it appears you’re rather busy so I guess I’ll go.” She turned and took a couple of steps toward the front door before he grabbed her arm.

“No need to leave. I happened to be looking for a diversion anyway.”

“Diversion?” She gulped. This wasn’t what she came here for, *was it?*

“Yeah. Why don’t you join me in the barn?”

Not the barn. Our last encounter had been interrupted in the barn office. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea.” She dropped her voice hoping his sister wouldn’t hear. “Remember what happened before?”

“Oh, I remember very well. And I also remember how disappointed we both were when things got interrupted.”

“I...uh...I’m going to go see to your guests, brother,” Jamie said, before she chuckled softly and disappeared.

Katrina hissed as a flush of embarrassment stained her cheeks. “You might as well have announced to the whole damned party that we’ve slept together.”

“If you wish,” he said and then turned to the group outside the door. “Hey...”

Her hand came down over his mouth and she growled, “Don’t you dare.”

He took her hand in his, kissed her palm and said, “I assume then you’ll be joining me in the barn?” His lips lifted at the corners while his dimples peeked out of his cheeks.

“*Fine*,” she grumbled. He practically pulled her arm out of the socket as he led her through the kitchen, out the back screen door, and toward the large doors on the barn.

Justin continued past the open stalls, hay storage until they reached his office, and closed the doors behind them. He stalked her with a wicked grin while she backed toward the desk, her hands help up in a vain attempt to stop him.

“Justin, I...”

His mouth dove for hers and she groaned under the pressure of his lips. *God, I missed this*. His tongue swept inside her mouth, sliding along hers as he swallowed the sounds coming from her throat. Unable to fight the explosive desire racing along her nerves, her fingers found the buttons on his shirt, working each one loose until she reached the waistband of his pants. She pulled the tail of the material from inside before she worked the shirt off his shoulders. He took over by pulling it off and tossing it across the room, never removing his mouth from hers. When he finally lifted his head, the heat reflected in his brown eyes set off an inferno of need that centered low in her belly.

“God, I want you, Kat. I’ve been dreaming of this for weeks.” He pulled her shirt over her head, unsnapped her bra, and removed the lacy piece of clothing so fast, she almost missed it.

His lips closed around her nipple, tugging on the taunt bud as she

wound her fingers in his hair and threw her head back on a soft moan.

One hand found the button at her waist, slipping it free. His fingers snaked inside to lightly twirl her already engorged clit. *Good lord, the man can turn me on.*

She whimpered and wiggled her hips in a desperate attempt to get closer to his fingers as he softly chuckled against her breast.

“Do you want something?”

“Touch me, Justin—God, please, touch me.”

“My pleasure, sweetheart.”

His fingers dove into her pussy, knuckle deep before he pulled them out again amongst her whimpers of need. She ground herself against his hand, and he pushed inside her for the second time.

“We need to get these jeans off,” he whispered, removing his hand and grasping the waistband of her jeans.

“Yes—yes we do.” She agreed as her lips found his chest, nipping and licking until a groan rumbled in his chest beneath her mouth.

“Justin!”

“Fuck! I don’t believe this!” he growled when he heard the voice call from outside the office.

“Maybe if we are quiet, they will think we aren’t here.” She suggested with a throaty giggle.

They heard a knock on the door and the rattle of the doorknob.

“Justin, I know you are in there. There’s a problem at the front door you need to take care of.” Keith’s voice sounded annoyed, but also laced with a small amount of panic.

“All right. I’ll be there in a minute,” Justin answered while she reached for her shirt and bra.

“Right.” They heard him take a couple of steps back before he said, “And Justin?”

“Yeah.”

“Tell Katrina hi for me.”

Heat crawled up her chest and across her neck before it splashed across her cheeks and Justin chuckled. “I’ll do that.”

Once she had her clothes back in place, she playfully punched him before she hopped down from the desk and headed for the door. When she reached it and went to pull the wooden panel open, he slammed it shut and spun her around, pinning her to the door.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“You have a problem to take care of, according to Keith.”

“Uh-huh, but not before I do this...” The dimples peeked out of his cheeks before his head came down, and he took her lips with his. His tongue slipped between her parted lips, entwining with hers and she moaned into his mouth.

When he finally lifted his mouth, he didn’t step away. “We’ll continue this later.” It wasn’t a question of would she, it was a statement—a command, and one she found herself wanting to follow without question.

“Is that a promise or a threat?”

He whispered against her lips, “Oh, it’s however you want to take it, sweetheart. I know there will be some hot sex in my bed, and you will be a willing participant if I have anything to say about it.”

“Really? What if I say I don’t want to?”

His thumb raked across her nipple and she fought a moan that rumbled in her chest. “Mmm...methinks you lie and not very well.” Her head tipped back against the door when his lips found their way across her cheek to her ear and then down her neck to nibble.

She pushed against his chest slightly and said, “All right. I can’t deny you any more than I can deny myself.”

He grinned and she groaned as the tempting indentations peeked out of his cheeks again and she fought the urge to lick them. “I knew you would see it my way.”

“You’re are insatiable—you know that?”

“Mmm...only with you.”

“Yeah right.”

He stepped back and she pulled open the door as he followed close behind. Once they were out of the barn and headed for the

house, he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her tight to his side while he nuzzled her ear. “Damn, you smell good.”

She chuckled softly as she snuggled up to him. “Yeah—like jet fuel and plane exhaust.”

He pulled open the screen once they reached the porch and ushered her through the kitchen to the living room. She felt him stop dead in his tracks when his gaze found the petite black-haired beauty standing near the couch.

* * * *

Holy fuck! What in the hell is she doing here?

The next thing he knew, she had thrown herself against his chest and his arms automatically went around her.

“Justin, tu debes ayudarme. Eres mi amigo. Estoy en apuro.”

“What do you mean you are in trouble, Ilana?”

“Justin, estoy embarazada y no tengo en cualquier otro lugar ir.”

“Pregnant?”

“Sí.”

His gaze met Katrina’s over the other woman’s head. Mistrust and anger glared bright from her eyes. “I’m going to go. You have enough on your hands.”

She turned and headed for the front door as he disengaged himself from Ilana’s embrace. “I’ll be right back.” He followed Katrina out the door and called, “Katrina, wait.”

She kept moving, her feet picking up the pace as she tried to run away from him. *Damn it! She’s not running this time.*

Stopping at her car, she fumbled in her pocket for the keys until she realized the valet still had them. “Fuck!”

He took her by the arm and swung her around, but wasn’t prepared when her hand found his cheek, snapping his head back. “What the hell?”

“You bastard!”

He grabbed both arms, pinning her hands to her sides, but her feet lashed out and tried to kick him. “Knock it off, Katrina.” She continued to struggle against him, wiggling and kicking until her foot finally connected with his tender shin. “Ouch! Damn it! That’s enough!”

“Let go of me,” she spat when he pinned her against her car.

“I don’t think so, you little hellcat. Not until you explain what you are so pissed off about.”

Without waiting for her to start again, he bent at the waist, stuffed his shoulder into her abdomen and hefted her off her feet, striding purposefully back toward the house.

“Put me down.” She smacked her open palm against his back and tried to wiggle free. His hand came down hard on the nicely rounded ass near his cheek and she screeched with indignation. “Damn it, Justin! Put me down!”

He ignored her as he strode through the front door, much to the delight of the guests standing around watching the fireworks. Down the hall, he went until he had firmly shut the bedroom door behind them and deposited her onto his bed. She tried to scramble off to the other side when he stood up to lock the door. He managed to corral her and dumped her right back in the middle, his body pinning her down as his hand held her wrists above her head.

“Get. Off,” she panted with each syllable.

“Not until you stop this craziness.”

“It’s not crazy—I’m not crazy. Get off me.”

“No.”

* * * *

Damn the man!

She squirmed again until she realized his cock lay hard against her abdomen. *Fuck! He’s getting turned on by this.* She looked into his eyes while the pupils darkened and dilated as they focused on how her

lips were parted slightly with her rasping breaths. His free hand snaked up her side, finding the underside of her breast with his thumb and scraped across her nipple. The traitorous nub hardened to his touch.

His thigh slipped between hers, forcing the seam of her jeans to rub enticingly against her clit. Wetness coated her thong and she squirmed against the pressure.

“Do you want me, Kat?”

She shook her head.

“You are a liar too. Your body betrays you.” His lips found the other nipple through her shirt, pulling it between his lips, wetting the material with his mouth.

His hand left her breast to slide down her stomach and unsnap her jeans before he slid his palm inside. One fingertip found her clit, circling and twirling it as she fought her body’s reaction. She didn’t want to crave him, but she did. No matter how much she fought the attraction, she couldn’t deny it. “God, Justin.”

“Tell me what you want,” he said, lifting his mouth from her breast.

“You, damn it! I want you.” She squirmed, trying to get closer to his touch.

“Not until you tell me why you were upset.”

She clamped her mouth shut, refusing to utter a word while she tried to calm her racing heart.

“Tell me.”

Tears welled up in her eyes, and she tried to blink them away. *That girl is pregnant with his child and here I am, craving his touch like some prostitute.*

“Kat?”

She choked back a sob before she finally said, “How can I want you if you left that girl pregnant with your child? What if that was me?”

“Katrina, baby, it’s not mine.”

She shook her head. *Did he just say the child isn't his?*

"It's not my child. I've never slept with Ilana."

"Not yours?" she choked out.

"No. She is like a sister to me. She was seeing one of my foremen several months ago. I'm assuming the child belongs to him since she came to see me."

Tears rolled down her cheeks. "You aren't the father?"

He smiled then, the dimples peeking out of his cheeks, and he whispered, "Is that what this was all about? You were jealous?"

She bit her lip.

"Are you jealous, Kat?"

She forced the breath through her teeth in a hiss and said, "Yes, damn you. Is that what you wanted to hear? I'm jealous, okay? Now, let that go to your big head."

"You don't have to be. I don't want to be with anyone else. I haven't been with anyone else since I met you. It's been driving me nuts not being with you the last several weeks. All I wanted to do was come by your place and ravish your body."

"Why didn't you?"

"I wasn't sure you wanted to see me again. Not after the way we parted."

"I can't deny my attraction to you. I never could, even if there isn't anything else between us."

Frown lines gathered between his eyes. *I wish I knew what ran through his mind.* "We're good together. Why can't we just leave it at that?"

"I guess it's all I can ask for. Make love..." She changed her mind about how to word what she wanted. "Fuck me, Justin. Just like before. Hard and fast. I want your cock buried inside me."

Relieving her of his weight, he stood up on the side of the bed and grasped her jeans at the waist, swiftly pulling them down her legs, along with her panties. He started to undo his shirt, but she sat up and reached for the button, her mouth finding his chest with each one she

opened. A growl rumbled deep inside and she smiled against his skin.

Once his shirt found the floor, her hands opened his trousers and slid inside the waistband of his boxers, forcing them down his thighs. She wrapped her hand around the straining length of his cock, skimming from head to base, back and forth while her mouth closed over the end of his penis. His hands wrapped in her hair as she sucked. A tortured moan slipped from between his lips.

He tugged on her hair, trying to bring her back up in front of him, but she grabbed his ass with both hands and forced his hips toward her. She didn't want to stop; she wanted him to come in her mouth.

"Kat... God, Katrina," he growled. "If you don't stop, I'm gonna come."

She released his cock for a moment with a pop. "I know." Her mouth took him inside again, sucking, fondling, and riding him until she felt him surge toward her, his balls tensing in her hand, drawing up against his groin.

He groaned, pushing deeper, and she felt the first spurts of his hot cum shooting to the back of her throat. The salty taste wasn't unpleasant even though she had never swallowed a man's cum before.

A moment later, she knelt on the bed and sat up in front of him. "I'll be right back. I need to rinse my mouth."

"You didn't have to do that."

"I know. I wanted to," she said before she headed toward the bathroom.

She returned to the bedroom a few seconds later, to find him sprawled out on the bed, his arm behind his head as his hot gaze skimmed down her still naked form.

"Up for more?" she asked when she approached the bed.

"I will be in a second or two."

Her gaze found his obvious bulge beneath the sheet. Sashaying a little closer, she squealed when he shot up from his position on the bed, grabbed her around the waist, and had her underneath him in the space of a heartbeat.

His lips found her neck and he nibbled up toward her ear. “Now about this up for more. I distinctly remember someone saying they wanted it hard and fast. Who could that have been?”

“Mmm...” She arched her neck to give him better access to the spot below her ear. “Me?”

“I thought so.”

He moved down her chest and took her nipple in his mouth, sucking hard while his hand moved down her stomach. Fingers slid through the curls at the juncture of her thighs, and found her clit, twirling it until she wiggled her hips.

“Please, Justin. I want your mouth on me.”

He chuckled softly and skimmed down her belly until he settled himself between her thighs. His tongue licked from labia to clit in one long stroke and she almost came as she moaned and tossed her head on the pillow. When he started toggling the sensitive nub, it only took a few swipes to have her careening along the edge of the abyss. The climax hit her as it curled from her toes and up her legs before it centered where his tongue continued to play. She groaned when the wave rolled over her and hot cum spilled from within, only to be lapped up by the gorgeous man between her thighs.

She hadn’t even come down off her high when he slipped inside her, pulling her legs up across his biceps. Her channel gave to the size of him as he pushed all the way in and groaned his pleasure.

“I’ve missed this...missed you. God, you are so hot.”

“Fuck me hard. I need you.”

With a possessive growl, his pelvis ground into hers, and his hips rocked against her. “I love the way you feel.”

The next climax hit her without warning as stars burst behind her eyelids and she screamed his name.

His hips slowed while she caught her breath and his tongue lapped at her nipple, the rough pad skimming excruciatingly against the tip.

He moved toward her mouth, his lips taking possession of hers in a soul-binding kiss and her heart swelled in her chest. When he finally

broke the fusion of their mouths, he put his forehead against hers for a moment, desire raging hot in his gaze.

“I want something from you.”

“What?”

“I want...” He closed his eyes, his jaw clenched tight. When he opened them again, she could see the tight rein he held on himself as he fought for control. “Will you let me have your ass, baby?”

She groaned at his words. Anal sex happened to be one of her favorites, but she didn’t want to assume anything with him. “You want in my ass?”

“Oh, God,” he whispered closing his eyes again.

“Tell me, Justin. Is that what you want?”

“Yeah, but if you’re not...”

She put a finger against his lips to silence his words. “I thought you would never ask.”

He physically relaxed and a dimpled smile spread across his face. Lifting himself from her, he straightened up and whispered, “Roll over.”

When she did as he instructed, he reached into the bedside table and brought out a tube of lubrication. *Prepared... I like it.* He dropped a dollop along the crack of her ass and she moaned when the cold liquid seeped down between her cheeks.

“I’ll warm it up. I promise,” he whispered before he ran his tongue along her spine.

She spread her legs further apart when the head of his cock nudged at her rear hole. When he put some pressure behind his thrust, his cock penetrated the tight ring of muscles slightly as she hissed.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. It’s been a while.”

He chuckled and pushed a little harder, but his chuckle turned to a lusty moan when he filled her to the hilt. “God, Kat. This feels incredible. You are so tight.”

“Glad you approve,” she whispered and rocked back against his

groin while he hissed.

He slipped almost out before he slowly slid back inside.

“I don’t want easy. Fuck me hard. Make me come.”

“Anything you want baby, anything you want,” he growled and filled her completely. His groin slapped against her ass while she pushed back, taking everything he had. The sensations he created when he filled her left her breathless. She had never been with a man as large as Justin, and the feeling of him inside her pushed her over the edge with very little effort. The muscles of her ass clenched him tight when she climaxed, pushing him over the threshold of control. He growled her name and spilled everything he had.

Once he finished, he rolled over and pulled her with him, spooning her buttocks against his groin while they caught their breath. His lips brushed her shoulder and his hand cupped her breast as he gently massaged the soft mound.

She rolled toward him and he moved to his back before he slung an arm over his eyes. Resting her head on his chest, she threaded her fingers through the hair beneath her cheek. He groaned softly when she fingered his male nipple.

“I really need to deal with Ilana and her problem.”

“I know, but it doesn’t mean I can’t tempt you back into this room later, does it?”

His mouth lifted at the corners slightly. “That wouldn’t be too difficult.” He kissed her quickly before he shifted from under her and slid his legs over the side of the bed. Grabbing a pair pants from the floor, he stood and headed into the bathroom. *Damn, he’s got a nice ass!*

She sighed and got up on the other side of the bed. Reaching down, she realized that he had grabbed her jeans before he went into the bathroom. Just then, he swung the door open, a piece of paper clutched in his hand. “What the hell is this, Katrina? Request for transfer?”

Oh shit!

Chapter Fourteen

“I, uh...”

“You’re requesting a transfer?”

“Can we talk about this later?”

“No. We need to talk about this now. Why are you asking for a transfer?”

She grabbed her bra and shirt and pulled them on without meeting his gaze. *How the hell am I going to explain this? What do I say? I’m sorry Justin, but I’m in love with you. You aren’t in love with me, so I’m going back to Iraq to get away from you?*

“Answer me, Kat.”

“Put some clothes on, will you? It’s a little distracting to have a conversation with you buck-ass naked.”

Grumbling under his breath something about stubborn women, he grabbed his pants from the floor as he threw hers across the bed to her. Once she had sufficiently covered herself, she moved to stare out the window at the twinkling lights of the backyard. Guests still milled around from the party, and she vaguely wondered what they thought since the two of them had disappeared into the bedroom.

He walked up behind her and put his hand on her shoulder before he turned her around to face him. “Now...what’s this about a transfer?”

Her shoulders lifted in a shrug. “They need pilots over there. It’s great money, and it’s all non-taxable.”

“You just came back from there, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, but...”

“You’re asking to go back.” It wasn’t a question. It was a

statement, one that said he saw right through her.

She turned back around to look out the window. She didn't want to look at him when she felt the tears burn behind her eyes. If he would just say he loved her and ask her not to go, she wouldn't. "It's better this way."

"What's better? Leaving?"

"Yeah. I mean, you and I aren't...there isn't anything between us."

A soft knock sounded at the door and Keith said, "Justin?"

He left her side and approached the door with a sharp, "What?" as he pulled open the door.

"I hate to interrupt, but you really need to deal with Ilana."

"I'll be out in a minute." He slammed the door shut, and she jumped as his obvious frustration bounced off the walls around them. Walking back to her side, he pulled her around and said, "This isn't over. We'll talk about this when I'm done dealing with the problem in the front room."

His mouth came down, slanting across hers and she could almost fool herself into thinking his kiss held a bit of desperation in it at the thought of her leaving. When he lifted his head, his eyes searched her face for a moment before he turned on his heels and disappeared out the bedroom door.

She let the tears come as she sank down on the window seat. Sobs racked her frame for several minutes before she wiped the wetness from her cheeks and stood. She grabbed her shoes from the floor and slipped them on before she silently pulled open the door and peered out. She could hear Justin's angry voice, but it sounded far away, like he stood in the next county.

Slipping out into the hall, she moved silently, trying not to let him hear her. She wanted to get away, away from him and the disturbing hold he held on her heart, before she changed her mind. The door loomed in front of her and she moved toward it. She grasped the door handle, pulling it open before peeking over her shoulder to check for

his presence. It would be just like him to see her leaving and drag her back inside the house or throw her over his broad shoulder like he did earlier.

She sighed in relief when she pulled the door closed behind her. Moving toward the valet, she asked for her keys, insisting she could retrieve her car herself.

Sliding into the leather interior, she let out the breath she had been holding before she pushed the lock on the door. The car's engine growled when she turned it over. The headlights reflected off the barn and she choked back a sob as her thoughts ricocheted to their interrupted interlude, and then to the desperate lovemaking in the bedroom.

When she pulled down the driveway, she looked in the rearview mirror just in time to see him race out the door and stop on the porch as he watched her leave.

* * * *

"Are you sure this is what you want, Major?" General Patricia Langston stood in front of Katrina and surveyed the transfer paperwork.

"Yes, ma'am."

"What are you running from, Katrina?"

"I don't know what you mean, ma'am."

"Don't you?"

Katrina's eyes filled with tears for a moment before she stiffened her shoulders and refused to let them fall, especially in front of her mother. "No, ma'am."

"What does Justin say about this?" Patricia waved the paperwork in her hand in front of Katrina and she gasped.

"How did..."

"Your father told me about him if that's what you are asking. Why are you running away from him? You love him." Katrina opened her

mouth to deny it, but Patricia silenced her with a wave of her hand. "Don't deny it. I can see it all over your face when his name is mentioned. Your eyes light up."

"It doesn't matter. He doesn't love me."

"Have you asked him?"

"Well no, but..."

"Have you told him how you feel?" She dropped her gaze, and Patricia stepped in front of her. "Katrina, don't make the same mistake I made."

"I don't see how you can even say that! I'm not pregnant and leaving my child with its father to be raised without the love of a mother."

"No, but you are walking away from the man you love for the force."

Katrina moved toward the window and looked out over the empty airfield. "No, I'm walking away from the man I love because he doesn't love me."

"Fine. If this is what you really want, I'll sign them." Patricia scrawled her expressive signature across the bottom of the paperwork and folded it, before she held it out for Katrina to take.

"Thank you."

"For the record, you are making a huge mistake."

"I appreciate your concern, but it's none of your business what I do."

Katrina turned and left Patricia's office, shutting the door behind her. *It's done. I'll be leaving in a week for Iraq and with any luck, I'll forget all about Justin Wilder.*

She headed for her car. There were several things she needed to take care of before she left. She dreaded telling her grandmother and Mark she planned to leave, but it had to be done.

Pulling into the parking spot at her apartment, she sighed heavily before she pushed the door of her car open and grabbed her flight bag. Once the car had been locked, she moved toward the stairs before she

saw Mrs. Abraham walking her little dachshund.

“Hello, Katrina. How are you my dear?”

“I’m fine, ma’am. I’ve got a lot of stuff to do, so if you’ll excuse me.”

“Of course. Are you meeting that nice young man I saw over here a while back?”

Justin. God, why did she have to ask about Justin? “No ma’am. We aren’t seeing each other anymore.”

“I’m sorry to hear your news. He looked like just your type.”

“Yeah, well, I guess he wasn’t after all.”

“I guess not. You take care, sweetheart. If you need to talk, you call me.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Katrina pushed open her apartment door as the tears threatened to fall down her cheeks. She dropped her bag on the couch and headed toward the refrigerator. *I need a drink.*

She poured herself a glass of red wine, grabbed the phone, and headed out to her balcony. First, she dialed her grandmother’s phone number. Gram would be upset she hadn’t come to tell her personally, but she knew there would be a lecture and she didn’t want to deal with it right now.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Gram.”

“Kat? Is that you, sweetie?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“I haven’t talked to you in forever. How are you?”

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t sound fine. You sound upset.”

Leave it to her to see right through me. “I’m okay. I just needed to call you and tell you I’m leaving for Iraq next week.”

“What? Why, Kat? I thought you were done with going overseas. What about that nice young man you were seeing?”

Damn it! I knew this would come up. “I’m not seeing anyone.”

“You know very well who I’m talking about young lady.”

“There is nothing between me and Justin.”

“Don’t give me that bullshit, young lady.”

“Gram! I don’t think I’ve ever heard you cuss before.”

“I don’t usually, but I’m upset with you, Katrina. I know you care for him, so why are you running away?”

Didn’t I just have this conversation? “I’m not running away.”

“Yes, you are.”

“Justin and I are through. We aren’t seeing each other anymore. I need to get away, and I’m not even sure Iraq is far enough, but I have to try.”

“Does he know you are leaving?”

“Sort of.”

“I take it that is a no, he doesn’t.”

“Yes, he does. He just doesn’t know when.” She pinched the bridge of her nose as she fought the headache behind her eyes.

“You are a coward, Katrina.”

“Gram!”

“I never thought I would say those words to you, but you are.”

“I’m not having this conversation with you. I’m leaving, and that’s it. I’m sorry, but I have to.”

“All right. I’ll miss you. I love you, my little Kat. You take care of yourself.”

She choked back a sob and said, “I love you too, Gram. I’ll email you when I can.”

“You do that, sweetie. I’ll even try to figure out the blasted contraption you young people call a computer.”

Katrina wiped the tear falling down her cheek and chuckled. “Have Mark help you.”

“You come back in one piece, young lady.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Katrina hung up the phone as gut-wrenching sobs shook her whole body, and she curled her knees up to her chest. She cried for at least fifteen minutes before the tears finally subsided into an

occasional hiccup.

Next, she dialed Mark.

The conversation with him sounded very similar to the one she had just had with her grandmother and vaguely like the one with her mother.

“Does Justin know?”

“Why does everyone keep asking me that? Yes, he knows.”

“Katrina, you know I wasn’t happy when you and Justin hooked up, but you have been like a totally different person when you are with him. He’s completely changed, too. I never thought I would see him fall in love with anyone.”

“Fall in love? What the hell are you talking about? Justin isn’t in love with me.”

“If he isn’t, he sure acts like he is.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m leaving next week. I’m sure by the time I get back, he’ll find someone else.”

“You have got to be kidding me.”

“I’m telling you, he’ll move on and so will I.”

“Sure, Kat. Whatever you say, but I think you are wrong.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Have you checked your cell phone lately?”

“No. I think the battery is dead, and I haven’t charged it. Why?”

“Justin has called me several times wondering where the hell you are. He even told me himself, he’s called your phone at least twenty times.”

“He has?”

“Yeah, he has. You need to talk to him. The two of you need to sit down and talk. My advice is, don’t leave until you do.”

She didn’t know what to say as the silence stretched between them. Did Justin really call her several times, trying to reach her? If so, why didn’t he just come to her apartment? It’s not like he didn’t know where she lived.

“Kat?”

“Yeah.”

“Call him. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Bye, Mark.”

“Bye.”

She got up from her chair on the balcony and walked into the living room before she grabbed her purse from the couch. Pulling out her cell phone, she flipped it open and turned it on as she headed for the charger plugged into the wall. Once it had begun to charge, she gave it a moment to connect, and even though Mark mentioned Justin calling, she was shocked to see new voicemail coming up on her screen.

She dialed into her mailbox and when she heard ten new messages; her heart sped up in her chest. Chewing her fingernail, she heard his voice. “Katrina—it’s Justin. Call me when you get this. We need to talk.”

She erased the first one, and when the second began to play, she began to question herself. “Katrina, please baby, call me. I came by your place, but you weren’t home. I want to talk to you. I need to talk to you.”

He did come by.

While each one played, she didn’t know what to think anymore. *Maybe he does care, but he never said it. Never said ‘I love you.’ Then again, neither did I.*

When the messages had finished playing, she closed the phone and left it lying on the counter as she headed back out to the balcony. *I guess I should call him. There are things left unsaid, and if I leave for Iraq and don’t tell him how I feel, I’m going to regret it.*

She looked out over the lights of Las Vegas shining in the distance. The glow lit up the night sky, almost like daytime. A car sped by below her, the music so loud the bass rattled the windows on her townhouse. Shaking her head, she slipped back inside and headed for her bathroom. A long hot soak would do the trick and hopefully, get her mind off of one brown-eyed, gorgeous cowboy she just

couldn't seem to forget for any length of time.

Sprinkling some scented bath salts in the water as she turned on the spigot, she was stripping off her clothes when she heard her cell phone ring in the other room. She slipped on her bathrobe and padded out to see who called. The caller ID said "Justin" and she debated on whether to answer it or not.

Biting her lip, she flipped open the phone and said, "Hello?"

"Katrina? Thank, God, I finally got you. I've been worried to death. Where have you been?"

"Around." She chewed her fingernail nervously.

"Why the hell did you take off the other day? And why haven't you called me back?"

"I didn't know you called until a few minutes ago. My phone has been off."

"I'm coming over there so we can talk."

She shook her head no before she said, "No, I don't want to see you."

"What? Why?"

"It's better this way."

"Better for whom?"

She massaged the spot over her left eye while her head began to pound. "Justin, please."

"Are you really going back to Iraq?"

"Yes. This is something I need to do."

"When?"

"Next week. We fly on Thursday."

"Fuck!"

She could almost see him pacing the living room while he talked, running his hands through his hair, making several strands stick up. The corners of her mouth lifted slightly at the picture she had in her mind.

"What about us?"

Her heart stopped in her chest, then started again with a slam

against her ribs. “There is no us, Justin.”

“What if I said there is?”

“Don’t, okay? Don’t say something you don’t mean.”

“I don’t want you to go, Kat. I need you.”

She shook her head and tears burned her eyelids before they began to slip silently down her cheeks. *‘I need you, Kat’—not ‘I love you’.*

“I have to go.”

“Katrina...”

She shut the phone with a click and pressed it to her forehead as sobs shook her frame.

Chapter Fifteen

“Thanks for getting Matt to take care of my place, Dad,” Katrina said as she hugged him. He had come to see her off even though he still had to use a wheelchair to get around. The last several days had been spent arranging her personal things, her apartment, her car, and whatnot before she had to take off.

“Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Yeah. I need to get away from here.”

“You mean away from Justin.”

She tipped her head back and sighed. When her gaze found him again, she said, “You were the one who told me not to give up the force for him.”

“I know, I did, Kat, but...I might have been wrong.”

“What? The infamous Colonel Alan Jamieson wrong?”

“Don’t think I won’t take you over my knee, young lady.”

“I love you, Dad. I’ll be fine.”

“Keep your head about you, girl.”

She smiled before she wrapped her arms around him in a hug. Fighting the tears, she closed her eyes and held on tight. When she opened them again, her breath caught in her throat when she spotted a familiar white truck. *Shit!*

Mark slipped out of the passenger side and Justin emerged from the driver’s side. She cursed Mark under her breath. Justin wouldn’t have been able to get on the base if not for her cousin.

She pushed against her father’s shoulders and stiffened in his embrace. He turned around and saw the other two gentlemen coming toward her. “I’ll see you in a bit, sweetheart,” he said before he

retreated inside the building, leaving her alone.

“Mark? What are you doing here?”

“I came to say goodbye. I don’t know how long you’ll be gone this time, and I didn’t want you to leave without seeing you.”

She cocked an eyebrow as she said, “And to bring Justin on the base?”

He ducked his head sheepishly. “Yeah.”

She took in the ruggedly handsome man in front of her, all six foot three of him, and she could feel the heat rising in her blood just looking. “Justin.”

“Kat.”

The distance in his voice drove a nail straight through her heart.

“Give me a hug and a kiss, cuz, and I’ll leave you two alone.” Mark wrapped his arms around her, and she hugged him tight. She loved him, no matter his meddling ways. She kissed him on the cheek, and he pulled back before he headed back toward Justin’s truck.

“Were you going to leave without saying goodbye?” Justin asked as his deep baritone sent goose bumps along her arms.

Her shoulders lifted in a shrug, and she dropped her eyes to the tips of her boots. “I didn’t think it necessary.”

He moved so fast, she almost missed it as he wrapped an arm around her waist and slammed her against his chest. “Not necessary? I thought maybe I might mean more to you than that, but I guess not. I should have listened when you said you didn’t need a man in your life.”

She slid her hands up between them and attempted to push against his chest, but he wasn’t letting go. “What difference does it make now? I’m leaving, and I don’t know when I’ll be back. It’s a little late for confessions of love.”

He inhaled sharply, and she closed her eyes. *Dumb! Stupid! What the hell did I say that for?*

“Look at me, Kat.”

She bit her lip and shook her head.

“Katrina,” he whispered against her lips before he swooped in and took them in a desperate kiss. She returned the kiss with everything in her heart. If she couldn’t say she loved him, maybe she could communicate it through the fusing of their mouths.

Smitty’s voice penetrated the fog surrounding her mind. “Major?”

Justin let her go, and she stepped away from him, drinking in the sight before she turned on her heel and headed toward her weapons officer.

Several moments later, she walked across the tarmac, hoping Smitty couldn’t see the tears swimming in her eyes when they approached her plane. “Are we ready to roll?”

“Yep.”

She did a quick walk around the plane, refusing to look at the fence between her and the man she loved, although she knew he stood there. Grabbing the hook ladder on the side of the plane, she hoisted herself into the cockpit, snapped her harness over her shoulders, and slipped her flight helmet on. Firing up the engines, she slowly started to taxi toward the runway, but shot a look to her left for one last look.

* * * *

He watched her jet when she moved toward the runway with the other planes leaving. While each set took off, he stayed right where he was until he knew she had left. He couldn’t tell exactly which one belonged to her since they all looked the same, but when no more headed for the wild blue skies above him, his heart crumbled in his chest.

A hand came down on his shoulder when Mark stepped up next to him. “You didn’t tell her, did you?”

“Tell her what?”

“That you love her.” He opened his mouth to protest, but Mark stopped him. “Don’t deny it. It’s written all over your face, man.”

“It doesn’t matter. She’s gone.”

“She left because you wouldn’t admit your feelings for her.”

“My feelings? What about hers?”

Mark shook his head. “Both of you. You are both so damned stubborn. Neither of you will admit you love each other and now it’s come to this.”

“She doesn’t love me, Mark. She said herself she didn’t want a permanent fixture in her life.”

“You are an ass, Justin Wilder. She might have said those words months ago when you first met, but now things are totally different. You wormed your way into her heart, but she won’t admit her feelings to you because she’s terrified you don’t love her in return. You both need to get over this crap, otherwise you will both be alone.”

Mark left his side and returned to the truck while Justin stayed for a moment more. *I guess I’ve made a big mess out of this.* He looked at the sky where she disappeared, before he headed for his vehicle and the long ride home.

* * * *

The glare of the sun reflected off the hangar, almost blinding them while they taxied in. *God, why did I ever agree to come back here? I hate this hellhole!*

“You okay, Kat?”

“Yeah Smitty, I’m fine—just tired. It’s been a long couple of days.”

“I know. A soft bed would be almost as good as sex right now.”

She laughed. “Too bad there isn’t any of either around here.”

“Yeah. You aren’t kidding. I dread the feel of those damned cots.”

“I guess they are better than the ground, but not by much.”

Once they parked, she popped the cockpit hatch and slipped her helmet off with a heavy sigh as Smitty unhooked his harness. “I could use a beer. How about you?”

“Sounds good. Too bad there aren’t any of those here either.”

“Yeah, I know. This whole thing sucks ass.”

“Why did you agree to come back then, Kat?”

She shook her head. *I’m not going into this with him.* “I guess I’m just crazy.”

“You could say that.”

Grabbing their gear, they headed for their quarters to get settled and then report into their superior officer to find out their rotation. She knew they wouldn’t be given very much time to rest before they were flying again, so she needed to take advantage of the downtime while she could. *I hope I can sleep without Justin invading my thoughts.* She shook her head with a soft laugh. *Yeah right! Who am I trying to kid?*

“I’ll see you after while. I’m going to try to catch a little sleep before we report in. They know we’re here, that’s the important thing.”

“Okay. How about if I go check in for both of us?”

“Would you? That would be awesome.”

“No problem. I’ll see you in a while,” Smitty said as he moved toward his own tent.

She moved the flap and ducked inside. Rows and rows of bunk beds lined the sides of the tent while she searched for an empty area. She hated cohabitating with the males, but being one of the few female pilots, she didn’t have a lot of choice. Spotting what appeared to be a bunk area without personal items nearby, she slung her rucksack onto the floor beside the bed and lay down. She forced her eyelids to close, hoping Justin’s face wouldn’t spring into her head.

It didn’t work. His brown eyes flashed across her mind and she groaned out loud before she rolled onto her stomach and buried her head beneath the pillow.

Over an hour later, she peeled her eyes open and squinted when the sun found a hole in the tent and centered on her face. *Damn! Did I really fall asleep?* She peered at her watch for a moment, noting the

time as she struggled to sit up. Her stomach pitched and rolled while she fought the urge to throw up. Bending her head, she took several deep breaths and the feeling subsided as a frown settled between her eyebrows.

“Hey, Jamieson.” She looked up to see an old friend from flight school as he moved toward her and hugged her quickly before releasing her. “God, look at you! All gold clover-leaf and shit!”

She stood up and a smile spread across her mouth. “Hey Carter! I haven’t seen you in forever.”

“Not since we left flight school. How are you?”

“Good. How about you?”

“Not bad.” His blue eyes toured her frame before returning to hers. “You look fantastic, Kat. I almost didn’t recognize you. I heard you have been burnin’ up the skies.”

Her shoulder lifted in a half shrug. “Just doin’ my job.”

“Yeah, way better than anyone else from what I hear.”

“Well, you know me—overachiever and all.”

He chuckled. “How is your dad? I heard he had a stroke.”

“Yeah, but he’s doing much better.”

“Great. I’m sure that takes a load off your mind.”

“You bet.” She looked around the tent for a moment. “Where’s the mess? I think I need to get some grub.”

“Behind the hangar. Come on. I’ll walk over with you. I’m kind of hungry myself.”

They continued to talk while they headed toward the mess tent, about old times, her dad, and the force in general. When they had almost reached it, the scent of fried meat hit her nose and her stomach pitched again. *What the fuck?*

“You okay, Kat? You look kinda green.”

“No. I think I must have picked up a bug before I left home. The smell of food is just making me nauseous. I’d better skip eating right now until my belly settles down.”

“I’ll catch you later then.”

“Sure, Jeff,” she said before she waved and headed back toward her bunk. *I guess I just need to lay down for a bit more. I hope I didn’t catch the flu or something before I left. It would suck being sick over here.*

Within minutes, she fell fast asleep.

* * * *

The glare from the computer screen mocked him as the blank email sat in front of him. She had been gone for over a month now and he felt like hell. He slept like crap these days and seemed to be biting the heads off of everyone around him. He knew damned well why, too. He loved Katrina Jamieson, and he didn’t tell her before she took off for parts unknown. When he had actually fallen in love with her, he didn’t know, but now she meant more to him than almost anyone in the world.

Mark gave him her email address, but he didn’t know what to say. He wanted to talk to her in person. Unfortunately, it wasn’t possible, and he knew it.

Justin took a deep breath and picked up his cell phone. Hitting the speed dial for the Rocking W, he waited.

“Hello?”

“Abby?”

“Yes, who is this?”

“It’s Justin. Is Chase around?”

“Hi, Justin. No, Chase isn’t here. He drove over to Bud’s this morning to pick up a couple of horses.”

“Oh.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” He paused and ran his fingers through his hair before he said, “No, I’m not—not really.”

“You wanna talk?”

Could he? He had originally called to talk to Chase. He figured his

brother would be the perfect person to understand all the feelings he had running rampant through him, but maybe it would be easier to talk to Abby.

"It's okay. You haven't talked to her in awhile and I know this whole thing is driving you nuts."

"What...how did you..."

"Come on. I know Chase told you about me. We didn't have a lot of time to talk last time you were home, but I can feel your turmoil."

"Just what exactly do you know, Abby?"

"Do you really want me to answer that?"

"Probably not. It will just freak me out."

She chuckled softly. "Yeah. So talk."

For over an hour, he talked. He told her everything about his relationship with Katrina, how they had found passion in each other's arms and finished with her leaving for another tour of Iraq.

"I know you are hurting, but be patient. She loves you too, but she's scared."

"Mark said the same thing."

"Mark?"

"Yeah. He's her cousin. He is the one who officially introduced us. And just so you know, Abby, patience isn't a virtue of mine."

He could have sworn he heard her snort over the phone, and he smiled for the first time in a while. He and Abby didn't have much of a chance to get to know each other, but he knew she had his best interest at heart, and he loved her for it.

"No? Really? I hadn't noticed that about the Wilder siblings. Why should you be any different? Neither of your brothers, nor your sister are any better."

He chuckled to himself. "Yeah, I heard about Chase's courtship of you, or should I say, his stubborn pride that got in the way. It sounds like the two of you are perfect for each other."

She laughed. "I would hope so since we're married and have a child together."

“By the way, how is my nephew doing?”

“Getting big. He’s already trying to pull himself up on the furniture. He’ll be taking off walking across the room in no time, I’m afraid.”

“Has his dad put him on a horse yet?”

“Are you kidding me? Of course, he has. Chase had Jeremiah on horseback as soon as he could sit up.”

“That sounds just like Chase.”

“You know, you should come home for the holidays this year. Since we did Thanksgiving at Cole and Carrie’s last year, we’ll be doing it here at our house this year. Besides, you need to see your niece, too.”

“I don’t know—maybe. You know how much I hate the snow.” He paused for a moment before he said, “How are Cole and Carrie doing?”

“I take it you haven’t called them recently.”

“No. I’ve been really bad about keeping in contact. He called me when Anne was born, but I haven’t talked to him since.”

“They are doing fine. The store keeps him occupied and the kids keep Carrie out of trouble for the most part.”

“I better go. It’s been great talking to you. Thanks for the ear. I really needed it.”

“Write the email staring at you from the computer screen in front of you, and tell her how you feel.”

“But...” He heard her chuckle. “How do you do that?”

“Trust me...sometimes I wish I couldn’t.”

“I guess I’ll talk to you later. Thanks again, Abby.”

“You’re welcome. Call me any time if you want to talk.”

“I’ll do that. Tell Chase hi for me.”

“I will.”

Chapter Sixteen

The telephone brought him straight out of the bed when it rang on the nightstand. He groaned as he held his head for moment before he realized he had to answer it. *Damn! I should never have gotten drunk last night.*

It had been several days since he had talked with Abby, but he still hadn't broke down and emailed Katrina yet. He just didn't know what to say. *How about 'I love you?'*

He shook his head when the phone rang again, and he stared at it like he wished he could throw it across the room. Grabbing it in his hand, he growled, "Hello?"

"Justin?"

He pinched the bridge of his nose and his head pounded. "Yeah."

"It's Mark."

"What do you want?"

"Don't you sound chipper?"

"I'm hung over, Mark. Now what in the hell do you want?"

"I thought we were going to the cattle auction this morning?"

"Shit," he grumbled. "I forgot."

"You still want to go?"

"Yeah. I need to get a couple more bulls."

"How about I stop and get the biggest Starbucks I can find while you get ready. I'll see you in about fifteen minutes."

"Fine."

He hung up the phone and stumbled to his feet. Finding a clean pair of jeans and a shirt, he headed toward the shower.

Several minutes later, he felt semi-normal when he ran a comb

through his wet hair before he padded back into his room to retrieve socks and his boots. The doorbell rang in the distance as he looked at the clock on the bedside table. *Probably Mark. He just can't seem to get over ringing the doorbell even though he practically lives here sometimes.*

When he reached the living room, he hollered, "Come on in, Mark."

The door swung open, revealing a bright smile on the other man's face as he held two extra large cups of coffee in his hands.

"Ah. Nectar of the Gods."

"And your salvation, my friend. Drink up," Mark said after he handed one to Justin. "At least you look halfway normal."

Justin took a long drink of the coffee before he answered, "A shower does wonders sometimes." He moved toward the couch and sat the coffee on the table before he took a seat and slipped on his socks. "I'll be ready in a minute."

"No hurry."

Justin watched Mark pace back and forth in the foyer for a moment. "What's eating you?"

Mark finally turned to look back at him and asked, "Have you talked to Kat?"

"You mean have I emailed her? No."

"Damn! You are about the most stubborn man I know. Why not?"

"I just haven't figured out what I want to say."

"How about *I love you?*"

"That's the easy part. It's trying to figure out how to write the other stuff." He stood and smoothed his jeans before he grabbed the coffee on the table.

"What other stuff?"

"Like how much I miss her. How I dream about her when I go to sleep at night. How I can't live without her, and I don't want to."

"Say it just like that."

"If I were talking to her face to face, then maybe. I can't write it."

Things get all jumbled when I try. I'm not a poet or anything. I can't seem to get it on paper or computer screen as the case may be, like I want to say it."

"Well, after the auction, maybe I'll sit down and help you. I know she would love to hear from you."

"How do you know that?"

"I've emailed her, and she's asked me about you."

They moved toward Justin's truck where Keith had already hitched the stock trailer. *It's a good thing Keith has my back.*

Once they were both settled and pulling out of the driveway, Justin asked, "What did she want to know?"

"Only general things like how you are. If you are seeing anyone."

"She asked you if I'm seeing anyone?"

"Yeah."

His heart lightened when Mark's words penetrated his mind. *Maybe she does care.*

Talk turned to business during the rest of the ride to the auction. When they pulled into the parking area, Mark said, "I'll be back in a minute. I'm going to grab a listing so we know what's up."

"No problem. I'm going to wander down the aisle over here where the Angus bulls are."

"I'll catch up with you over there then."

Justin moved down the aisle and eyed the impressive selection of animals up for auction. He stopped a few times to talk to the owners and even met a few he knew from past cattle sales. They exchanged ribbings and friendly insults until they laughed. He didn't bring any of his cows this trip and a few of his competitors asked if he felt all right.

"Justin Wilder, not selling this trip? What's up with that? If I didn't know better, I would swear there is a woman involved, but damn. I don't see one hangin' around your pretty boy face."

"Keep on Williams and we'll be tusslin' under the stands over there," Justin growled playfully.

“Will you two quit?” Mary Williams said while she wrapped her arm around Justin’s waist. “How have you been? Haven’t seen you around much.”

He hugged the petite graying woman to his side before he planted a kiss on her head. “I’m doing fine. Just busy, that’s all.”

“Well, we sure miss you around here.”

Justin laughed and teased. “I’ll try to do better, Mom.”

“See that you do. How can I hook you up with some unsuspecting female if you aren’t around? Your handsome mug shouldn’t be alone.”

His good mood sobered a little when he thought of Katrina.

“Hey.” Mary waved a hand in front of his face. “What’s with the long face? If I didn’t know better, I would think some pretty little woman has already snagged your stubborn heart.”

“Maybe.”

She grabbed him in a huge hug and laughed. “I never thought I would see the day. Justin Wilder in love.”

“Don’t say it too loud. You might cause a stampede or something.”

“That could be.” She looked around before she asked, “So where is the lucky girl?”

“In Iraq.”

“Huh?”

“She is a pilot in the Air Force. A mission took her over there about a month ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Justin. When does she come home?”

“I don’t know.”

“Wait a minute. Something isn’t right here. The woman you love is overseas, and you don’t know when she’s coming home?”

“It’s a long story. One I can’t go into right now.”

“Well then, make sure the next time you come, you bring her with you. I need to meet the woman who finally lassoed the heart of Justin Wilder.”

He chuckled softly. "I'll do that."

Mark returned to his side just as the conversation wound down. Shortly afterwards, they headed toward the stands to find a couple of seats to await the start of the auction.

Once they were settled and the parade of animals started, the cattleman in Justin took over while he surveyed the stock. He bid on several bulls that met his expectations for his stock. When the sale was over, he moved down the aisle toward the railing of the arena.

"I'm going to supervise the loading if you'll take care of the check," Justin told Mark.

"Sure. I'll be back in a minute.

The two of them went in separate directions while Justin made his way to where his truck sat parked. He moved it in line, so when it came his turn to load, he already had his position. His thoughts drifted to his conversation with Mary earlier. The older woman would love Katrina, he knew. Kat kind of did that to a person. Her big green eyes and sexy smile usually turned him upside down and inside out whenever she was nearby. He hoped like hell, he had a chance to tell her how he really felt.

When it came his turn, he backed the stock trailer into position, shut the truck off, and stepped out. He moved around the back and unlatched the gate, swinging the big door open so the cattle could be loaded more easily as the cowboys on horseback herded them toward the ramp on the trailer.

Justin stepped outside the arena while the others did their job and came face to face with an ashen faced Mark.

"What's wrong? You look like you are going to be sick."

"I..."

"Mark. Come on man, talk to me."

"Justin, its Katrina."

He felt like he had been gut punched. His legs went weak, and he almost dropped to his knees. "What about Katrina? God—please Mark, don't tell me she's de...."

“No, at least, not as far as I know.”

“Then what?”

“She took a hit while she flew a mission. Her plane is down over enemy territory. They haven’t found her yet.”

He dropped his head and tears sprang to his eyes. *Oh, my God! She could be dead, and I never told her I love her. I shouldn’t have let her leave without telling her.*

“Justin—we need to go. I need to get back.”

Squaring his shoulders, he looked at Mark and said, “Yeah. We’re loaded anyway. Let’s ride.”

The cowboys waved from the rear, indicating they had the gate locked and loaded with the cattle safely tucked inside. Gravel flew when Justin hit the gas and pulled out of the grounds headed back for his house.

The ride home was made in complete silence. Justin knew Mark wondered the same thing he did. Would they find her alive?

When they reached his house, Mark made his way to his SUV, but Justin stopped him from shutting the door. “Where are you headed?”

“I’m not sure. Either her dad’s or Gram’s.”

“Let me know. I need to be there, too.”

“I’ll call you when I know where we’re meeting.”

Justin watched as Mark pulled down the driveway before he headed into the house and started pacing and praying. He wanted a drink, but he knew he couldn’t while he waited for Mark to call. He wasn’t about to drive after he had been drinking, especially in Vegas.

Several hours later, the phone rang, and he sprinted across the living room to reach it. “Hello?”

“Hey.”

“Do you know anything, Mark? Anything at all?”

“No. They haven’t contacted her dad. He’s used all his connections to find out what is going on.”

“Are you at her grandmother’s or her dad’s?”

“We’re at Gram’s. You are welcome if you want to come. I’ve

already told Gram, and she just smiled and winked.”

He had to chuckle. It sounded just like Katrina’s grandmother.
“I’ll be there shortly.”

“I’ll see you then.”

“Oh, and Mark?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. I know how much you care about her even if she doesn’t.”

Within the hour, he pulled into the stately house he remembered from the barbeque several months ago. You wouldn’t know it by the foliage in Vegas, but winter now knocked on their door as September rolled in with a bang. *Has it really been that long since Kat and I met?*

He knocked on the front door only to be met by Katrina’s mother, Annabel.

“Come in, Justin. Mark said you would be coming over.”

“Thanks.” He wiped his feet and stepped into the foyer as his gaze took in the staggering amount of people gathered in the front living room. There had to be at least fifty people there.

“Justin. Come here, young man,” Katrina’s grandmother called from her chair off to the side of the thrall of people.

He smiled and made his way to her side before he bent down to kiss her on the cheek. “How are you, lovely lady?”

“Oh, go on with you. You are such a charmer.” She waved to a chair nearby, motioning for him to bring it closer so he could sit next to her. “Come and sit with me a bit.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Mark told me you were coming. I have to say, I’m very happy to see you.”

“I wasn’t sure I would be welcome.”

“Of course, you are welcome here. This is my house, and you are always welcome in my home.”

“Thank you.”

“Besides, I want the dirt on you and Katrina. So spill it.”

He laughed and shook his head. This spitfire of a woman had him wrapped around her little finger, just like her granddaughter, and there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it, even if he wanted to.

His eyes scanned the room for a moment while he noticed the people within. Katrina's father stood against one wall with a phone to his ear as he barked into it, assumably trying to get information on her whereabouts, while a pretty brunette stood on the other side doing the same thing. He knew a frown must have marred his face when Katrina's grandmother tapped him on the arm.

“That is Katrina's mother, General Patricia Langston.”

“But I thought...”

“Annabel isn't her mother. It's a long story, and one I think Katrina is aware of, but she obviously hasn't shared it with you. Alan and Patricia knew each other in flight school. She got pregnant with Kat, but chose the military over her child. She gave Alan custody so he raised Katrina. He met Annabel when Kat was still small.”

“Holy cow,” he mumbled when his gaze settled on Patricia. “Kat looks just like her.”

“I know. I haven't talked to Katrina since she found out, so I'm not sure how she feels about the whole thing. I understand she's had a conversation or two with her mother since then though.”

“I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall for that one.” His gaze returned to her grandmother.

“Me, too.”

He chuckled, and she patted his arm.

Patricia's raised voice boomed over the entire crowd, and all eyes turned to her. “I don't give a flying fuck, Sergeant. This is General Patricia Langston, and I want to talk to whoever is in charge in that hellhole immediately.”

Justin's gaze met Patricia's across the room, and she cocked a questioning eyebrow in his direction before her focus returned to the

phone in her hand.

“Yes, I’ll hold.” She paced back and forth in front of the window, and he could tell exactly where Katrina got her spunk.

“Yes. Colonel Young. General Langston.” The crowd waited in silence. “I want the status of one of my pilots.”

He could vaguely hear murmurs from the phone from where he sat next to Katrina’s grandmother. He knew the entire room held their breath, just like he did.

“I realize Major Jamieson is now under your command, Colonel, but she was mine before she became yours. I want her status, and I want it now.”

More murmurs.

“Yes, I’ll wait.” She threw up the hand not holding the phone as she sighed.

Several minutes ticked by and the silence in the room was almost deafening while they waited.

“Yes, Colonel?”

Justin could hear a deep voice mumbling on the other end.

She sighed and closed her eyes. “Thank, the Lord.” She paused. “What? What do you mean? Tell me the extent of her injuries.”

His heart shattered when he heard the last bit. *She’s hurt!*

“Fine. I’ll be on the first plane to Walter Reed in the morning.” She hung up the phone, and everyone held their breath. “They found her.”

“Oh, thank God,” Alan said when he approached Patricia. “She’s hurt?”

“Yes, Alan, she’s hurt. They don’t know how badly yet, but she hasn’t regained consciousness. They are checking her over at the base and flying her back here later this afternoon, their time. She’ll be at Walter Reed by tomorrow evening.”

“I’m going with you,” Alan stated, standing in front of Patricia.

“I think you need to. She needs us there with her.”

Justin stood and approached the pair. “I’m coming too.”

Patricia frowned and shot him what he assumed to be her intimidating look. "Exactly who might you be?"

"Justin Wilder," he answered.

Patricia physically bristled when he said his name. "Ah, yes, Mr. Wilder. The man Katrina chose to go back to Iraq to get away from."

"That's enough, Patricia," Alan growled.

"I appreciate your sentiments, ma'am, but what's between Katrina and me is between us."

"How can you stand there and act like you are innocent in this whole thing! She chose to leave here, leave her family because of you." Her green eyes snapped at him in her anger.

"That may very well be true, ma'am, but it is a situation I plan to rectify, which is why I plan to go to Washington, D.C. with you and Mr. Jamieson tomorrow."

"What if she won't listen to you?"

"Then I'll make her listen."

A very undignified, unladylike snort left her mouth at his words. "If you think that, Mr. Wilder, you don't know my Katrina very well."

Okay, I've had enough snarky comments from the woman who left her child at birth for her career. "Your Katrina? My understanding of the situation, ma'am, is that you left her with her father at birth for your career. If you think you have any more knowledge of your daughter's personality than I do, you are sadly mistaken. How much time have you spent with her over the last several months?" Her anger deflated and she dropped her gaze to the floor. "Well, let me tell you something. Katrina is about the most passionate woman I have ever met. When she cares, she cares deeply and underneath all of her tough bravado beats the heart of a very feminine woman. Did you know the walls of her townhouse are painted pale pastels?"

Patricia raised her eyes, and the shock shined brightly in her eyes. "No."

"Did you know she has a wide variety of music in her collection?"

Everything from country music to heavy metal rock.”

“No.”

The crowd around them grew silent.

“Did you know she can ride a horse better than some cowboys I know? Did you know she likes red wine over any other kind of alcohol? Did you know she cries when she watches love stories at the movies?”

“No.”

“Well, General Langston, I do. Even if Katrina and I weren’t on the best of terms when she left, I think I know her pretty well. The one thing she doesn’t know is I love her, and it’s something I plan to rectify as soon as I see her.”

Alan Jamieson shot him a confused look.

“No, sir, Katrina and I weren’t engaged. She just told you that because she didn’t want you to give up after your stroke. She wanted to give you something to work for, like walking her down the aisle.”

Alan shook his head in amazement. “She would do something like that.”

“Now, if y’all will excuse me, I have flight plans to make.” Justin turned on his heel to leave, but before he did, he stopped at Katrina’s grandmother’s side and kissed her on the cheek. “I’ll see you again soon.”

She gently touched his face and gave him the biggest smile he had ever seen. “You’ll be good for her, and I can’t wait to see the great-grandbabies you two make.”

He chuckled softly as he felt the heat of a blush curl up his neck to splash across his cheeks. “You are one smart lady.”

“Just remember that cowboy.”

He gave her his best dimpled smile and a soft chuckle before he rose and headed for the front door.

Chapter Seventeen

Her head felt like it wanted to explode. The pain shooting through her brain made her want to claw her eyes out and throw them across the room. She moaned softly and tried to pry her eyes open.

The asshole standing above her, pried open her eye and shined the bright light inside, sending sharp pain zinging through her head, and she groaned. She raised her hand to slap it away, but it fell back to the bed weakly. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

“Major Jamieson, can you hear me?”

She moaned again.

“Major, open your eyes.”

If I could, I would, ass-wipe. God, my head hurts!

After a moment, she slowly lifted her lids and blinked several times, trying to bring her vision back in focus. A not-so-bad looking guy leaned over her in a white coat with Captain’s bars gracing his broad shoulders. She could vaguely make out the nameplate above the pocket of his lab coat. Martin.

“Major?”

She licked her lips and ground out, “What?”

He chuckled. “Better. Glad you are back with us.”

Her throat felt parched, and her lips were cracked, but she managed to croak, “Where the hell am I?”

“Walter Reed.”

Frown lines settled between her eyes, and she closed them for a moment. Thinking made her head hurt worse, but she had to piece together what happened. She couldn’t remember.

“What?”

“What happened?”

She slowly nodded.

“You were shot down over enemy territory in Iraq. They couldn’t find you for a bit. You must have gotten a severe concussion in the wreck because you wandered away from your plane, and they found you a couple of miles away.”

She cleared her throat. “Smitty?”

“He’s fine. Just a few bumps and bruises. He happened to be knocked out too, so he couldn’t tell them where you went.”

“Am I okay?”

“You’ll be fine. You had us worried for a bit with your concussion, but since you have regained consciousness, the prognosis is much better.”

“How long?”

“How long were you out?”

“Yeah.”

“A few days.”

“Damn,” she murmured softly, not at all like she wanted it to come out. “My family?”

“They are aware of your whereabouts.” He chuckled and said, “Your mother wasn’t about to let anyone tell her they didn’t know where you were.”

“My mother?”

“General Langston?”

Katrina frowned. *What the hell does she care what happens to me?*

“Both of your parents are here. I didn’t realize you had such connections, Major. A Colonel for a father and a General for a mother?”

Her shoulder lifted in a half shrug.

He started to move toward the door as he said, “I’ll check on you after a while. I know your parents want to come in and see you.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

“Oh, and by the way, just so you aren’t concerned because of the accident and all the testing, the baby is fine.”

Her eyes widened in shock. *What the hell is he talking about now? I’m not pregnant.* “Baby?”

“Yeah. We did an ultrasound to make sure the fetus was nice and snug.”

Her mouth dropped open while she searched her mind for the last time she had bled. *It’s been a few months now. I didn’t have one before I left and I’ve been over here for over a month. I didn’t even think about it with all the stress, but I took birth control. How can this be?*

Captain Martin tilted his head slightly to the right and peered at her with concern. “By the look on your face, I’m assuming you didn’t know.”

She cleared her throat, trying to dislodge the lump attempting to choke off her air. “No, I...”

“I’ll keep your parents out for a bit so you can absorb the news. I have a copy of the ultrasound on your chart if you would like to see it.”

“Yes, please. This is a bit of a shock.”

“I can imagine. I’ll be right back.”

He disappeared then, only to return a few minutes later with the picture and a piece of paper. “Here.” He held up the ultrasound picture, but she didn’t have a clue as to what she was looking at, and it must have showed on her face.

Pointing to what appeared to be a bubble with a small blob in the middle; he tried to explain what everything was. “This is the placenta and this,” his said as his finger stopped at the blob, “is the baby. I would say by this, you are about eight weeks. Of course, I’m not an OB and you will want to see one pretty soon so you can get some pre-natal care.”

Tears formed in her eyes and slid into her hair as she weakly grasped the picture in his hand. *This would explain the nausea I had*

since I arrived in Iraq and the unreal need for sleep. She blinked back the tears. *Justin's baby.*

"I'll leave you alone now. If you need anything, just hit the button on the side of the bed."

"Thanks, Captain."

"You're welcome, Major."

She smiled weakly. "It's Katrina."

"Okay, Katrina. You can call me Adam."

"Thanks again, Adam."

"I'll be back after a while. Don't try to get up on your own. You are still very weak and will probably be lightheaded for a bit yet."

"I won't."

He chuckled softly and disappeared out the door as she lifted her gaze to the ceiling above her. *Justin's baby.* Her hand settled on her still flat stomach and her heart hammered in her chest. *Now what the hell am I going to do?*

She must have dozed off after the tears had stopped. The next thing she felt was a warm hand picking up hers as she opened her eyes and smiled.

"Hey, Dad."

"I can't leave you alone for a minute, can I?"

"I guess not."

"I hope you at least got your target before you hit the dirt."

She chuckled softly before she said, "Yeah. We had already finished our run and were headed back. I guess this is what I get for not keeping my mind on track."

"Daydreaming, were you?"

Heat flushed her cheeks, and she dropped her eyes.

"Justin?"

Her gaze returned to her father's as she shrugged. "I should have seen it coming, Dad. I lost my concentration and dropped the ball."

"It happens to the best of us, sweetheart."

"Not you."

“Yeah—even me.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“It’s true, baby. I’ve done it, too.”

Her gaze found the intimidating figure of her mother as she propped herself against the wall before it returned to her father.

“I’m glad Smitty is okay.”

“He’s fine. He’ll probably be by after a while to see you. He is here too.”

Patricia approached the bed.

“What are you doing here?”

“I came because I care.”

Kat snorted in disbelief. “You don’t care about anyone or anything but yourself.”

“If that were true, why did I pull every string I had to find out whether they had found you? Why did I put up with your grandmother, your father, and every other family member at her house for several hours? You are my daughter, Katrina, whether you want to admit it or not. And just so you know, probably every member under my command as well as your father’s, knows that fact now.”

“Not by any admission of yours, I would imagine.”

“God, you are a bitch,” Patricia said as she ran her hand behind her neck.

“I get it, honestly—Mom.” Katrina heard a soft chuckle coming from near the door, and when she turned toward the noise, her heart dropped into her stomach when her eyes met those of the man who had stolen the errant organ and refused to give it back. “Justin,” slipped from between her lips on a whisper. She almost whimpered as she fought the desire that whipped through her like wildfire.

“Miss me?”

His arrogance pissed her off. Tamping down the craving for his body racing through her with the look in his eyes, she snapped, “Not in this lifetime.”

He sauntered toward the bed as her gaze took in the smooth roll of his hips. Her lips parted slightly, and she licked them nervously.

“You are a liar, too.”

“We’ll leave you alone, Kat. Your mother and I have some things to discuss anyway. We’ll be back in about an hour.”

“Sure, Dad.” He turned and looked at Justin, but she couldn’t read the expression in his eyes before he and Patricia disappeared out the door. Justin took the seat next to the bed. “What are you doing here?”

“I figured there were some things we needed to work out.”

She gave him her best, ‘I’m waiting’ look, but didn’t respond.

“You scared the hell out of me—you know that, right?”

“How so?”

He raked his fingers through his hair. “When Mark told me you had been shot down and they couldn’t find you...”

“What, Justin?”

“You have no idea the thoughts running through my mind at the time.”

“Like?”

“The first one happened to be—were you dead? I couldn’t handle that, Kat. My heart about stopped when he said they didn’t know where you were.”

“It did?”

“Yeah, it did. Then I spent the entire evening at your grandmother’s, listening to your parents threaten people with their lives and their careers if they didn’t tell them your status.”

“You were at my Gram’s?”

“Yes, and by the way, she thinks we’ll make wonderful great-grandbabies for her.”

Her hand slid to her stomach in a caress, and she let her fingers splay across her belly. His eyes took in the movement, but he didn’t say anything. “She would say that.”

He chuckled. “You are a lot like your grandmother.”

“I’ve heard those words before.”

He picked up her hand and entwined their fingers together intimately. Heat zinged up her arm to settle somewhere in her chest, making it ache for the love of the man next to her.

"I hate how we left things when you took off."

She closed her eyes for a moment before she opened them again and stared into his. "Me too. I missed you."

A smile rippled across his mouth and the devastating dimples peeked out of his cheeks. "I missed you too, baby. God, you have no idea how much I missed you."

Tears sparkled on her lashes when her own smile lifted the corners of her mouth. One lone tear slipped down her cheek, and he reach over, wiping it off with his thumb.

"Why are you crying?"

"Because I never thought I would see you again, much less have you tell me you missed me." She sniffed, and her other hand wiped at the tears in her eyes.

"There is something else I need to say. Mark gave me your email address, and you have no idea how many times I sat down to write to you, but I just couldn't put everything down. I didn't want to. I wanted to tell you in person and you were thousands of miles away."

She held her tongue, afraid he wouldn't finish.

He dropped his gaze to their hands for a moment before his brown eyes returned to hers. "I'm not sure when it happened or how, since I never thought I would ever find someone like you. Somehow in the last couple of months, you wrapped my heart around your little finger, and I would do anything for you."

"What are you trying to say?"

He chuckled. "You need me to spell it out for you, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"I love you, Katrina Jamieson, and if you don't tell me you love me too, I will hunt you down and drive you nuts until you do."

She laughed, and the tears started again, clouding her vision until she wiped them away. "I love you, Justin. I think I fell in love with

you the first night you took me home and got me drunk on whiskey and your eyes.”

He laughed along with her and said, “You came on to me first, young lady.”

“Mmm...very true, but you didn’t resist very hard.”

“Are you kidding me? I had one of the most gorgeous women I had seen in a long time draping herself over me like a blanket on a Wyoming winter night. I wasn’t about to deny you or myself.”

He shifted closer until his lips grazed hers. She moaned softly and opened her mouth to take his probing tongue deep inside, letting it tangle with hers until they were both breathless.

When he finally sat back in the chair, he said, “That will have to come later. You need to rest and recuperate before I can make you scream my name as you cum around me.”

She sighed and smiled. “I love it when you talk dirty.”

The dimples peeked out of his cheeks again as he whispered, “Mmm...someone else I know likes to talk dirty, too.” A mock frown marred his face a moment before he said playfully, “I distinctly remember a certain woman saying something like, “harder and fas...”

She clamped her hand over his mouth before he could finish his words while her cheeks warmed with color. “I remember, thank you very much.”

He nipped at her palm before pulling it from his mouth. “So do I, and I can’t wait to hear those words again, so you better hurry up and get better.”

His gaze took a lazy trip down her body and he frowned when he saw the picture lying next to her on the bed. *Shit! The ultrasound picture.*

She tried to grab it before he did, but she wasn’t quick enough when he picked it up. “What’s this?”

“I...uh...”

He looked at the picture, reading the top as his eye skimmed the information.

“You’re pregnant?”

She couldn’t meet his stare. *Damn it! This is not how he needed to find out.*

“Answer me, Katrina.”

She shrugged and tried to be nonchalant. “I guess so.”

“You guess? You mean you didn’t know?” He stood up and started to pace while he ran his fingers through his hair.

“No, I didn’t—not until a little while ago. The doctor told me not long before my parents came into the room. Maybe two hours?”

“Why didn’t you tell me when you saw me?”

“It hadn’t sunk in yet. Besides, I didn’t want you saying you wanted to be with me because of a child. At the time, I didn’t know exactly why you were here. I hoped it was because you wanted to be with me, but I wasn’t sure.”

“I love you. I want to be with you no matter whether you are pregnant or not.”

“I didn’t know that when I first saw you again.”

“Well, now you do, and if there is to be a child between us, it just makes me love you more. But there is one little problem now.”

“Problem?”

“Yeah. We’ll have to move up the wedding.”

She inhaled sharply. “Wedding? What wedding?”

“Ours.”

“I don’t remember you askin’, cowboy.”

“Mmm...I’ve been neglectful in my duties then.” He sank onto one knee next to her bed and pulled out a small box from his shirt pocket that she hadn’t noticed before. Her breath caught in her throat when he opened the box and pulled out the most gorgeous diamond solitaire she had ever seen. “Will you marry me, Katrina?”

Tears swam in her eyes again as the love in his gaze shone bright for her to see.

“Will you?”

She nodded her head while her palm rested against his cheek,

tracing the dimple she loved so much. “Yes.”

Epilogue

Katrina relaxed against her husband's chest while the flames licked at the wood in the fireplace. Sparks flew up the chimney with each pop and crack echoing through the room. The children had all been put down for the night as the adults shared conversation.

She loved his family already even though she hadn't known them long. The love between the Wilder siblings encompassed her and made her feel special. Spending Thanksgiving in Wyoming at the Rocking W brought her into the fold with open arms, and she loved Justin all the more for it. When he had mentioned it at first, she hesitated. She had never met any of his brothers, only Jamie, but when they stepped off the plane, she knew she would care for them each in her own way.

Her hands were wrapped around the coffee mug she cradled while Justin's fingers did a slow caress of her arm. His touch always drove her crazy, and when he traced circles on her skin, the increasing dampness of her panties rubbed against her clit enticingly. *Would it be rude to grab him and run for the bedroom?*

He nuzzled her neck and whispered in her ear, "Mmm...are you thinking the same thing I'm thinking?"

"Maybe." She grinned as she felt his cock throb against her back.

"When are you two headed back to Nevada?" Chase asked while he sat propped against the leather armchair, Abby securely encased in his embrace.

"In a day or two I imagine," Justin replied. "I can't be gone too

long. I've got a big shipment of cattle headed to Japan. Besides you know how much I *love* Wyoming winters."

The group around them chuckled.

"Yeah, we know bro," Cole added before he buried his nose in his wife's neck, and she giggled.

"Y'all gag me. I'm going to bed," Jamie complained when she got up. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Sorry, sis. Didn't mean to make you uncomfortable," Justin said.

Jamie rolled her eyes. "Sure, Justin. I just love watching you three drool all over your spouses. Night."

Everyone said good night, and she shook her head before she disappeared down the hall where she and Samantha had taken up residence for the night.

Abby's Cheshire grin caught Katrina's attention for a moment, and she and Chase exchanged looks before Justin's hand moved to her gently rounding belly, drawing her focus back to him. "You okay, babe?"

"I'm fine, Daddy. Stop worrying."

"I love you. I'm supposed to worry."

She caught the smile and a soft shake of her head from Abby out of the corner of her eye as Justin's brothers laughed.

"What?"

"I never thought I would see the day my big brother would act like a coddling mother," Cole answered.

"Mind your own business, Cole. You are one to talk. Can Carrie even take a shower without your help?"

"Hell no! What fun is that?"

The easy laughter brought a smile to her lips.

Abby sipped the wine in her hand before she asked, "Kat? Have you two decided on any names?"

"Not really." She shot a coy look at Justin before her focus returned to her sister-in-law. "Our *discussions* usually end with a tumble in the sheets."

“And what, pray tell, is wrong with that?” Justin asked while his fingers moved her hair to the other shoulder, giving him better access to the skin peeking out of her shirt.

“Nothing sweetheart, I’m just saying.”

Abby smiled secretly as she brought her wine glass back to her lips and said, “You may want to lean a little toward a boy’s name.”

Katrina’s startled gaze fixed on Abby. “But...”

Chase, Cole, and Carrie chuckled, and Chase shook his head. “You’ll get used to it, Katrina. She loves to spring things like that on people. I think she’s a little sadistic in her own way.”

Justin’s shocked expression focused on her face, and he said, “Babe? Is there something you need to tell me?”

“Well, I had planned to wait until we were alone, but I had an ultrasound the other day—remember, at my last doctor’s appointment?”

“Yeah.”

Katrina shrugged and dropped her eyes from his until he forced her to raise her face again with a finger under her chin. “They are ninety-nine percent sure it’s a boy.”

“Seriously?”

She smiled. “Yes, seriously, so you had better quit distracting me whenever we discuss names. We need to figure out what to call this little guy before he makes his debut.”

She turned in his arms and he murmured, “I love you, Kat.”

“I love you, too.”

Running her tongue up the sexy column of his neck, she finally reached his ear and whispered, “I never thought I would ever say those words to anyone, but you stole my heart when you took me on the ride of my life.”

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sandy Sullivan is a romance author, who, when not writing, spends her time with her husband Shaun on their farm in middle Tennessee. She loves to ride her horses, play with their dogs and relax on the porch, enjoying the rolling hills of her home south of Nashville. County music is a passion of hers and she loves to listen to it while she writes.

She is an avid reader of romance novels and enjoys reading Nora Roberts, Jude Deveraux and Susan Wiggs. Finding new authors and delving into something different helps feed the need for literature. A registered nurse by education, she loves to help people and spread the enjoyment of romance to those around her with her novels. She loves cowboys so you'll find many of her novels have sexy men in tight jeans and cowboy boots.

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