



Carnal Passions Presents

Hell Bent

By

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&
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Carnal Passions

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Dedication

In loving memory of the greatest Marine I ever knew, this is for you Chris. Special thanks to my many other Marine friends for their service: Mike, Russ, Bert, Mitch, Nick and Richard. To the special group who are now serving in Iraq, thank you is just not enough: Jason, Russell, Brad, Joal, Takashi, Jason, Brian, Mel, Ricky, Christian and Brian. May God bless and keep you all, because our country is nothing without the warriors.

~Arlene

I would like to say thank you to those who have read and critiqued my work; Amy, Lindy and Tonya. My writing is dedicated to my children and in memory of my mother, Judy.

~Judith

One

Mindy took a deep breath and started her car. It seemed that getting to and from work was like a tense scene from a thriller movie. Pierre, her work assistant, rounded a corner ahead of her and she followed. Parking garages were spooky enough without the threat of a looming stalker. A grey SUV backed out ahead of her but she thought little of it. When the SUV didn't move, however, her heart stuttered into a faster pace. She scrambled to open the center console. After a tense moment of panic, her hand wrapped around the familiar grip of a gun. Her father had taught her to shoot even before she knew how to ride a bicycle, and if it meant the difference between life and death, she wasn't afraid to pull the trigger. She blew her horn. Nothing. The pounding in her ears matched her heartbeat as pure adrenaline surged through her veins. She jammed her car into reverse and backed quickly up the lane behind her. If she couldn't get out through the exit, then she'd damn well take the entrance. She wasn't about to sit there and wait for someone to take her.

Her mind flitted back to when she had realized that the eerie feeling of being watched turned out to be true. She couldn't understand why she, of all women, would have a stalker. She'd only moved to San Diego six or so years ago and she had very few friends. She had even fewer enemies, or at least she'd thought so.

She backed into an empty space, turned the car around then sped toward the entrance as if her life depended on it, and it may have. Her heart sank when the SUV pulled into the lane and blocked her.

"Oh, God," she sighed as her tires squealed to a stop.

She crammed the car into reverse and disappeared out of sight of the SUV once again. How long would she have to play this cat and mouse game? Would it come down to taking a human life? She wasn't willing to be a victim.

She brought her Firebird to a stop and picked up her phone. She punched in Pat's number. He was closest to her location and she needed a big brother like never before. Of course, it would mean certain death for the person in the SUV if Pat actually caught him in the act of harassing her. Her brothers, Pat and Pete, were her self proclaimed keepers since childhood. When their father had attempted to make her self sufficient, the twins could see that little girls were just different than boys. They knew that even if their father said otherwise, she, six years their junior, would always have two big brothers to turn to. Their protectiveness had only grown more intense when she'd moved in with them a few years ago.

"Hey, li'l sister." Pat's smooth tone flowed through the phone.

"Pat, I need help." Her voice wasn't as fearful as it was desperate.

She searched the dim garage as mounting fear wracked her mind with wavering apparitions and shadows that disappeared into the dark distant corners. She wasn't the kind of girl who went screaming into the night at the first sign of trouble. She fought to keep calm. In her family, she'd learned that panic was most often the killer in a dangerous situation.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm trying to leave work. I need you to get here *now*," she ordered. "A grey SUV has blocked me at the exit of the garage. I went around to the entrance but it had already moved and blocked me there, too."

"I'm on my way," he said as the sound of boots on pavement filled the phone. "Stay on the phone with me. Don't get out of the car and if he gets near you blow his ass off."

She worked her way back to the exit and wasn't shocked to find the SUV waiting there. Any other time there would have been twenty people wanting to leave the parking

garage, but just like in the movies, this time she was alone.

Logic told her this game could be never ending, but with a little quick thinking she might just make it out in one piece and save her stalker's life in the process. Pat wouldn't be an understanding brother if he got within arm's length of the person in the SUV. Little did the man know that his life depended on her escape as much as her own. She took a deep breath and squinted in thought; odds were good the stalker had returned to the exit to block her again. She glanced at the gun in her lap, took a deep calming breath and turned the car around.

"Do you recognize the truck?" Pat asked as he ran across the Marine Corp Base parking lot, a few miles away. His sudden voice coming out of her cell phone startled her.

"No," she said. "I don't think I've ever seen it before."

"I'm leaving now," Pat informed her as the sound of an engine roaring to life filled her car.

She remembered the anger on her brothers' faces when a man had called their home and challenged them to try and keep him from kidnapping her. Pat had just walked in from a week of maneuvers and Pete had returned the day before from another Hell Week.

"Hello," Pete had answered.

"Is this Mindy's brother?" a male voice asked.

Pete allowed his eyes to find Mindy sitting on the couch. "Yes, it is, this is Pete. Do you need to speak with her?"

"No. I called to talk to you."

Pete furrowed his brow. "Me?"

Mindy quirked her eyebrows, put down the magazine she was glancing through and twisted on the couch to watch him.

The person laughed. "You would want to know that I plan to kidnap your sister, wouldn't you?"

"Who the hell is this?"

Mindy tilted her head in confusion as Pete glared at the phone. "Who is it?" she mouthed.

Pete shrugged and shook his head, the ferocity never leaving his eyes.

"It doesn't matter who I am," the voice rasped. "Can you keep me from taking her?"

"I don't know who you are," Pete growled, "but you're talking crazy stuff that'll get you killed."

Pat walked from the kitchen with a banana in hand and looked first to Pete then Mindy. "Who is he talking to?"

She shrugged, pulled her feet onto the sofa and turned her full attention toward Pete. "I don't know."

"Try me," the man challenged. "If you think you're such a bad-ass, come and get me."

"You stay away from my sister," Pete warned, seconds before the line went dead. He turned to his siblings. Mindy twisted at the corner of a throw pillow and stood up, a thread of anxiety creeping down her spine.

"What the heck was that about?" Pat asked. He used the banana to point to the phone Pete held.

"Some guy just threatened to kidnap Mindy," Pete explained, meeting Pat's eyes in some sort of twin-like exchange of thoughts.

"Kidnap me?" Mindy's voice shot up an octave. "You think he was serious?"

"Don't worry," Pete said, his voice softening. "Surely he's not that stupid."

Her hands shook and fear traveled through her veins like a cold drink through a straw. "Why would anyone want to kidnap me?"

Pat cut his eyes toward her, peeling the banana and taking a gigantic bite. "Sounds like you might have broken one too many hearts."

She scowled at him. Threats of kidnapping had to be taken seriously. Kidnappings rarely had a happy ending, and the last thing she wanted was to end up dead, especially if she didn't know why. "As if."

"He didn't say why." Pete checked the screen on the phone. "Private caller. He just said that if I thought I was such a bad-ass to come and get him."

"Mindy?" Pat called. "Mindy!"

She gasped as her mind returned from the memories. "I'm here."

"Be careful, and watch what's going on around you," Pat advised. "You've got to be at the top of your game. Don't let yourself get distracted, keep your mind on what you're doing. He could be waiting for an opportunity to walk right

up to you."

Her brothers always spoke of the power of distraction and confusion that could be the difference between winning the battle and licking your wounds. It was strange how the feeling of being trapped made people do strange things. They would spend so much time, effort and thought trying to escape that they would overlook their obvious weaknesses. The problem was that Mindy wasn't on the battlefield, and something told her that if she slacked for even a moment she'd become someone's personal play thing.

She pressed the speaker option on her phone and threw it into the passenger's seat. "I wouldn't advise anyone to walk up to me right now."

"I'll be there in about two more minutes," he said. "Just hang tough."

Her nerves were so alert that her skin seemed to crawl. She felt like one of those stupid women in horror movies who would walk weaponless into a basement to investigate a noise, when she should've known damn well the killer was there waiting. She'd always said she wasn't that way, yet here she was trapped in a parking garage as the sun faded more with each passing minute. She drove toward the exit ramp. The SUV wasn't there. She zoomed down the lane far too fast but her life probably depended on getting out of there. The sound of her front spoiler and bumper giving way when she made contact with the street echoed over the phone in a loud crash.

"Mindy?" Pat's voice filled with alarm.

"I'm okay." She glanced back to the empty roadway behind her. "But I think I need a new bumper."

The relief was evident in his laugh. He wouldn't have to call his parents and tell them that he, a highly skilled Marine, had allowed someone to snatch his sister. Someone actually making an attempt to take her had also brought the game to a whole new level. It was a level she wasn't sure the stalker would want to play. When it came to their little sister, the twins would kick ass and ask questions later.

Mindy stomped the accelerator, leaving the SUV that rounded the corner to deal with the sound of her screaming engine and the smell of hot rubber. Ahead she could see Pat's truck approaching and he ordered her to call her other

brother and make her way to him where she would be safe. Pat was no doubt going to look for the mysterious SUV, and with any luck, he'd find it.

As much as her two brute brothers got on her nerves, they were dependable. She could count on them. Of course, they were always bringing guys by the apartment in hopes she'd fall in love with a military man. They'd invited her to move to California with them because they knew if she kept dating civilians, she would eventually find one she liked well enough to marry. And to them, that was unacceptable.

She sighed, then dialed Pete's phone and explained what happened in the parking garage, and asked him to meet her close by. Leaving her car in a department store parking lot, she climbed into the truck with Pete after he pulled into the parking spot beside her.

Pete's cell phone buzzed and he answered it, pressing the speaker option. "Yeah?"

"I found our boy," Pat said. Mindy sucked in a breath and pushed her back straight against the leather seat.

"Who is he?"

"Don't know that," Pat said. "But there is a Navy sticker on the truck. I think he knows he fucked up. He's headed back toward base now."

"We'll be there in about ten minutes." Pete pressed down on the gas pedal, speeding through a yellow light. "We'll meet you at the gate."

~ * ~

Pete stopped the truck at the base gate and Pat climbed inside. Pat wrapped his arm around Mindy and gave her a squeeze, commending her on keeping a level head while all hell was breaking loose. A warm sensation of pride bubbled deep inside her. A compliment from her brothers, especially for bravery, was the equivalent of getting a silver star and living to tell the story.

Mindy listened to the conversation between the twins as Pete concluded that he knew the stalker. It seemed that although Mindy was the target, she wasn't the reason for the attempted kidnapping. Pete, an instructor for the Navy SEAL's BUDs Training Facility, noticed a weak link trainee by the name of Sanback. When he was convinced Sanback couldn't handle the strenuous job, he'd pushed him harder,

knowing he'd make the crawl of shame up the beach and ring the bell in defeat. Then he would finally head back to his regular MOS with his tail tucked between his legs. Pete had been right and Sanback quit after two hours of surf torture, but not before standing nose to nose with Pete, his mouth spewing obscenities for causing him to lose his life long dream of becoming a SEAL.

Mindy could sense the tension in the vehicle. Her brothers' tempers were hotter than the leather seat beneath her. Once her brothers laid eyes on Sanback, he'd have hell to pay. She wasn't proud that she needed her big brothers as bodyguards, but no one else had ever volunteered for the job. Pete pulled along side the gate's guard shack, shoved the transmission into park and locked his eyes on the Marine on duty. Mindy turned her attention to the young Marine, and listened as he discussed the situation with Pete. She sighed with relief when the Marine called for two extra MPs to assist in the search for Sanback.

They waited, impatient, until an old Hummer came into sight. Pete and Pat stepped from the truck and stomped toward the MPs. Mindy watched as her brothers explained the situation to the men inside the Humvee. She sighed when one of the MPs motioned her brothers to follow them.

The twins quickly made their way back to the truck, got inside and closed the doors behind them. The silence was deafening, but it was obvious they weren't going to let her in on whatever they'd learned from the MPs. Logic suggested that they were headed toward Sanback's quarters, but her better judgment wouldn't allow her to ask. Pete advanced the accelerator and the truck jumped forward. This scene reminded her of life on base at Ft. Bragg when she was a child. She hadn't liked the feeling of being on a military base then, and she certainly didn't like it now. She wasn't sure if it was the base itself or the people there that made her so uncomfortable. Military men were too unpredictable, too cocky and too willing to prove themselves through bloodshed.

She gripped the edge of the seat with both hands and locked her eyes on Pete's sidearm laying in the console tray between her feet. She swallowed hard and glanced toward Pete. His eyes were locked on the roadway ahead, he

seemed set on his mission and that mission was to find the man responsible for blocking her in the garage. She blinked against the cool air that flowed from the vent in front of her, and then turned her attention toward Pat. He sat erect in the seat, his right leg bouncing with anxiousness as his left thumb drummed against his thigh. His nostrils flared slightly and he reached for the door handle. The truck began to slow and she realized that the Hummer had come to a stop at a housing unit.

"Stay here." Pat ordered, his eyes meeting hers in a kind of warning.

She nodded and took a deep breath when the twins jumped from the truck like a couple of cold blooded crocodiles looking for dinner. She wasn't sure if she was ready for this, but there was no stopping it. She wanted the stalker to disappear from her life, but she hadn't been so lucky. She didn't like needing a hero; her father hadn't raised her that way. Self-sufficient since she was a child, she could do anything she set her mind to, and that included standing up to the bullies on the school playgrounds. At sixteen, a slight 101 pounds, she'd even fought off a date one night when he wanted more than a kiss. She'd kept that to herself for more than one reason, but then she'd kept a lot of things to herself through the years.

She recognized the grey SUV sitting in a parking space to her right and her breath caught. She hadn't really imagined until now that the driver might actually have the capability of taking her. The thought of what might have happened if he'd actually succeeded made her skin crawl. She'd always considered herself a strong person who would rather be killed than abducted. Perhaps there were people who would rather be alive, and face the unknown. Not Mindy. Being kidnapped would mean she'd lost control of her own life, that she'd been weak. Losing control wasn't an option in her world. No, her choices had been to avoid being kidnapped or die trying. She would rather be found lying dead on the pavement than somewhere no one would ever look for her with an evil stranger.

The entire stalking episode seemed harmless at first. Someone paying a bit too much attention to her, until it quickly escalated. When Mindy returned home one morning

after a mysterious phone call, she found her bedroom window broken and a rose on her bed.

She had wished a thousand times since that day that she'd looked at the things the stalker left on her bed. At the moment, however, the only thing on her mind had been to call for help. Her brothers wouldn't tell her what had been left behind, but it was obvious they'd taken it as warning that his threats were serious.

~ * ~

As one of two MPs pounded on the quarter's door, the other stood patiently on the sidewalk. He was tall, fit and even wearing that ridiculous camouflage uniform, he was hot. She blinked rapidly. The feelings that bubbled to the surface were as unexpected as an earthquake, and less welcome. It didn't matter how brutally sexy he was, he was off limits. All military men were, without exception. She'd grown up in a military family, lived by military rules and she wanted nothing more than to escape the only lifestyle she'd ever known. She didn't want any part of the arrogance that usually went along with such men. She wanted an average Joe, no more and no less.

A young man walked onto the sidewalk where the MPs summoned him, and Mindy wondered how many hours he had watched her. He'd probably spent more time looking at her than any other man on the planet. He didn't look like a stalker, at least by the dramatic movie description. He didn't have wild, crazy eyes and he certainly didn't appear mentally disturbed. She squirmed against the oddness of admitting to herself that he was handsome, or at least as handsome as a stalker could be. However, he had turned her life upside down and left her to deal with the turmoil.

Pete stepped toward the stalker and the MP blocked him as if he were a worthy opponent for the Navy SEAL. Mindy snorted at his attempted.

The tension escalated. The MP had a job to do, but she was sure Pete wasn't about to back down. He had earned the title of Navy SEAL, and it wasn't because he'd lagged behind in hand to hand combat training. He was as skilled at killing with his bare hands as most butchers were at extracting a steak from a fresh kill.

"Don't do nothing stupid man," the MP suggested.

"Stand down, I'll handle it."

Pete arched his head the slightest bit and squinted at the MP. "You can handle it when I'm finished."

"Negative," the MP stated with a solid jaw and eyes of cold steel. "Stand down."

"Stand down, my ass." Pete moved another step closer to the stalker. His body seemed to ripple with ferocity.

The MP put his hands on Pete. Big mistake. She sucked in a quick intake of breath as she thought about Pete going to jail for kicking the MP's butt. She hadn't meant for any of this to happen. It seemed only natural to call her brothers, but she was wondering if she might have been better off to have handled it on her own.

"I won't tell you again," the MP growled as he furrowed his brows in warning. "Stand down!"

Mindy held her breath and leaned forward in anxious anticipation of Pete's reaction. Pete stepped back and Mindy had to admit she was impressed the MP managed to avoid Pete's wrath. She studied the MP's rigid stance as he glared at Pete, almost daring him to take another step. A smile teased her lips when Pete didn't move.

~ * ~

As the second of the two MPs questioned the stalker, the first walked with the twins toward the truck where Mindy sat. She squirmed. She hadn't expected a man in a uniform to ever light a fire in her, but this MP did.

"Ma'am, are you okay?" he asked as he looked at her with blue eyes that seemed foreign to a girl who came from six generations of brown eyes.

She nodded. "I'm okay." He didn't need to know about the sudden heat that engulfed her. He was none the wiser that her core was throbbing with a demand that left her fighting for breath.

"Is that the truck that was chasing you?" He pointed to the SUV to her right.

She forced herself to look away from those beautiful eyes. "Yes sir, that's it."

"I understand that you've had a stalker for the past few weeks," he stated with understanding.

She wanted to touch the five o'clock shadow on his face as he talked. She wanted to feel the demanding touch of

his hands against her skin. She wanted him alone in a big soft bed. His taut, muscled body assured her he could make all her sexual fantasies come true. Her thoughts drifted as her mind tried to rationalize her crazy thoughts. She had sworn off military men long ago. But her brothers were as hell bent on her marrying a military man as she was hell bent against it. For once in her life, she wanted to be normal, not having to deal with deployments and weeks of uncertainty during wartime. An average Joe, someone with a house in the suburbs and a job at the local factory. She would be fine without a man who knew more ways to kill than he knew how to love.

"Ma'am?" he questioned, lifting his clipboard in attempt to get her attention.

The uncontrollable laughter of her brothers brought her back. Their high five couldn't have been any more obvious if they had told the MP why they were celebrating. Her face burned, but it still wasn't as hot as the fire that ignited in her loins. She looked hard at the twins, daring them to utter a single word.

"I'm sorry, yes." She sat straighter in the seat and met the MP's gaze. "Phone calls, one break in, flowers, pictures that my brothers won't let me see...and now this."

His blue eyes searched her as if he were feeding off her energy. She couldn't control the sudden wetness rushing to her core any more than she could the wind. She held his stare, not knowing if she was comfortable with him seeing what she already knew was in her eyes. He was confident, enough so that he'd backed down Pete and she'd never thought that could happen. He seemed unbothered that she'd seen hungry lust in his eyes, but then she was certain that a man like him could have any woman he wanted.

"Yeah, man, she was certain it wasn't a boyfriend because she says nobody will ask her out because of us." Pat interjected and tossed her a wink. She folded her arms against her chest.

Her face couldn't have gotten any redder had it been on fire. That statement had been intended to prove a point to her brothers, not something for them to use against her. She'd even gone so far as to say that she was like the gold in Ft. Knox, because men might want her but they weren't

brave enough to try and get her.

The MP lowered his gaze and sucked in a quick audible nasal breath, fighting a smile as he realized her brothers' intent. "No offense, but I can't imagine that I'd ever let a brother stop me if I wanted to ask a girl out." His gaze met Pat's.

"See, Mindy, we rest our case." Pat nodded as he slapped his right hand onto the MP's shoulder. "This is the kind of man that you need."

She rolled her eyes, unsure if it was good or bad that the MP had made it known that her brothers wouldn't stop him. Of course, he hadn't asked, and for that she was thankful. The last thing she needed was to complicate her life with a man like him. But, wow, he was hot and she couldn't help imagining the fire that would burn if he touched his tongue to her clit.

"Pictures?" the MP quizzed. "It seems we've deviated from the subject."

Pete nodded and stepped away, asking the MP to follow. She'd probably never see the pictures that had been left on her bed. If only she'd taken time to pull them from beneath the covers. But she was too terrified to do anything but call for help. It wasn't everyday that she came home to find her window broken, her bed covers turned down and a single rose on her pillow. Of course, the twins had spotted the photos. The MP nodded and asked that the photos be brought to him as soon as possible.

"You also mentioned phone calls. Phone calls to where?" the MP asked, his eyes searching her.

"Work and home," she explained, squirming from the heat of his wandering eyes. "I work in the medical field and I live with my brothers."

"This has had our routine so screwed up the past few weeks that I was going nuts," Pete chimed in. "We've switched bedrooms so many times that I forget which one is mine. I swear I'm ready to hire her a date so we can get a break."

Her eyes grew large. She couldn't believe he'd crossed that line, too. There was no way she could hide the humiliation, anger and betrayal coursing through her. She

forced a grin, then looked at the MP. "As you can tell, my brothers are anxious to fix me up with someone because they don't want me to be like them, thirty-two and alone."

The MP tried to hide the grin on his face, but he was unsuccessful, and soon his perfect pearl-white teeth began to show. He shot a quick wink her way and stood silent while waiting for the brotherly reply.

"Ouch, that bites." Pat admitted, stepping forward to meet his little sister's gaze. "At least it hasn't been six..."

She gasped. That had also been a conversation she'd had with them while trying to figure out why she was being stalked. Since moving in with them six years ago, every man who had come to the apartment to pick her up for a date had left as scared as a pursued rabbit. Her brothers had probably threatened them within an inch of their lives. Pat had commented with a laugh that he didn't believe she was a virgin. She'd replied that her life had been normal up until the point she'd moved in with her self-assigned keepers. From that, the twins had drawn the conclusion that she had been six years without sex.

"Patrick Gregory Austin, if you finish that sentence, so help me God I'll jerk a knot in your ass the size of Texas," she sat erect, her face glowing and her fists clinched in defense.

Pete winked at her and turned his attention to the MP. "How long have you been in the Marines?"

"Five years with the Marines, and ten years in the Navy; two as a Seabee and eight with the SEALs," he replied, his chest puffing with pride.

She took a slow, deep breath and fought the feeling building within her. Not only was the MP a military man, but he was the worst kind. He was a Marine—cocky, arrogant, and fearless—like Pat. And a former SEAL, like Pete—oversexed, boastful and full of pride. She'd lived with those two elements for years and couldn't image the kind of man that would evolve from a combination of the two.

"I'm with the SEALs now. I've been doing BUD's training for the past three years," Pete said, his own chest puffing out as he reached a friendly hand toward the MP.

"I noticed your shirt. It brought back a lot of memories."

Pete's hand engaged with the MPs, and something inside her knew that the guy had to be special for Pete to set aside his pride and warm up to him. She'd never seen anyone, even their dad, back Pete into a corner that he didn't come out fighting. She smirked, wondering if Pete thought that the MP might be able to bring him down a few notches. If that was the case, then she was looking at the only man of his kind on earth.

"Excuse me, Pete, I'm sorry to interrupt your reunion, but could we please finish this so I can go home?" she said, exhaling a deep breath. She was getting far too worked up over the hot hunk of sex in front of her and she needed to get away.

The MP gazed back at her, his blue eyes telling her things words could not. His lips puckered the slightest bit as his eyes trailed onto her cleavage and, dumbstruck, her heart almost jumped out of her chest. It was as uncharacteristic of her to be intrigued by a warrior as it would be for a millionaire to weed a garden.

"I'm sorry about that." A coy expression teased the MP's face. "I have some good news and some bad news."

"Let's have it." Mindy sighed, her core throbbing so hard that she wondered if he could feel the vibrations.

"I don't have enough to hold him. But if you'll give me your phone numbers I'll get with NCIS about obtaining his phone records. It's possible that we can tie him to you that way."

She nodded with a smile. She had hoped for something a bit more reassuring, but it didn't seem likely. This wasn't television and the good guys didn't always win. It was her fear, however, that one of her brothers would end up in prison after beating the life out of her stalker.

"You're letting him go?" Pat shouted, stepping forward. "He's stalking my sister and you're going to let him walk?"

The MP shrugged. "It isn't that I don't want to take him in. It's just that I have no evidence."

"Let me guess, we need to call you *after* he kidnaps her?" Pete's face twisted as it grew red and tight.

"That's just the way the law works. I don't make the laws, I just enforce them." He nodded at Mindy. "Right now

it's his word against hers."

"You may let the bastard go, but after you leave, he won't be bothering anybody else's sister," Pete growled and turned his head toward Sanback with a confirming nod.

"You can't do that." The MP's face darkened and his stance tensed.

"The hell I can't," Pete bit back. "According to you, as long as you don't see it, it'll be his word against mine."

Mindy's eyes darted as she followed the conversation. The feeling of dread that crept through her body reminded her of the feeling that consumed her moments before she was at the correcting end of her father's belt. It seemed that even the palm trees suffered from the tension. The wind was suddenly still and the air that usually smelled of the salty Pacific, was filled with the scent of testosterone.

Pat walked toward Sanback. "I don't really give a fuck if he sees me or not. If he isn't going to put an end to this shit, then I'll handle it my damn self."

The MP trotted toward Pat, his hand going for his gun. "Negative, stop right there."

Mindy sat erect, her eyes wide, every muscle in her body stretched to the snapping point. The MP was pushing his luck. He'd be lucky to come out of the impending chaos without a broken nose. The only person in the world with a shorter fuse than Pete was Pat.

"Why don't you go play cops and robbers?" Pat stopped and whirled around. The MP nearly slammed into him. They stood nose to nose. "I'll take care of the bad guy for you."

The MP furrowed his brow and pointed a determined finger into Pat's chest. "You listen to me, Marine, this is my watch. Stand down. I realize you're worried about your sister, but we don't have enough on him to hold him right now."

Pat looked down at the finger on his chest and Mindy held her breath. She considered getting out of the truck and attempting to save the MP, but Pat was doing exactly what she'd hoped and expected. She didn't want the stalker dead, but she wanted him to understand that continuing to pursue her would find him face down in the dirt.

"I'm not interested in holding him," Pat replied,

looking straight into the MP's eyes. "I'm leaning more favorably toward killing him."

Mindy glanced at Sanback. He didn't seem intimidated by Pat's viciousness. She shuddered at his obvious lack of fear.

The MP shoved himself between Sanback and Pat. "Don't push your luck, Gunny. You seem like a good guy, don't make me show you who's boss."

Pat threw back his head and chuckled then locked eyes with the MP. "Boss?"

"Stand down!" the MP warned in a deep voice that demanded respect. "Last warning. I'm sure you can beat the hell out of him in nothing flat. But I'm not a pushover, and you *will* lose."

Mindy gasped. Not only had this guy backed down one of the twins, he'd actually backed them *both* down. She studied him, looking for his cape. He had to have some sort of superhuman powers.

"Give me your word that you'll take care of this," Pat demanded. "First Priority."

"I'll handle it," the MP said, his tone no less intimidating.

The altercation was over and the MP had two wins to his credit. Two wins that she wouldn't have counted on even if the twins had gone up against Walker, Texas Ranger himself.

"Are there any more questions?" Mindy asked as the MP and the twins made their way back to her. Her nerves couldn't take much more of this. This was precisely the reason that she hated the military life, it was all about who was the biggest bad-ass of them all. Her insides felt like jelly, and it was evident in her shaking hands. This world was too violent, and she couldn't wait to get back outside the gate. It was true enough that the MP looked delicious, but somewhere there was a man who was just as hot who didn't belong to the government.

"I need your numbers. The ones he called, of course," the MP said. "If I need anything else, I'll call you."

"You do that, man. Call her if you need *anything*." Pete slapped the MP on the back. "Call her if you get bored and need—"

"Pete!" she exclaimed, grabbing his arm hard enough to leave marks. "Let's go home!"

Mindy handed the MP a business card from her purse. Intrigue swept over his face when he looked down at it. What he was thinking? She hoped he was thinking about what a good ride she would be. But military men, even one as sexy as this one, were off limits. Too bad.

"I didn't get your name there, Gunny." Pat snagged the door handle and pulled himself into the truck.

"Newhope," he replied. "Shane Newhope."

Pete dropped his face and fought the gentle shake of his shoulders as he waited for Pat's sharp-tongued wit.

"Damn, man, you are new hope." He wrapped his arm around Mindy and gave her a quick squeeze. "New hope that my sister—"

A sharp elbow into his ribs ended his sentence. She spoke softly through gritted teeth, "Shut your mouth."

The MP tilted his head back and chuckled while throwing them a careless wave. The sound of his laughter was as glorious as the sound of the ocean crashing in majestic waves against a rocky shore. His smile was bright and confident. Mindy found herself hoping that someday she could look into his sparkling eyes and read his soul. No, she had to keep reminding herself that he was strictly off limits.

Pete backed from his parking space and looked to Gunny Newhope then back toward Mindy. "You can have him, Mindy. I'm telling you, I know that look."

Could she really have a man like Shane Newhope? Of course, he was off limits by her own rules, but it didn't stop her from admiring the view and the fantasies his looks created. "If he's like most Marines, anyone with a crotch can have him." Mindy rolled her eyes.

"Hey!" Pat interjected. "I disagree. I'm very picky about who I let have me."

Mindy couldn't believe her ears. She didn't even want to guess the number of women who'd helped him carve notches into his bedpost. "And if I didn't know you so well, I might actually believe that."

He pulled her into a playful headlock scuffing her hair before releasing her. She instantly reacted with another elbow, then a desperate attempt to correct her hair. She

didn't like that Pat was laughing at her, teasing her with a poking finger to the ribs. "Come on admit it. You're hot for him." He teased.

She admitted that Gunny Newhope looked scrumptious standing there on the sidewalk holding his clipboard. In fact, he even looked good in cammies and she never dreamed she'd think that of any man. The last thing that she would ever be willing to confirm to her brothers was that she was hot for the super, smoking-hot military policeman. She nodded but kept her eyes straight ahead, "You're crazy."

"He sure would look strange at the dinner table with blond hair." Pete pushed on a pair of stylish shades. "But at least he has brown eyes."

If Mindy was thinking clearly she would have caught the loaded statement, but she was still so wrapped up in Gunny Newhope that she never saw it coming. Before she could stop herself, she said, "His eyes are blue." She turned her head to catch one last glimpse of him before Pete drove away.

"Really, now?" Pat pinched her playfully on the arm. "Did you happen to get his ID number off his dog tags?"

"Stop it," she warned, fighting impossibly against the laugh that finally escaped her.

"Maybe you just happened to notice how many caps he had on his teeth," Pete said as he joined the teasing.

Her face blushed red. The twins were top notch spies. Pat and Pete wouldn't let her rest when it came to Gunny Newhope. They'd harassed her in the past for weeks about a man named Jack Hampton. He was a young sergeant Pat had met in the mess hall. Pat had conned Hampton into meeting Mindy without informing him she was hell bent against having a Marine or any other military man in her life. She admitted that he was very handsome, but the fact that he was a Marine coupled with the fact that he was obsessed with heavy metal music brought the relationship to an abrupt end before it ever started.

"I cannot believe that the two of you acted like a couple of ten-year-olds back there," she snarled. "You embarrassed the fool out of me."

"You're avoiding the subject." Pete added with wide to

the point eyes. "You're hot for the guy. There is nothing wrong with that, he seems like an okay dude."

"Can we change the subject?" She pressed a palm toward each of the twins. "If you will remember we came here because someone is trying to kidnap me."

"Oh hell, Mindy, we were just trying to help you hook a good man." Pat reached to meet Pete's high five over her head.

She swatted their hands. "Act your age. I don't need a good man. At least I don't need *that* kind of good man," she snapped as she straightened her shirt. "Why do you not understand that I don't want to live the military bit my entire life?"

"You don't know anything else, Mindy," Pete insisted, the jolly tone of his voice dissolving.

"And nobody in our family ever will until somebody jumps ship." She folded her arms across her chest.

Pat turned the blowers full on her. "You were heatin' up over him, I saw you."

She wanted to laugh. She'd certainly been caught drooling over the cookies in the jar. Any woman who wasn't blind would have reacted the same way to the MP named Shane Newhope. In fact, if he was anything other than military she would be on him like a barnacle on a ship.

"He was a nice looking man, yes," she agreed. "With big blue eyes, but if you'd taken as much interest in what he was writing as you were in getting me hooked up with him, then you both would have noticed he was wearing a wedding band."

Of course, it wasn't true, but it would be enough to get the matchmaking twins off her case for another day.

Two

Mindy wasn't excited about the twins being gone. But sometimes their jobs took them away. It happened that this week they were both gone at the same time. Pat was away on a high priority secret mission while Pete was in the middle of another Hell Week.

She enjoyed the security of being at home. It wasn't very often that a girl could lie down in her bed and know that a Navy SEAL and a Force Recon Marine were in the beds across the hall. Peter and Patrick Austin, Mindy hated to admit, were probably every woman's wet dream. Their dark hair and eyes were like lures to a hungry fish in a small pond. They were a couple of tall drinks of water, standing in excess of six feet, with attitudes and confidence to match. Flirting was a finely tuned art for the twins, and they rarely failed to successfully extract their female prey from the hoards of willing victims.

Pete and Pat would die for each other without a second thought. They had also battled each other for the past thirty-two years to gain the title of the biggest bad-ass of the Austin family.

Mindy's great, great grandfather had fought in the Civil War. Her great grandfather was a World War I hero, who saved the lives of nine men and lived to tell the story. Grandpa Austin followed suit as a Marine Drill Instructor in World War II. Their father kept up the military tradition by becoming an Army Green Beret medic.

Christmas at the Austin house wasn't about the football games on television, or the presents under the tree, it was about who had the greatest war story to tell. The

twin's, even with their Special Forces status, still faltered in the war story event, at least until the attack on the Pentagon and World Trade Centers in 2001.

~ * ~

Mindy hesitated to answer the ringing phone, terrified that it would be the stalker. It had been almost three weeks with no activity and excluding the occasional uneasy feeling of someone's stare, her life was getting back on track.

She answered and was pleasantly surprised to hear the voice of Gunny Shane Newhope. Of course, he wasn't calling for the reason she'd hoped. He was just going through some old reports making follow up calls. Just her luck, she'd met a man who'd shaken her to the core and he'd needed a report to remember her. It didn't matter anyway, she wasn't about to get herself trapped in the military life.

"I still don't have enough evidence to turn the case over to NCIS. I have requested that they get his phone records. The problem is that they don't consider it a criminal case until there has actually been a crime. So you are stuck with me for the time being. If you have any problems just give me a call."

"Thank you." She placed her hand over her heart. "I hope it doesn't come to that."

"Well, in case it does, don't hesitate to call. We'll get someone on it immediately."

Part of her was disappointed, the part of her that found him so stunningly attractive she couldn't function in his presence. She hoped the offer to call if she needed him was assurance he'd come running. Considering he'd said they'd get someone on it immediately, he might or might not be that someone.

~ * ~

The phone rang again the following evening. Mindy reached for the phone without hesitation. There'd been no clue the stalker was going to follow through on his threat. "Hello."

An ominous male voice whispered, "I'm going to get you."

"Who is this?" Her bold tone belied the instant frantic pace of her heart.

An evil Dracula-like laugh filled the phone. "You'll see

soon enough."

Mindy dropped the phone when the line went dead, and scrambled for her cell phone. She punched in the numbers for the MP station and waited impatiently while the line connected.

"Gunnery Sergeant Newhope, may I help you?"

"This is Mindy Austin," she said, holding her composure. "A man just threatened me on the phone."

"Threatened you how?" he asked, his voice smooth and confident.

"He said he was going to get me."

"Are you home alone?"

"Yes."

"Did you happen to get the number he was calling from?" he asked.

She turned her attention toward the phone receiver still lying in the floor. Her hand wrapped around the cool plastic, lifted it and pressed the review button near the small screen on the back of it. "Unknown caller."

"I suspected that," his voice grunted over the phone.

"Isn't there something you can do?" she asked, desperation finally rearing its head in the sound of her voice.

"Well, Ms. Austin, being totally honest, that call could have been from anyone. I'm a military police officer. I can't just come into the civilian world to investigate a phone call."

Her eyes flowed over the living room as fear climbed through her body like a slow rising tide. Someone had just threatened to kidnap her and the man on the phone wasn't offering the help he'd promised yesterday. She was alone, and she hadn't realized exactly how alone until this moment. "I see."

"I'm sorry that I can't be of more help." his voice admitted with a note of sadness.

"That's okay, at least one of my brothers should be home in a few days." she explained, hoping that the fear she could hear in her own voice wasn't as noticeable to him. She understood he couldn't run out and arrest someone based upon her word, but something told her that before it was all over he would wish he had.

~ * ~

The next night when her phone rang she waited for

the caller to speak into the answering machine before she grabbed the phone to talk with Gunny Newhope. They spoke for a few minutes. It made her angry with herself that she couldn't carry on a simple conversation with him without her hormones roaring into overdrive. He was all business, which bothered her even more. She wanted him to want her more than she'd ever wanted or needed anything in her life. He told her to call if she had any more problems and the MPs would take care of everything. She pursed her lips in disgust and shook her head. Suddenly she wanted to get the attention of a testosterone filled, gung ho military man and she couldn't. Sometimes life just left her wondering what would happen next.

She thanked him again, a click indicating he'd disconnected from the line. What did she expect? He wasn't likely to change his perception of her overnight. Obviously he was as interested in her as he would have been a fresh case of the clap. Her brothers had assured her that she could have him, but of course she didn't want him or at least she didn't want them to know it. Excluding his stunning blue eyes, hard body, fearless grit and perfect smile, there wasn't anything special about him. He would be easy enough to forget. The throbbing sensations that came with the thought of him, however, might take a little longer.

~ * ~

She'd had an uneasy feeling since the threatening phone call the day before, but she figured that human nature played a part in that. The front door was locked, she was sure of it. It wouldn't hurt to check once more. The low shag carpet was cool and soft on her bare feet. The deadbolt was active, as was the standard lock on the knob. She turned toward the short hallway and nodded in disgust. It was senseless to search her brothers' rooms again, there wasn't anyone in them. The windows were all locked, she'd checked three times.

A wary smile teased her lips, because their apartment seemed so tiny when they were all home. Now that she was alone, it rivaled the largest building in the world. She felt tiny, and as the streetlight outside the front window flickered, she felt increasingly smaller.

A noise, in the kitchen, caught her attention. It was an

insignificant sound, most likely the pages of the hunting magazine flipping from the breeze of the ceiling fan. It was also enough to scare her crazy. She crept toward the swinging door that divided the two rooms, and hesitated to push through it. What if he was there, waiting for her?

The laminated wood was cool and smooth to the touch. Oddly enough, she'd never noticed that before. Until this moment it hadn't mattered. She sighed with relief to push into the kitchen and find the magazine pages in mid-flip. If her father could see her now he'd disown her.

She resolved herself to the fact that she was alone, settled into her bed and to her surprise slept soundly through the night. The following evening, however, things took a drastic turn. While lying in her bed a strange sound echoed through the house. She looked around the room, her imagination running wild. She was certain there was no one in the apartment, she had checked. There was no closet unopened, and no monsters beneath the beds. She took a deep breath and attempted to gather her composure. She had to stop acting like a little girl.

The sound grew louder. Something was scratching on her bedroom window. She stared at the window, mere inches away. There was no mistaking the sound, it was fingernails against the glass. Her heart thudded into a dangerously fast pace. She pulled the covers closer to her face, and then realized how senseless the gesture had been. The crisp white cotton sheets weren't going to protect her from the bad guy. That only worked on television. She slid from the bed without a sound. She wrapped her hand around the gun on her night stand and settled against the wall to listen. She sighed when the scratching stopped. Relief rushed over her, and she released a slow steady breath that she'd held far too long.

She almost jumped out of her skin when the sound returned, this time at the front window. Someone was prying at the latch. The window was locked, she had checked it herself. 10:15 glowed red from her alarm clock next to her bed. She reached for her cell phone and remembered that she'd had it with her when she'd gone to check the kitchen window for the third time tonight. She felt like a trapped animal, unable to summon help, and no one she could depend on even if she did. She scrambled through the

apartment by memory, gun firmly in hand as she fumbled for the house phone. She dialed Shane Newhope's number slowly, not trusting her shaking hands to key in the numbers correctly. On second thought, she clicked the receiver back into the cradle. She couldn't call him in the middle of the night, on a hunch, that Sanback was outside her door. She'd already called for help once. Newhope had answered the call, but offered nothing more than a doubtful voice.

For almost five minutes there was no activity and she hoped they'd given up. The sound of someone picking the lock echoing throughout the room proved otherwise. She gripped the gun tighter, tip-toeing toward the window. If this was someone playing a joke then it was a deadly one. She was too scared to play stupid games. She moved her left hand from the gun and reached nervously toward the blinds. She wasn't sure what she'd do if it was Sanback. The part of her that listened, as her father taught, wanted to just start shooting. The part of her that valued human life, however, was scared stupid that it would come down to Sanback's life or her own.

She craned her neck and found the dark figure outside her door. If it was possible her heart pounded even harder, painfully hard. She couldn't tell who it was, but he was trying to break into her house and it shouldn't matter. The man outside the door nodded in what looked like frustration and arched his head back as if relieving the tension from his neck. When her eyes rested upon Sanback, her heart nearly stopped. She backed toward the phone, gun pointed rigidly toward the door. Again she keyed in the number, her heart pounding as adrenaline coursed through her veins like liquid fire.

A strange voice answered the phone but that didn't stop her. "My name is Mindy Austin. Gunny Newhope said you would help me."

"He's right here, ma'am, I'll just let you talk to him."

"Please hurry," she said, her voice level but desperate.

"Gunnery Sergeant Newhope."

"This is Mindy Austin," she whispered.

"Ms. Austin, are you okay?" His voice divulged an uneasiness that made Mindy's heart pound even harder.

Mindy explained that Sanback was attempting to pick

the front door lock. Luckily for her, the double deadbolts were keeping him at bay. But the stalker was determined to gain access into her home. The fear was evident in her voice, even if she was trying to paste on the strong face her father had always demanded.

"Have you called 911?" he asked.

"No." she whispered. "I called you."

"Listen to me Ms. Austin," Newhope's voice ordered. "Call 911, in the event they may have an officer closer than I am to your location. I am on my way to your house."

She pressed her finger onto the telephone disconnect button then released it. Her nerves were so jangled she was barely able to dial for emergency help. She didn't care who got there first, the civilian or the military police. If she had her way she'd rather one of her brothers come home. That wasn't likely to happen.

She laid the phone receiver onto the floor. The 911 operator had asked her to stay on the phone, but she wasn't about to stand ten feet from the front door and wait for a kidnapper to come crashing inside. She wiped the sweat from her forehead with her upper arm, making sure that she never lost grip of her gun. Quickly she backed into her bedroom, and wondered where she should hide. She could get under the bed, but she'd have a lousy shooting advantage if it became necessary. In the corner between the dresser and the wall was an option, but he could easily get his hands on her there, especially if the gun misfired. The closet was her best option, and she so hated small dark places.

~ * ~

Mindy settled into the corner of her closet, praying and listening. Her breath echoed in the darkness while she struggled to regain her composure or give herself away. She hoped that she was hidden well enough that he wouldn't find her, but common sense told her that the closet would be the first place he'd look. The clothes, hanging around her, brushed against her face as she trembled in fear.

When the front door opened, she swallowed hard. She was about to find out what she was really made of. She tried to listen against her heart pounding in her ears. She laid the gun into her lap for a few seconds, her hands were starting

to slip. Taking a deep breath, she clasped her sweaty hands together and hoped her nerves would settle. *In through the nose, out through the mouth. Slow down, slow down.* Her fear wasn't of firing the gun. She'd learned long ago not to pick it up unless she was willing to use it. Her fear was that the gun might misfire, leaving her to deal with the intruder with no other weapon. Pat had told her to take her pistol to the gun shop, but she hadn't listened. The gun had misfired while Pat was target shooting. The big bad Marine made a huge deal out of it. Of course, the next shot had fired off flawlessly and Mindy had put off dealing with the man down at the gun shop.

The faint sound of footsteps entered the room. She quickly wrapped her hands back around the gun and readied herself for what she knew was ahead. What was this man thinking? Why would anyone in their right mind do something like this to try and prove a point? After all, she hadn't done a thing to Sanback. She was being punished for being Pete Austin's sister. Sometimes having a brother like him was punishment enough.

The beam of a flashlight danced at the crack beneath the closet door. She held her breath and blinked against the brush of the hanging clothes against her cheek. It was possible that he might think that she wasn't home. Not likely, but possible. His footsteps moved across the room, and she was proud that she hadn't taken a seat beside the dresser. If she had then this would all be over. Either the killer would be shot, or she'd realize she didn't have the guts to kill and she'd be his prisoner. The steps came back toward her and she struggled to take very light, silent breaths. The movement stopped as if the intruder had a sudden revelation as to her location.

She held the gun steady and waited. Her father's words echoed through her mind. *Center the widest part of the body, squeeze and don't stop 'til it's empty.* The door knob jiggled, then turned. She went numb, and she knew at that instant that she'd be willing to kill, and it looked as if she would have to. The closet door opened. Hidden behind a suitcase she held her breath, hoping above all else that she wouldn't be forced to kill him.

"There you are," the haunting voice sighed.

He shined the flashlight into her face and chuckled when she squinted from the glare.

"Don't come any closer." Her voice trembled but her hands held a firm grip on the gun. She'd never known a fear so real or overwhelming. Pat and Pete weren't going to walk through the door and save her. It also wasn't likely that Gunny Newhope or the police would arrive before she was forced to pull the trigger.

"Let's go for a little ride," he said, moving into the closet. "Too bad your brothers aren't here to save you."

When she cocked the hammer on the .38 Special she'd received for her seventeenth birthday, and raised it toward him it was too late for Sanback to turn away. She squeezed the trigger, anger rushing through her body like the eruption of a shaken soda. Warm blood splattered her face as he grunted and arched back. She squinted against the feeling of his life's blood running down her face, but it wasn't her fault, he'd pushed too far. She squeezed the trigger again, her hands struggling to hold the gun steady and low. The shots rang out one after the other. She exited the closet like a cornered dog launching toward his attacker. Sanback continued to stumble back as each shot slammed his body.

Gunny Newhope bolted through the door toward the gunfire. Sanback fell across a cedar chest at the foot of her bed. Three times the hollow snap of the gun signified the cylinder was empty.

The distant sound of a siren caught her attention when the gun snapped the third time. Part of her hoped that he was dead. Another part didn't want to see herself as a killer.

"Ms. Austin, are you okay? Put the gun down." Newhope reached for the light switch when his flashlight beam found Sanback slumped across the piece of furniture.

Tears streamed down her face as she held the gun rigid in front of her. She squinted in the light, unable to believe what had just happened. Her Dad told her to shoot to kill if she ever had to raise her gun, and she had.

"Put the gun down," Newhope asked a second time, more forcefully.

Screaming cop cars slid to a stop outside her door and the sound of running police officers filled her ears. Then, "DROP THE GUN!" one yelled as if she were three blocks

away.

She glanced toward Newhope then the other men, whose guns were pointed directly at her. She was scared and confused. She didn't know these men and she didn't need them to yell at her.

"Is he dead?" she asked, laying the gun on the night stand and collapsing on the bed to keep from dropping to the floor. Of course, he was dead, but for her own satisfaction she needed confirmation.

"Yes, he's dead," Ed Valley, the second MP said.

"Get your hands up," the policeman ordered. "All of you."

Newhope snapped his attention toward the police officers. "Put your weapons away. We are military policemen, the dead guy is a Navy man from our base. He's been stalking Ms. Austin."

She cupped her hand over her mouth. "I didn't even know him." Her eyes searched the dead man at the foot of her bed.

"Your brothers, where are they?" Newhope asked, then turned his attention back toward the police officers. "Your sidearms. Put them away."

"Pat is on a mission and Pete is in the middle of Hell Week." Her eyes focused on the civilian policemen as they holstered their weapons.

"Let's get you into the living room. I'm going to arrange a room for you in guest housing on base until your brothers are home." Newhope reached for Mindy's arm and guided her into the living room.

"NCIS is on the way to clean this place up," Valley supplied as he made eye contact with Newhope.

Mindy nodded, figuring that this was where she'd get thrown into jail and they'd throw away the key. Sanback forced her to kill him, that bastard. Anger clouded her vision as her heart broke. She'd taken a human life. She was scared out of her mind that she might be dead right now if not for training received from the military men in her life.

"Thank you, I don't think I can stay here. Let me grab a few things and I'll be ready," she said. She stood on legs as weak as wet noodles.

"You cannot leave the scene." A civilian policeman

name French said. "Our detective will need to speak with you."

"The man killed is military, the case belongs to NCIS." Ed Valley corrected French.

"He may be military but he was killed in my jurisdiction," French argued.

"We'll see." Ed Valley nodded. "That man is property of the U.S. Government. It isn't likely that the city of San Diego will be doing the investigation."

Mindy huffed, it seemed that now she had too much help. It was too bad that they hadn't all gotten here a minute earlier. But they hadn't. In fact she'd just killed the man they were arguing over.

She moved toward Pat's bedroom. She'd make do with a pair of shorts and a T-shirt from his drawer. If she had her way she would lock herself in the security of her assigned room and wouldn't stick her head back out until one of her brothers knocked on the door. She stopped short of the door and looked at Newhope. "This sounds silly, but will you come with me?"

Newhope cleared his throat and drew in a long slow breath. "You did everything in your power to keep from having to kill him. I can tell you that if I heard someone picking my lock, there would be a hole in my door."

"I kept hoping you'd get here before he found me." She cried as she walked into Pat's bedroom, realizing how much she missed the security of him being around.

"I'm sorry. I got here as quickly as I could," he said, resting his hand on her shoulder. Even that innocent touch sent shivers of desire straight to her core.

She turned toward him, her eyes drawn to his as if by magic. "I'm not blaming you. I was just hoping."

He nodded. "I know."

She flipped on the light switch and looked around the room. Her brothers' rooms always looked like someone had just moved in. There was no personality visible in their spaces. A simple full size bed was in the distant corner of the room. It had no head or footboard, but that was the way Pat preferred it. The simple, small black table beside his bed held two things, an alarm clock and a handgun. She turned toward the old tattered filing cabinet that Pat used for a

dresser. She pulled the top drawer open and snagged a pair of shorts from inside. The closet was a testament to the man who owned it. Perhaps his room had no personality but it was easy to see by his perfectly pressed uniforms that he was a man who was a stickler for regulations. "I never thought I'd say it, but I miss my brothers."

Newhope stepped closer. "Would you like for me to try and get in contact with your brother at BUD's? I still have a couple of friends over there and I could get a message to him."

Her eyes traced slowly up his body. "No, he'd be in a terrible mood. Hell Week does that to him."

Newhope stepped back. "Well, there is no need in telling you that there is no way to get in touch with the one who's out on a mission."

Mindy brushed a tear from her cheek and forced a weak grin. "I know. I'll be okay."

"You can call on me if you need anything." He pushed his hands into his pockets.

"Thank you." And she meant it because something told her the next few days would be very long ones.

He stepped back further and allowed her access to the door. "You're welcome."

"Let me get my toothbrush and I'll be ready."

Mindy braced herself on the bathroom door frame as the reality of having just killed a man set in. Newhope moved closer as she folded against the crushing pain of what had happened. "Oh God he's dead." She sobbed, wrapping her arms around Newhope. "I killed him."

"You had no choice," he reassured, giving her a light, awkward pat on the back. "You did the right thing."

She had done the only thing she could to stay alive. That didn't make it any easier, however, when she thought about taking a life. Fighting the helpless feelings invading her body, she realized she was hanging onto Shane Newhope like an ornament on a Christmas tree. "Oh God, I'm sorry." She pulled herself away and wiped the tears from her face. "My dad and brothers forgot to tell me that dealing with after effects of killing would be harder than the actual deed."

"Listen to me," he said as he stepped into the bathroom with her and closed the door behind him. "That

guy was a piece of shit. If you hadn't killed him he would be dead now anyway."

Her eyes narrowed. "How so?"

"Me," he answered, his eyes searching hers. "He would have never made it out of here alive."

"Thank you."

~ * ~

When they returned to the living room, there was a battle of jurisdiction in mid-swing. There was a tall man, a detective with the San Diego Police Department, who was adamant that the case belonged to his precinct. A much shorter man with a Northeastern accent was obviously the head agent with NCIS. It was just as obvious that the NCIS agent wasn't going to back down when it came to the death of a Navy man.

Mindy felt the sting of the agent's eyes on her. "NCIS Special Agent Nate Armstrong." He held out a badge showing his shield and credentials. "You must be Melinda Austin."

Mindy glanced at the badge then turned her attention toward Shane. She desperately wanted to leave the house and never return. She needed him to save the day and be her voice.

"Agent Armstrong, I'm Gunnery Sergeant Shane Newhope. I have secured Ms. Austin a room at the VOQ for the night. Can she leave?"

"Gunny, we're going to have to ask a few questions now while the incident is still fresh in Ms. Austin's mind." The agent tweaked his brows, as if Newhope should have known better than to even ask. "Ms. Austin, please have a seat."

Mindy followed the agent to her sofa and sat where he pointed. Was this agent so naïve as to believe this episode would ever be anything *other* than fresh in her mind? She could still smell the gun powder, and taste the fear. She could hear the grunts Sanback's body had released as vividly now as she did at that moment. Perhaps the agent didn't know it, but he could ask about this night ten years from now and it would be right there in her mind waiting to flood back into her soul.

Mindy wasn't sure that she liked Nate Armstrong. His personality was a bit too overbearing for her. He looked more like a bookworm than any NCIS agent she'd ever seen.

His small round black rimmed glasses made him look like a cross between Buddy Holly and Woody Allen. She noted that he was constantly rubbing his left index finger against his thumb, which made her wonder why someone in his position had so much nervous energy.

"Ms. Austin, I've seen the previous reports that Evan Sanback had been stalking you for some time." Armstrong reached into his pocket, pulled out an ink pen and clicked the button on the top.

"Yes," her voice quivered, her nerves still raw.

"Did he ever physically touch you?" Agent Armstrong arched his brows and poised his pen to write.

"No. Why...Why does that matter?" Her nervous fingers fidgeted with the hem of her t-shirt.

"No reason. Just a few things I need to get clear for my report." He wrote a few notes while she watched.

Detective Danny Hughes of the San Diego Police Department cleared his voice and Mindy turned her attention toward him. "Ms. Austin don't be intimidated by his questions. You did nothing wrong. The constitution clearly states that you have a right to defend yourself."

Armstrong shot Hughes a piercing glance. "I would have assumed that the phone call you got earlier was from your chief telling you that this case belongs to NCIS."

Hughes huffed and cocked his head to the side. "Your man is dead in my jurisdiction. It may be your case, but I have every intention of being here to aid the civilian victim."

Mindy wanted to laugh but there was nothing funny about the situation she was in. No matter how much of a pissing contest the two investigators had going, fact remained that she'd been forced to kill someone. She liked Detective Hughes because he wasn't about to let the cocky NCIS agent get a thing past him. Hughes reminded her of the lead character on her favorite television series. Hughes may have been a detective rather than a doctor, but he reminded her of Dr. Gregory House.

"Just stay out of my way," Armstrong warned. The NCIS team busily moved about her home. A woman entered the living room using a hand held video camera and a man dusted the front door for prints. Two other men pushed a gurney through the living room holding a black

body bag. Sanback.

"Your brother knew the victim. He was the actual target when the stalking began, correct?" Armstrong asked as he turned his attention toward the squeaking wheels on the gurney.

"I guess Sanback was using me to get back at my brother who was his instructor at BUD's." Her jittering nerves were settling somewhat but she wondered about the questions the agent peppered at her. Did he think she killed Sanback on purpose or would he believe that it was self defense?

"And Mr. Sanback blocked you in the parking garage near your workplace?"

"He did, but I managed to get away and find my brothers." She answered then watched and listened as Shane Newhope interrupted the conversation.

"We spoke to Mr. Sanback and impressed upon him the importance of leaving Ms. Austin alone." Gunny Newhope nodded at a report he held out for the agent to inspect.

"Good. I need to see the scene and take a few notes in there. We should be able to close this in a few days. Ms. Austin, please don't leave town until we can close out the case." Agent Armstrong piped as he rose to his feet and reached for Gunny Newhope's hand.

Mindy nodded. She wasn't leaving town she had no where to go but to her parent's house and that wasn't an option. Her father would find a way to blame this on her being weak, she didn't need that.

The woman with the video camera pointed it toward Mindy. "What are you doing?" Mindy asked as she turned her face away. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that she looked like hell. There were probably mascara lines down her face and her eyes felt as if they were swollen half closed.

"Just documenting your disheveled appearance for our records." The woman replied with a kind tone and removed the camera from Mindy.

Mindy furrowed her brow as a feeling of denial rushed through her body. She hadn't been raised to ever be disheveled. Austins were known for their iron grit and heroic bravery, her father had said so many times. Disheveled. Just the thought of it was a disgrace.

"We can go now." Newhope nudged Mindy to get her attention.

She looked up at him, at first confused. She glanced at all the activity in the apartment before she brought her eyes to meet Newhope's again. "She called me disheveled. Maybe I'm confused or even scared stupid, but disheveled sounds helpless."

Gunny Newhope placed one hand on her upper back and pointed with his other hand toward the front door. "Trust me, she knows you aren't helpless."

~ * ~

Gunny Newhope escorted Mindy to her room at the VOQ. Although she wasn't afraid anymore, she still worried that even if the NCIS investigation cleared her, she might not be able to move forward from having killed. A part of her was hollow, like the vast open space of a canyon. She wasn't sure anything could ever fill that emptiness. She'd pulled the trigger, not once but six times, and it had come as naturally to her as brushing her teeth. She had intervened on God's plan, and had taken a life that may have had big plans for the future. Did Sanback have any family? Would they hate her once they knew the full story? Would they be willing to hear the full story? She couldn't dwell on it. Dealing with the guilt of having taken a life was enough without adding the guilt associated with his family into the mix.

"Do you think you'll be okay?" Gunny Newhope asked. "Would you like me to check the quarters before I leave?"

She picked up a pillow from the green wingback chair that sat near the door. She met Newhope's eyes, wishing that he'd do much more than check. She wanted him to stay. "I'm sure everything is okay. Thank you for making arrangements for me to stay here."

His gaze scanned over the sparse motel-like furnishings. "That's my job."

With a confident pace, he returned to his vehicle. Even as her mind reeled with the devastating events of the night, he still sparked a fire within her that made her squirm. His sandy blond hair, what little there was of it, looked baby soft. His eyes were an azure blue lined with steel gray. When he held her in his gaze, she couldn't have looked away if she'd tried. He was slightly shorter than her brothers, but his

muscles easily surpassed theirs. He was wide in all the right places, narrow exactly where he needed it and sexy all over. But...he was also military. She reminded herself that even a Mallard with his beautiful majestic colors was still a duck.

~ * ~

It took the NCIS agents two full days to finish and allow the crime scene cleaners into her house. Gunny Newhope had called her twice in that time. Each time, his voice sent rolling waves of hungry desire plunging through her body. She'd considered talking to him on a more personal level, just an attempt to learn more about him, but she figured she'd regret it. A man like him would have a different woman for every night of the week, and the supply of pretty women in the military wasn't as short as many believed. He'd be like an electrical storm in bed as the need escalated. He'd start as a distant clap of thunder and sparks would course through his body until it grew closer into a raging inescapable barrage of ecstasy. She wanted to discover if he could make that kind of magic, but it would alter the plans for her entire life.

~ * ~

On the third day, Gunny Newhope knocked on the door. She opened it to his handsome, hard body. His blue eyes sparkled. What was he wearing? "You were cleared of any wrong doing and NCIS released the report. The shooting was ruled self defense and you can return home."

Mixed emotions flooded her body. She was happy to be cleared in Sanback's death, but it didn't change the fact that he was dead. She was excited she could go on with life, but getting back to normal meant going back to her apartment. She wasn't sure she could go back there without her brothers. It would be at least two more days before Pete got home from Hell Week. Pat was even less predictable as she had no idea where he was, or what type of mission he was on. She wasn't sure she wanted to go back home even if they were there.

"Thank you!" she said happily, determined to deal with her troubled mind and emotions in her own way.

Something unusual brewed in his eyes. What would he say next? He could have announced that the stock market had crashed and she would have basked in the sound of his

voice. She didn't want to admit that part of her was attached to him, a part that had never even been attracted to a military man. It was a part that had never been attracted to anyone.

"You're welcome to stay here until your brothers' return," he said, that odd expression still in his eyes. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

She shook her head. "I need to face it."

"I'll be happy to take you back to your apartment." His expression seemed sad. "Or I could call a cab, if you prefer."

She swallowed hard against his words. "If you don't mind I'd prefer you take me. To be honest, I don't think I want to walk in there for the first time alone."

"Not a problem." He brushed his hand over the arm of the green wingback chair, "How long will it take you to get your things together before I come back for you?"

It was a golden opportunity to get closer to him and perhaps learn more about him. "It won't take fifteen minutes. If you're allowed, you're more than welcome to wait."

He nodded and stepped inside, closing the door behind him. "I'll be happy to wait."

She checked and double checked the quarters for her things. She'd brought very little with her, and wasn't very happy at the moment that her make up was one of the things she'd left behind in her haste to leave home. She combed her hair one last time and pulled it into a ponytail. Pat's oversized clothes made her look like a homeless clown. She puffed out her lips. It was too little too late.

"Okay, I think that does it." She hooked her purse over her shoulder and waited for him to move.

"Well let's roll." He slapped his palms onto his thighs then rose to his feet. "We still have some daylight left."

She climbed into the military vehicle and glanced at him. It brought back old memories of the years her father had been on active duty back at Ft. Bragg. She hated that time of her life. She was at that awkward age where she was all elbows and knees. There was something about military men that let a woman know she was beautiful but their ability to ignore her had only confirmed she wasn't.

Newhope hefted himself into the driver's seat with

practiced ease. He took a deep breath and said, "Would you like to have dinner with me?"

Every bit of the girl inside her wanted to jump for joy and scream in jubilation. Instead, she kept her composure. "I'd love to."

It was amazing how quickly the negative thoughts disappeared. He'd single handedly defeated the memories that made her hate his lifestyle. He'd renewed her hope in those digital camo-wearing tyrants and something told her that given a chance, he'd have her hoping for more.

He exhaled a long deep breath. "Would tonight be too soon? I understand if you need some time to get through everything that's going on."

Her pulse leapt, it certainly was gallant of him to think of her feelings. "Actually, it might be better to go before my brothers return home."

He chuckled. "I'm not worried about your brothers."

A smile teased her lips. "Oh, I'm sure you aren't. But I'd rather they not know about it."

He nodded and turned on the signal to enter into the lot of the apartment complex. "I'm okay with that."

At her home, he slid the key into the lock, turned it, then turned his attention to her. "Are you ready?"

She nodded. At that moment she couldn't have spoken a word to save her own life. The feelings invading her reminded her of the day she'd looked at her grandfather in his coffin. The eerie stillness inside the apartment felt like death. It was. She stood silent as Newhope flipped on the light switch to the left of the door. Her eyes scanned the room, everything was in place but it didn't smell like home. There was a faint chemical smell in the air, probably the cleaning solutions the clean up crew had used.

"If you'd like to wait here, I'll check everything out," he said softly.

She nodded again, thankful he was there. Of course, he wouldn't be there when night fell. He wouldn't be there when the ten o'clock hour would leave her shaking in fear. She refused, however, to appear weak, so she stiffened her back and walked through the apartment. She moved quietly toward her bedroom as Shane Newhope opened the closet doors in her brother's bedrooms. She took a deep breath and

reached for the doorknob. She squinted against the vivid memories that suddenly shot through her mind. She twisted the knob and pushed the door open.

The room was as normal as it had been the day before Sanback had invaded her privacy. It was spotlessly clean, and there wasn't a shred of evidence that someone had died in that room. If only the cleaning crew could clean the cobwebs from her mind as well as they'd cleaned her room.

She flipped on the light switch out of habit more than need. Her heart was racing and she didn't like not feeling safe in her own home. Damn Sanback for what he'd done. She turned toward the sound of footsteps behind her to find Shane Newhope standing in the doorway, nodding with an easy smile. She had impressed him, it was obvious, but for the first time since she'd met him it didn't matter. It took every ounce of her energy to fight the demons within her. She wanted to run screaming from her home and never return, but life wasn't that simple. There was nothing he could do to help her. He knew it and so did she.

The cedar chest was polished to a perfect shine, but in her mind she could still see Sanback's body there. The blood was gone from the carpet, but it had made a puddle beside the chest as it dripped off his fingers. The gun was gone from her dresser, and for a split second her heart leapt. It was probably still in possession of NCIS and she might never get it back. She looked toward the closet door. Of all the places in her home, it was that closet she feared most. She had never been more terrified than she had been alone in that small space. Taking a deep calming breath, she moved toward it. The cold stinging feeling of predatory eyes upon her engulfed her as the memories flooded back. But it was only a memory and it could only control her if she allowed it.

"So where are we going for dinner?" she asked, desperate to lessen the tense fear that coiled around her like a python.

He nodded, as if he was in disbelief that he would be the one to pick the restaurant. "You name it lady, we're there."

Three

Her heart thudded at a frantic pace as she pulled into the parking lot to meet Shane. It had been her idea to meet him there. She wasn't ready to return home with a Marine in tow. There was no schedule of when Pat might return home from his mission. Luckily, Shane respected her decision and hadn't asked any questions.

She had dated military guys before, and no matter how handsome and charming they were, she just wasn't interested in having that kind of lifestyle. More than anything, she wanted nights full of cuddling, not stories about maneuvers at 29 Palms. She didn't want to plan a vacation, then have to cancel it because her husband was suddenly on Delta alert. A husband whose friends called him by his first name, not his last, would be nice. To shop in a grocery store and not a PX. Manage to get into her neighborhood without having to show ID. But most of all, to be first in someone's life, not second behind the military, was her ultimate dream.

Walking across the parking lot, a movement caught her attention and she turned. It was Shane. There was something about the way he looked at her that made her tingle all over.

"Hello." She grinned, waiting for him to catch up. "How was your afternoon?"

"Good, how about yours?" His eyes touched her as though they were familiar with every aspect of her body, heart, and soul.

She considered her answer and spoke softly. "It was okay. I guess it'll just take some time to learn to function

normally again."

"Things will get back to normal. Now you don't have to worry about always looking over your shoulder."

She admired him as they walked. His jeans were stylish, not too faded, but not too blue. His pant legs bunched slightly at the top of his brown leather casual shoes. The pale blue three button pullover tucked neatly into his jeans accented his eyes. This guy was so hot that he threatened to spontaneously combust. She wanted to tug at the braided belt that fit snugly around his trim waist. She wanted to touch his short blond hair, no longer beneath his cover. She wanted to drag him behind the boxwood hollies at the side of the building and have her way with him.

"Don't be surprised if my brothers show up," she warned. "I was afraid they'd get back to base and hear about the shooting, so I left a note I'd be here. If they find out I'm meeting a Marine, I'll never hear the end of it."

"I thought one of your brothers is a Marine? Why would it bother them for you to be out with me?"

She had dreaded this moment because she wasn't ready to tell him her feelings about the military. "Oh no, it wouldn't bother them. They'd be ecstatic. It's me who doesn't want them to know."

His eyebrows quirked in question. "Why?"

She paused as Shane registered at the hostess podium, then turned his full attention back to her as they settled onto a nearby bench.

"My brothers are fifth generation military. Every person in my family for that many generations, including aunts, uncles, cousins and so forth are either military or have married military."

"So you've decided to be the one who takes the leap?" he asked. "You want something other than the military lifestyle?"

She traced her fingers along a seam of the leather cushioned bench where they sat. "I have nothing against the military, it's just that I've never known life without formation, maneuvers, missions, deployments and war. I want to know what it's like in the real world."

"But they want you to hook back up with a military man." He replied with understanding. "That's why they

jumped on me with all four feet."

Her eyes swept away as embarrassment overtook her. "Exactly. If you are wearing a uniform you are the perfect target to try and line up with the little sister."

"I see." He rubbed his knuckles over his freshly shaven jaw line. "So much for thinking I was special."

She giggled. "Something tells me that you are special."

"Well, thank you, and if they show up, we'll deal with it." He clapped his left hand on his thigh. "I know some excellent James Bond escape moves."

It was entirely possible that escape moves weren't the only thing he had in common with 007. He could most likely work a girl to orgasm so fast that it would leave her dazed and confused. The seductive way he kept gazing at her promised he wasn't afraid to prove it.

She liked the gentle touch of his hand at the small of her back as they followed the hostess toward their table. She glanced over her shoulder and met a pair of hungry blue eyes.

"You have amazing eyes," she said, taking a seat across from him in a booth.

"Thank you." He locked his eyes onto hers. "To be quite honest, I haven't seen anything about you that isn't amazing."

She nodded shyly. If she stayed around him very long she'd actually start believing she looked like the type of girl her brothers might date.

"I noticed on your business card that you work at the rehab complex. What do you do?" His eyes tracing over her face left her breathless.

She cleared her throat and struggled to speak. "Cardiac Rehabilitation. I supervise the unit on the west side of town."

"Wow, you can make my heart strong?" He lifted a confident brow. "So far, you've only made it weak."

"Oh, you are smooth." She pushed her hair behind her ear. "Do they teach those lines in boot camp?"

"Ways to woo beautiful women?" he asked. "Not hardly."

She was falling for him. She knew it in her heart but

there was no way to stop it. The way he could set aside his job for a few hours of civil conversation made him irresistible. If only he were a civilian cop, he'd have to pry her off his pant leg tonight when he went home.

There was always a sparkle in his eyes. He wasn't the usual, by-the-book, tough guy, who needed the world to see the testosterone dripping off of him. He was a simple guy with a complex job who didn't let it control him. Of course, the Marine Corps ruled his life because he'd signed a contract. That contract forced him to report for formation every morning and do weapons check every night. He had reports to complete to a government that didn't seem to appreciate his sacrifice. He was under military law. He *was* the military law.

"It would be easy for you to get a job as a policeman." The revelation sprang from her mouth before she could stop it.

He nodded, lowered his glass and swallowed. "I am a policeman."

"I mean in the civilian world." Her face burned, but the mistake was already made.

He squinted, as if he actually considered it. "Maybe some day."

What in the heck she was doing? This was her first date with the guy and she was actually making attempts to nudge him toward a job in the civilian world. He couldn't work in the civilian world if he wasn't a civilian. He couldn't be a civilian if he was property of the U.S. Marine Corps. He didn't seem ready to end his career anytime soon.

~ * ~

When he reached toward her lips with a shrimp from his plate, her heart leapt as if she was a virgin waiting to be touched. She'd wanted to enjoy herself, go home at the end of the night and never look back. Getting involved with a man like him wasn't the plan. He was everything she wanted, but he was also the one thing she refused to have in her life. Her mother had taken second seat to her dad's job. As a child, Mindy wondered if her dad would be there when she woke. She didn't want that for her or her children.

Walking her to her car, Shane stopped only a couple of feet from her and stuffed his hands into his jeans pockets.

The blue sparkles were still in his eyes even in the dimly lit lot. "Well, this is awkward, huh?" she said, her voice shy. What was she supposed to do? Kiss him? Give him a hug? Invite him back to her place?

He nodded. "I'll say. I know that I'm last thing you want in your life. I'm a Marine through and through."

She took a deep breath. "Maybe we could go somewhere and talk? I obviously don't have anything against the military. I just don't know if I'm willing to share someone else. I've always been forced to share with the military."

He cleared his throat and reached for her hand. "Come on, let's take a ride."

She pressed her hand into his and walked with him to his car. He made her heart warm and the fluttering butterflies hadn't left her chest since he stepped into sight. She wasn't in love, but given a few more hours he'd go away on his next mission with a little extra baggage, her heart.

She sat in his sporty Dodge Charger and took a deep breath, enjoying the pure masculine scent. He slid beneath the steering wheel and looked her way as he turned the key in the ignition.

"So where are we going?" She crossed her hands in her lap.

"I'm going to take you to one of my favorite spots." He squinted as if waiting for her objection. "I go there sometimes just to think."

She nodded and swallowed hard. "Tell me. What is it that makes you tick?"

He glanced toward her, looked back to the roadway and gave her question some thought. "I love the thrill of competition. I was the kid who played every sport all the way through high school. I was offered a football scholarship to Georgia State but I needed more than sports. I needed a bigger challenge, so I joined the Navy."

She was shocked at the revelation, but hid it well, "Wow, a football star. Let me guess—you were a running back."

He nodded. "Tight end."

She cleared her throat. "God, that's true."

He relaxed, resisting the urge to laugh out loud. "Well, thank you."

She fought the embarrassment that swept through her. "So, why did you leave the SEALs and go to the Marines?"

"How'd you know that?" His gaze swept toward her.

Realizing far too late that the answer was self incriminating, she swallowed her pride. "You told Pete that day on base."

"And you were paying attention." A new wave of confidence seemed to sweep over him. "I joined during peace time, and my recruiter talked me into going into the Seabees. I was miserable. I was at the hanger one night when the SEALs showed up for a mission and were gone in five minutes flat. The next week I signed up for the BUD's waiting list. Once I made the SEALs, I was happy. It was short lived though, because eight years later my sister was dying with breast cancer and I needed a job stateside. That's when I went over to the Marines."

"Your sister?"

"She died the next year. She was nine years older than me." His voice was sad and his eyes sparkled with the threat of tears.

"I'm sorry about your sister. I can't imagine losing one of my brothers."

The car came to a stop and he tossed her a wink. "I think your brothers will die of old age because death is afraid to mess with them right now."

She appreciated his kind words because she was the first to admit that her brothers were a bit too cocky for their own good. "I guess we're here, huh?"

Part of her hoped he was about to take her into the bushes to have his way with her, but another part of her prayed that she'd escape with her heart.

"Oh, yeah. I found this place a few years ago. I hope you're okay with walking, there's no road down here."

She nodded. She would walk with him into battle if he'd just promise to keep her safe. It was odd that because as safe as she felt with her brothers she'd never felt safe enough to follow them into battle.

Distant crashing waves caught her attention. She followed closely behind, letting him lead the way more out of memory than sight. Her breath caught when they

approached a rocky area overlooking the Pacific Ocean. She took a deep breath and enjoyed the salty sting of the air deep in her lungs.

"Have a seat," he said, pointing to a large flat rock. "I've sat here for hours and have never seen another soul."

"This is beautiful." She sighed. "If you're after my heart, it's working."

He took a seat beside her, then gazed into her eyes. "Well, that's exactly what I'm after."

He moved closer, his eyes searching hers, giving her one last chance to pull away. Her heart thudded like a runaway clock. The butterflies in her chest were replaced with a warm fuzzy feeling that consumed her entire body. His lips touched hers softly and he waited for her acceptance before he advanced the kiss. His kiss was like feeling the rays of heaven. No matter her feelings against the military life, Shane Newhope was the man she was destined to be with forever. His right hand trailed around her head as his fingers massaged through her hair. His tongue touched the seam of her lips and she moaned in approval. Opening her mouth, she reached for him, enjoying the taste of him.

The totally male grunt that rumbled from his chest was no surprise, especially since she accidentally lowered her right hand into his lap when the kiss escalated. Her eyes opened but she did not pull away and she certainly wasn't moving her hand. It had been years since she'd felt a throbbing penis and she liked it.

When the kiss finally ended, he looked first at her swollen lips then down to her hand that still lay on his shaft. She pursed her lips and ever so slowly moved her hand away.

"I'm not afraid. I've been through so many deployments in my life that it's second nature. That's what bothers me. I don't even go to see my brothers off anymore, they just tell me they're leaving and we say our good-byes."

"So you think you're a bad person because you don't get upset if someone you care about goes away on deployments?" he quizzed, the confusion obvious on his face.

That was exactly the way she felt. She remembered her mother sobbing when her father would go away. But her mother hadn't been born into that world. By the time Mindy

was old enough to walk, she understood that her dad would leave for long periods of time. Deployments were as much a part of normal life as going to work on Monday morning was for her.

He pulled her into his arms. If she only knew what he was thinking. He wasn't laughing, that was a plus. The pounding of his heart rumbled through his chest into her own. That was a good sign.

"That doesn't make you bad." He smoothed her hair away from her eyes, then tucked a lock behind her ear. "That gives you an edge. You're already what every military wife and mother prays to be."

"Cold hearted?" she asked.

He grunted, rested his palm against the curve of her face and stroked her cheek with his thumb. "Not cold hearted, just strong."

"Well, it feels like I'm cold hearted." She pulled her face away in shame and aimlessly brushed loose pebbles from the rock's surface.

"Trust me," he said, leaning in to kiss her again. "The last thing you should ever worry about is being cold hearted."

She reached for his face as he moved dangerously close and she leaned toward him, meeting his lips with her own. He had no idea how long she'd wanted to tell someone the secret way she felt and have them understand. He pulled her into his arms, exploring her mouth like a Spanish adventurer on a Mexican coast. He groaned loudly, tugging his shirt tail from inside his jeans.

He looked into her eyes. "There are some things I can't do half way and stop. You are about to cross the point of no return."

"Good." Her fingers traced down his arm. "You said that no one but you ever comes here."

He crossed his arms over his chest, then grabbed the tail of his shirt and yanked it over his head in one swift motion. He tossed it onto the rock behind her. Her hands smoothed over his chest, like a blind woman reading Braille. The deep intake of breath and roll of his eyes showed his pleasure of having her hands on him. She sighed as her fingers pressed through very light coils of blond hair.

Following a single line of hair that led down the center of his abdomen and disappeared into his jeans, she reached for his belt. He stepped back as she rose to her feet. While she worked at his jeans, he unbuttoned her sexy pink silk blouse. He pushed the shirt off her shoulders and laid it onto a rock to his right. She pressed her hands into his loose jeans, feeling the smooth curve of his buttocks. He deftly divested her of her lacy pink bra. It fell freely into his hands. He grunted and laid it to the side.

"My God, you are beautiful." His stormy blue eyes devoured her with a need he couldn't hide.

"Thank you." Her cheeks burned.

The moon on high and the smell of the salty air infused with the hearty scent of the Sequoia trees aroused her senses. The roaring rhythm of the crashing waves below the cliffs was the only sound as she looked into his smoky eyes. She tugged the button free on her jeans and slid them effortlessly down her legs. He pulled the belt from his jeans, stepped out of his shoes with little effort and slipped his loosened jeans down off his legs as his eyes scanned along the curves of her body. He leaned around her and laid his jeans onto the big, flat rock behind them, taking special care to pull his wallet free. She rolled her eyes from the pleasure of his hands on her shoulders. He slid them down her body studying her like she was newly found ancient treasure. He caressed her breasts only a few seconds before his hands continued their journey down her body. She drew in a long steady breath when his fingers hooked her panties and eased them down, kissing her thighs and calves along the way. She stepped from them and smirked as he held them up to admire them. Without hesitation, he reached for his own boxers and slid them from his body in nothing flat.

Mindy scooted onto the rock, thankful for the clothes he'd laid there. The sound of his big hands fighting with a small package caught her ears as he fumbled through his wallet. Mindy acted as if she didn't hear it and focused on the stars.

"I bet there are a million stars up there," she said in an attempt to give him privacy when there was none.

He sniggered. "Probably so. If you count them one by one out loud then I might actually get this done by the time

you're finished."

She chuckled. This was a moment she'd remember for the rest of her life. She looked briefly toward him, realizing two things. One, he was very near success in his battle with the condom. Two, from the look of things, he was hung. More than she'd thought.

"Something tells me you'll be worth the wait."

He crawled onto the rock with her, hovering over her like a plane awaiting permission to land. She reached for him, pulling his lips to hers. Did he need her worse than she needed him? Her eyes were desperate, searching for something she hoped he could give her. His strong arms held him above her as he lowered his head and allowing his lips to lock around a nipple. His shaft jumped in anticipation as she arched into his touch. He feathered kisses from her breast up to her lips.

"Are you going to make me wait forever?" Her voice was as desperate as her eyes.

He nodded. "Not hardly."

He lowered his body onto hers, allowing her to adjust to his weight. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." She tugged him closer. "But if you keep stalling I'm going to die of lust." She moaned, wrapping her legs around him, opening herself, forcing him to enter her. "Now that's better." She closed her eyes with relief.

"I was trying to take it slow and do it right. You don't get a second chance to make a first impression."

"Shane, trust me, you're going to get a second chance," she said with a solemn tone that drew his mouth toward hers. "I don't get naked on rocks with every guy I date."

Her tongue danced with his as he worked himself inside her. She moaned and closed her eyes from the pleasure. She'd vowed never to feel this way about a military man, but now she'd learned too late that it wasn't one's choice who they loved. He was everything she wanted and needed and if the military gig was the price to be paid, she'd just have to make the sacrifice.

Shane rested on his elbows and pressed his forearms beneath her shoulders and cradled her head in his hands. He pushed more forcefully into her.

"Am I hurting you?" His lips and teeth teased her shoulders.

"Not at all." Passion made her words come out in a breathless whisper.

He took her left nipple into his mouth and sucked it hard. However, the pleasure the rest of her body was experiencing diluted the pain. He pounded into her and her wetness wrapped around him like a hand in a glove. Her sighs grew louder as the pleasure intensified.

"Oh Shane," she moaned as she rubbed her hands over his head. "Don't stop." Her eyes widened then fluttered as her breath caught when he increased the rhythm of his thrusts.

"That's it," he grunted when her eyes fluttered again. "Let it feel good."

His thick shaft stroking inside her was so extremely intoxicating she couldn't have formed a sentence had her life depended on it. He ground his knees into the rock, thrusting himself into her.

She smoothed her hands down his back and her body climbed toward release. The grunt that escaped him was purely masculine as she touched his naked ass and dug her fingernails in, forcing him deeper.

"You are so good," she whined. "That feels so good."

He cocked his head to the side his face flush with pride. "Tell me what you want, baby. I'll give you anything you want."

"Just don't stop," she managed to say through labored breaths.

"I'm not going anywhere." He promised, leaning to kiss her once again.

"Oh God!" she exclaimed as the ecstasy rose to the exploding point. "Oh Shane—Oh Shane—Oh Shane."

He tilted back his head and growled loudly, but kept his relentless rhythm. The pressure building within her was intense, it would soon release. Like her grandmother's pressure cooker on the stove. The water boiling inside it as the release valve giggled in attempt to ease the pressure enough to keep it from exploding. She was reaching her boiling point and her panting wasn't enough anymore. She ground her fingernails into his butt cheeks and the gush of

wetness left her body as she climaxed. She was incapable of doing two functions and breathing had to fall to the wayside. Oddly enough, she didn't miss the oxygen, her mind and body were too busy enjoying the best orgasm she'd ever had.

Her breath caught as the orgasm released and at that moment she would have followed him directly to the gates of hell if he'd asked. She would have spit in the devil's eye just because he told her to then she'd follow Shane right back out again.

"How was that?" His eyes were still full of lust.

"Do it again," she almost begged. "I need it again."

He sat up onto his knees and wrapped his arms around her thighs pulling her to him. He pressed back inside her, pumped her against him as the muscles in his arms and chest pulled and pushed her onto his shaft. She rose onto her elbows and shuddered to see her wet, hungry body accept his hard shaft stroke by stroke.

There was no energy to reach and touch his face, not even with a need as strong as hers. She steadied herself on one elbow and reached toward the spot their bodies connected. For a few seconds, his eyes locked with hers. Sweat beaded on his forehead; he wasn't holding back. He never would. Her middle finger stroked her clit.

"Oh baby, that's so hot." He furrowed his brow and nodded in disbelief.

She stroked her herself a few more seconds then pulled her finger to her mouth. "I want it again."

"Trust me," he said. "I'll give you two, I promise. Right now, I'm about to explode."

"Come on, Shane," she said as she laid back onto the rock and reached both hands toward her wetness.

His chest rumbled as he hammered into her. Her left fingers divided and pulled herself open, exposing her clit while her right stroked her passionate bud. His face burned red with passion, evidence that he no longer had the ability to speak.

"Watch it." She gritted her teeth and spoke through them. "Let it feel good."

He looked into her eyes but was unable to utter a sound until his release. He took a deep breath as her fingers

continued to work on her clit. "You are unreal."

"How so?" her heart thudded at a frantic pace, the powerful need consuming her.

"Can I help you with that?" he asked as he looked down at her fingers.

"I need to come again."

"And you will." He backed further down the rock and pressed his freshly shaven face into her wetness.

She moved her hands to hold herself open while he worked the sensitive area around her clit. She pressed her feet onto his shoulders and he winked at her, grinning. One finger, then two, slid into her, pumping, stroking as he licked her into total ecstasy. Her breath caught and her body locked. He continued to slide his fingers into her as his tongue assaulted her clit. She began to pant, and seconds later her release trickled from her body.

He rose and wiped the wetness from his face as he licked his lips. He reached for her hand and tugged her toward him. His lips met hers in a soft kiss. A kiss that was everything she needed to know about Shane Newhope.

Four

As soon as Pat had stepped off the plane he heard about the shooting. News on a military base spread as quickly as it did in a woman's salon. By the time he'd stowed his gear and checked his weapon at least three people had made the unit aware that a man from base had been shot. He didn't put it all together for another hour. Information learned during a phone conversation with his comrades sent Pat's mind reeling with the possibilities that Mindy might have been the shooter. The killing was off base, but a Navy man was dead. The Navy guy was obsessed and had been stalking her before he broke into her house. Pat's heart raced. It all sounded too familiar. He rushed to his locker, grabbed his phone and called the MP station, hoping to get some answers.

"Sergeant Dodson," a voice answered.

"This is Gunnery Sergeant Pat Austin. I've been away on a mission and just found out that a woman shot a stalker. My sister, Mindy Austin, was being stalked by a Navy man named Sanback. Did my sister kill him?"

"That was Gunny Newhope's case—let me get him to the phone."

Pat nodded with angry disbelief, it shouldn't matter who the hell gave him the information. If the MPs had worked a murder case this week, they'd all know about it. Instead, however, they were pulling rank, swapping hats or comparing dicks, and for him neither was acceptable.

The minutes ticked away. The longer Pat waited the more impatient he became. He wasn't asking them to give him access to the damn case file; he just needed to know if

it was Mindy. If so, she was most likely tucked away in some safe haven while the MPs waited for him or Pete to arrive home. He huffed, wondering if Gunny Newhope was under the impression that he would back down from him right now. Tonight wasn't the night to play his *'this is my watch'* card. In fact, if Mindy was the shooter this would never have happened had Newhope kept his word. Newhope thought he could trump Pat with his military police rank, but this would probably be the night Newhope got his cocky MP attitude shoved up his ass.

"Gunny Austin, I've been expecting to hear from either you or your brother," Newhope piped into the phone.

"Well, it's a good thing I wasn't in danger. I'd be dead as long as it took you to decide to come to the phone."

"I'm sorry about that, I wasn't in the building."

"Was it Mindy?"

"Yes, it was," Newhope explained. "He broke in on her four nights ago. She had no other choice."

"Where is she?" Pat asked, his heart pounding like a base drum. He clenched his fist at his side.

"She insisted that she would stay at home. She stayed here on base for two nights."

Pat's temper jetted into overload and shot off the end of his tongue. "You piece of shit, you let her stay there by herself?"

He waited for a reply and wasn't sure what the silence meant. Perhaps the big bad MP was trying to come up with a plan to toss him in the brig for the night. A touch of arrogant pleasure spread across Pat's face. If the MP wanted an excuse to put him in the brig, all he had to do was show his face. Pat would be happy to do a little brig time to get to stomp this guy's ass.

"She's very stubborn." Shane's voice was raw. "But she's fine. I've called her several times to check on her and she assures me that she's okay."

Pat nodded, yes, Mindy was stubborn. She'd come by it honestly. "She's not stubborn by choice. She's stubborn because my dad forced her to be that way. It seems to me an MP should learn the difference between the two." With that, he ended the call.

~ * ~

Shane gritted his teeth and eased the phone back into the cradle. Those smartass brothers of Mindy's were a force to be reckoned with and if it weren't for his promise to Mindy he'd be happy to deal with them. He took a deep breath and looked at the clock, it was now 23:20 and his shift ended twenty minutes ago. In fact, he had already sat down into his car to go check on Mindy when he'd been called back in to answer the phone...

"Gunny Newhope, the phone is for you."

Shane rolled his eyes. He needed to get back to Mindy's apartment. He looked at his watch, 23:07. He was officially off duty. He laid his cell phone into his car seat. He'd call Mindy just as soon as he handled whatever it was on the phone.

"Who the hell is it and why couldn't you handle it?" The door thudded closed behind him.

"Gunny Pat Austin," Dodson informed. "I thought you'd want to take it."

~ * ~

Mindy hadn't wanted him to leave last night, but he also knew that she was stubborn. She didn't want to give him the wrong idea about why she wanted him around. He wanted to put her over his knee and spank her. He'd invited her to visit him on base while he was on duty. He would have also followed her home and crawled into the bed with her, if she'd only asked.

He'd been at a loss for words when dealing with Pat. It wasn't fear or even the possibility that he'd been wrong in the way he dealt with Mindy. It was because she'd set a crazy rule. He looked around at the other MPs who were far too interested in his phone conversation for his taste, then made his way back to the car.

Shane slammed the car door and sat back into his vehicle. He was in a hell of a position. To her brother, it had to look as if he'd abandoned Mindy, and he wouldn't have done that even to a woman he hadn't fallen in love with. He wanted to tell Pat that he'd spent hours with her talking since the shooting. He'd even taken steps to make her his own. He needed Pat to know that he'd sat outside their apartment the past two nights just hoping she'd call him asking him to come to her. Last night, she rode shotgun on

patrol with him while he was on duty, and he'd followed her home to verify that her apartment was safe. He spent the night in his car, parked outside their apartment door, in case she needed him. Tonight he'd sat there through his entire shift, watching and waiting for her to call. He would have been court marshaled for guarding a civilian off base had he been caught but he didn't care. He'd swapped the patrol vehicle for his personal vehicle at the end of his shift and was about to make tracks back to her apartment when Pat called. Now he understood why she hated that independent part of herself. Her father had created it and it kept her from truly letting anyone in.

~ * ~

"Mindy!" Pat's voice echoed through the house.

"Pat!" she cried in return.

"Are you okay?" he asked as he walked into Pete's room and saw her standing in the corner, the gun still on the floor.

She hadn't wanted to make a big deal out of not feeling comfortable in the apartment. Shane would stay with her but the last thing she wanted was for him to think that she'd attached herself to him because he was her hero. She had learned straight away that she couldn't sleep in her bedroom as nightmares invaded her sleep the way Sanback had invaded her life. She tried sleeping on her brothers' beds but that didn't help. The only thing that got her through her first night at home alone was sitting in a corner, gun by her side, waiting for the sun to rise.

She broke down into tears. "I killed him, Pat."

"I know," he soothed as he walked to her and wrapped his arms around her. "I talked to Gunny Newhope."

He kissed the top of her head and she clung to him the way a terrified little sister would cling to a protective big brother. She'd done what her father would've had her do. She'd made it through alone. Her father had prided himself on making not only the boys strong, but her as well. She didn't like the obligation to be strong. There were times in a girl's life that it was okay to need a pair of big strong arms to hold her.

Her tears finally quieted, and they sat on the bed. She gave Pat a play by play reenactment of the night she'd killed

Sanback. Pat's face lit with pride that she'd actually listened when their dad taught her how to use a gun. The lesson that if she had to shoot, make it count.

"Do you think you can sleep?" Pat asked after an hour.

Mindy glanced at Pete's bed and took a long slow breath. "I hope so. I think I'll sleep in Pete's bed."

He motioned her from Pete's room to his own. He took off his jeans and snatched on a pair of plaid sleep pants. "You can sleep with me," he informed with a voice of authority. "If Dad has anything to say about it, he can let me know."

Mindy's mind was invaded by memories of nights at home when she'd get scared by the shadows of the willow tree outside her window. She would stalk down the hall with her stuffed green bunny and walk into her brothers' room. They always allowed her to crawl between them on the big queen sized bed and she'd sleep soundly. Of course, they'd all have hell to pay the next morning when their dad found out. He didn't like weakness, the one thing he refused to tolerate.

Pat crawled into the king sized bed and pulled at the soft clean sheets as Mindy nestled into the opposite side from him.

"Hey," Pat spoke into the darkness.

"Hmmm?"

"When Pete gets back so he can help, I'll swap bedrooms with you. You'll always be safe in here."

The joy was obvious in her voice. "Thank you, Pat."

"You're welcome." He rolled onto his side and pulled the cover close to his face. "Now go to sleep. It's my watch."

~ * ~

Pete stormed in the house at 05:00 after hearing about the shooting. He ran to Mindy's room and found it empty and oddly eerie. He turned toward Pat's room. Opening the door, he sighed with relief to see Mindy asleep on the extra pillow. Pat held a finger to his lips as Pete walked in.

"Is she okay?" Pete whispered.

Pat nodded and rose, then made his way into the living room. "She's fine now, but she was in the corner of your bedroom with the gun when I got home."

"Damn it," Pete growled. "What were the chances that we'd both be gone at the same time?"

"Here's one better than that," Pat said, matching the snarl in his brother's voice. "Remember Newhope, the MP that helped us before?"

Pete nodded.

"He actually let her stay here by herself the past two nights. You would think that any dumb ass would have known that she would be scared out of her mind."

Pete hated himself and his damn job. He was away more than he was home. Mindy hated the military and he couldn't blame her now. Not only had some idiot wearing a U.S. Armed Forces uniform stalked her, but the military had taken away the two people who had promised to keep her safe. On top of all of that, the dumb ass MP assigned to the case had actually listened when Mindy said she'd be okay alone. He narrowed his eyes and rubbed his hand over his mussed hair. "We'll get a chance to deal with him later. Thank God it's Saturday 'cause I could sleep in a mine field."

"When we all get up I need you to help me swap bedrooms with Mindy. According to her, she killed Sanback in her bedroom," Pat said.

Pete nodded. "We'll give it a try, but we may have to move. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. I wonder if Mindy called Mom and Dad."

Pat shook his head. "Are you kiddin'? She knew that hardass would tell her what she did wrong."

Pete nodded. Even though he and his siblings had a wonderful childhood, Mindy had never gotten a fair shake. Their dad expected her to be as strong as the boys. He still remembered the horrible fight that had broken out between his mom and dad when the old Army hardass had taken Mindy's green bunny away. Their mother had let him train her children to be mini-soldiers, but she'd be damned to let him take away Mindy's sleep toy. She stood up to him, toe to toe, and dared him to defy Mindy the right to be a little girl. That was the only time his father backed down. The odd thing was, Pete never understood why his dad didn't realize the type of strength their mom had would have been far more valuable to Mindy.

He shook himself from the distant memory. It sounded

just like Mindy to try and handle the situation herself. She might not want a military man in her life, but it would take one to ever be able to live with her. She'd been taught all of her life that there was no future in being weak and therefore she'd made herself strong.

~ * ~

Several hours later, Mindy rose from the bed. Pat had long since started his day. Even when her brothers had gone out hell bent to save the world, they only needed two hours of sleep to do it. She heard the shower and walked across the living room toward the kitchen. She gasped, when Pete walked from the kitchen carrying a glass of orange juice.

"Pete," she sighed, walking into the open arms beckoning her. "When did you get home?"

"Before the sun came up. How are you making it?"

She nodded and answered all his questions about the night she'd shot Sanback. She wanted to tell him that Shane Newhope had been a huge part of her recovery, but she wasn't ready for the celebration that would ensue if she told.

"I've gotta go for a while," Pat said as he opened the bathroom door and picked up his boots at the end of the sofa. He sat to tug them on.

"What's up at base?" Mindy asked, turning her attention from Pete to Pat.

"I've got to talk to someone," he answered. "It could wait 'til Monday but I figured I'd go ahead and get it over with since I have the time."

Mindy nodded and looked toward Pete. "Are you going to be here for a while?"

Pete hesitated then took a seat on the sofa. "All day. I hear that we're going to be doing a little room swapping, so maybe you and I could get a head start on that."

"That sounds good." Mindy's eyes sparkled as she took a seat on the sofa. "Hurry back, Pat."

~ * ~

Pat walked inside the MP headquarters, pushed his stylish black shades onto his head, and wasn't surprised not to see Gunny Newhope. After all, it was Saturday and chances were he had the day off.

"May I help you?" A scrawny, red haired Sergeant named Dodson quizzed.

"How can I get in contact with Gunny Newhope?" Pat asked laying his palms on the counter as he talked. "I'm Pat Austin. I need to speak with him."

The young Sergeant swallowed hard. It became quickly obvious that the Sergeant was suddenly as nervous as a cat. Pat's eyes scanned across the back of the office to three other men who had suddenly taken interest in his presence. He turned his attention back to Dodson.

"He's off duty today, can someone else help you?" Dodson asked as he laid his own arm onto the counter. "I could get the officer in charge if you need to see him."

"Did I ask for someone else?" Pat snapped as he slid his hands off the counter and straightened his back. "Look, I need to speak to Newhope. Does he live on base?"

The Sergeant seemed startled and spun his attention toward the men to his left then back to Pat. "Let me give him a call and tell him you're here and would like to speak with him."

There was something going on that Pat didn't like. He felt like there was a big secret that everyone except him knew. There were two Corporals and a Staff Sergeant in the corner, and if necessary he'd pull rank on them all to find out what in the hell was going on. "That sounds like an excellent idea," Pat growled. "I'll wait outside."

It was almost fifteen minutes before Gunny Newhope pulled into the lot. Pat held his position, resting against his truck grill, arms folded over his chest. Shane stepped from the car and met Pat's eyes.

"I understand you need to see me?" Newhope quipped, as he made short time of the distance between him and Pat.

Pat pushed off the truck and squinted at the all too cocky MP headed his way. It seemed they guy was under the impression that he was a bad-ass. Dumb ass maybe but he wasn't so bad. A man with any balls would have handled the situation with Mindy differently. Newhope had given him his word that he'd take care of this situation and instead it had escalated out of control. That's the reason he was here, and he damn well wasn't leaving until he got some answers.

"I got home last night and my sister was sitting in a completely dark house, in the corner of my brother's

bedroom holding a gun," Pat barked. "Would you care to explain to me why you let her go back home by herself?"

Shane took a noticeable deep breath and shifted his weight. "I allowed her to go home because she insisted."

"You're going to need a better excuse than that," Pat snarled. "That's just not good enough."

Shane swallowed and rubbed his hand over his head, "I'm not trying to impress you with my answer. I'm just giving you the truth."

Pat furrowed his brow and stood silent for no more than two seconds. "Any dumb ass would've known she would be scared to death. Hell, she'd just killed a man."

"I barely knew her. Did you want me to insist that she stay somewhere else?" Shane lifted his palms in question.

"Hell, knowing or not knowing someone shouldn't keep you from protecting them." Pat wobbled his head sarcastically.

Newhope was thinking way too hard about his answers. There was more to the story of Mindy's ordeal than Newhope was admitting. Movement at the door of the building caught Pat's attention. The four MPs inside were looking out the doors and windows like a bunch of teenage girls hoping the paperboy would be along real soon. Something wasn't right.

"I called her several times to check on her. I even offered to call your brother at BUD's." Shane glanced down at his jeans as his cell phone jangled from his front pocket. He pulled the phone from his pocket and fought the smirk that battled its way onto his face. "Excuse me just a minute—it's my girl."

Pat grumbled, folded his arms across his chest and turned away. The guy was cocky enough to answer a call from his girlfriend while he was obviously pissed? Something inside him wanted to go a little round of one on one with the big bad MP. His eyes caught the men at the door again. He threw his hands into the air as anger swept through him like a raging fire. "What?"

The men scrambled to move from the door and windows. It reminded Pat of the time he and Pete had got caught with their father's pipe. They'd been home alone, and had decided to become men that day by smoking. A car had

pulled into the drive and they'd run to the window to identify the vehicle. When it was their parent's car the two boys had spun away from the door and made hasty tracks to extinguish the pipe. They'd gotten caught anyway. In fact there was only one reason to look scared as a Sunday School Teacher in a whore house. Those men knew something.

"Sorry about that," Shane said as he tucked his phone back into his pocket. "I'll call her back."

Pat couldn't believe that they'd actually tried to talk Mindy into hooking up with this pussy. He was as fake as a plug nickel, and just as worthless. What kind of man, real man, was perfectly dressed on a Saturday morning? He looked like he'd just stepped out of a designer clothing catalog. It took a pansy of a man to wear those half worn out, low rider jeans just because the Hollywood pretty boys were doing it. He was a grown man, a Marine for goodness sakes and he was wearing sandals.

"That was your girl, huh?" Pat flexed his chin and rubbed his fingers across displaying sarcasm rather than scratching an itch. "What if the situation was reversed and it was your girl who shot the stalker and I was the MP who let her go home alone while you were away on a mission?"

Shane clenched his teeth and drew in a slow steady breath. "I made several attempts to get her to stay somewhere else. She insisted."

Movement caught Pat's attention once again, and from the corner of his eye he realized that the other MPs were looking out the windows again. He paused, gave the situation some thought and got madder by the minute. There was a reason those sons-a-bitches were glued to that window, and it had everything to do with Mindy.

"What the hell is going on around here?" Pat's eyes locked on Newhope's and left no room for misunderstanding. He wanted a straight answer.

"Around where?" Newhope twisted his face in question and looked at Pat as if he'd lost his mind.

"Here." Pat snapped as he pointed to the ground. "I want to know what in the hell is going on around here that makes four grown men plaster themselves to the window like a bunch of fucking suction cups?"

He spun his attention toward the men in the windows

again, his hands flailing angrily. "What the fuck are you looking at?"

"Maybe they aren't accustomed to a Gunnery Sergeant running around bitchin' like a girl." Shane smirked then turned his attention to the men and waved them away from the window.

"Bitchin' like a girl?" Pat chuckled. "I've got your fuckin' girl you damn pansy. I'm here to get answers about my sister and I'm gonna get them if I have to jerk 'em out your ass."

Newhope rolled his eyes. "How many times do I have to tell you? Are you having trouble understanding that I did everything I could to talk her out of staying there alone?"

"I'll tell you what I'm having trouble with," Pat said as he reached onto his forehead and removed his sunshades, closed them then turned to his truck. He laid the shades onto the hood and turned his attention back to Newhope. "I'm having trouble with your smart mouth insinuating I'm stupid, when it was you that left my sister alone after she killed somebody."

"What the hell did you want me to do? Would this be better if I'd offer to spend the night with her? Should I go to your house now and offer to sleep with her tonight?" Shane lifted his hands in frustration.

"You keep your ass away from my sister." Pat's lip quivered in anger.

"Well I sure can't change the past." Newhope explained with a single nod of his head. "But here you are busting my chops for something that happened almost a week ago."

"You better hold on to that girl of yours, Newhope," Pat puffed as a smirked grin grew across his lips. "Because you've got a hell of a lot to learn about women."

"My understanding of women has nothing to do with this." Shane stiffened his back and moved closer, dangerously close. "I did all I could. What was your point in calling me here this morning?"

Pat flexed his jaws and fought the desire to knock Newhope flat of his ass. "Now's not the time. Don't think you're gonna put on your MP hat and I'm gonna back down." Pat poked his finger into Newhope's chest. "I blame you for

this. If you'd let us handle it, my sister wouldn't be fighting the demons of having killed someone. And I think we both know what demons I'm talking about."

Newhope looked down at the finger on his chest. "I was trying to obtain enough evidence to arrest him," then shoved aside Pat's finger.

He had to give the guy credit, he was a ballsy bastard. He was trying to stand his ground, and the idiot had to know that he'd been wrong. Hell Pat wouldn't do the biggest bitch he knew that way.

Pat stepped forward, closing the gap between him and Shane. It seemed that it was show time. "You gave me your word that you'd take care of it. I'm not sure what *your* honor is worth, Marine, but I can tell you that it's not nearly enough."

Pat held Newhope's gaze, it was time for this guy to learn that people didn't always back down just because he was an MP. He didn't care, at this point, if the guy was the damn Commandant of the Marine Corps, he needed his ass kicked. Pat was just the man to do it.

Shane glared into the eyes of the man who had invaded his space. His nostrils flared, and it was easy to see that rage had bombarded him like a heat seeking missile. "Don't push it."

"Push it?" Pat arched one brow. "Is that supposed to scare me? I should've gotten a piece of you that day, but I took you at your word. Today your word isn't worth shit to me, so go ahead, you big bad-ass fucker, give me half a reason."

The silence was deafening as the two stood eye to eye, nose to nose and toe to toe. Pat was close enough to smell the cinnamon gum in Newhope's mouth. He hated cinnamon. The vein in Newhope's neck was pounding, but Pat couldn't associate it with fear considering his own felt like it was doing the same thing.

"Get out of my face, Austin," Shane snarled his lip slightly. "Don't make this personal."

"It's already personal. You let me down. I took your word as a Marine that you'd deal with it. Now my sister is dealing with the hell that goes along with being in a war zone. And you're telling me not to make it personal? If it

were any more personal, you jack-off, I'd be up your ass."

"You weren't there Austin." Newhope made one last attempt to defuse the situation. "Let it go. I've played this game with you as long as I'm going to."

Pat reared his head back and snapped it forward making brutally hard contact with Newhope's upper eye and brow line. "Game on mother fucker!"

Newhope stumbled back, wiped the top of his hand across his brow and looked at the blood. Lunging quickly forward he planted a solid left fist into Pat's stomach and followed through with a right hook to his eye.

"We're even." Newhope said pointing a stiff finger toward Pat. "Now back the fuck off."

Pat bolted toward him, planted his shoulder into his chest and pushed. They impacted Newhope's car and sprawled across the hood. Pat was swinging with all he had as they rolled off the car hood like a couple of bouncing basketballs.

Suddenly there were hands everywhere. Someone was pulling him off Newhope and this fight was far from over. "Get your damn hands off of me." Pat struggled against the men who were pulling against him and he got a good hit on one of them.

Newhope was struggling just as hard against the men who held him. "Let him go! Let's get this over with."

A tall black man pushed between them, dodging the flying fists and feet. "Break it up. Now!"

Pat's muscles went limp as his eyes landed upon the dress blue uniform with yellow chevron stripes easily distinguishable at Sergeant Major. Of all the times for a Sergeant Major to show up, why did it have to be now? Given five more minutes he'd make a believer out of Newhope.

"What the hell is going on here?" the Sergeant Major's voice roared, grabbing a fist full of material on Newhope and Pat's chests. He pulled them closer and looked from one to the other. "I'm tempted to send you both to the brig."

Newhope's eyes were wide as saucers, and he acted as if he'd quickly forgotten the reason for the fight. "Sergeant Major Hansford I let my temper get the best of me, Sir."

The Sergeant Major released Newhope and turned his attention to Pat. "And you?"

"This is nothing we can't deal with another time, Sergeant Major," Pat offered, his eyes full of regret. "It was just a little misunderstanding."

"He's right." Shane nodded. "We'll deal with it, another time at another place."

~ * ~

When Pat walked back into the house, Pete was standing motionless in the hallway, watching Mindy pack up trinkets for the move.

"What's wrong with you?" Pat asked, rubbing his hand over the puffy lump on his lip.

"She's talking to a guy," Pete said, glancing toward Pat then turning back toward Mindy. "She's planning to meet him somewhere tonight."

Pat looked her way with furrowed brow. "What guy?"

Mindy was stacking the items from her dresser top into a small box. She was also giggling as she talked to someone on the phone. She had killed someone a few days ago. Pat had just finished a brawl in her honor, and she was giggling. She brushed her long black hair behind her shoulder and laughed aloud.

"Someone she was very happy to hear from," Pete explained then turned back toward Pat with wide surprised eyes. "What in the hell happened to you?"

Pat sucked the lump on his lip then began to speak, "Me and Newhope didn't see eye to eye."

"Who won?" Pete teased, his eyes focused on Pat's puffed up lip.

"The Sergeant Major," Pat admitted with a chuckle. "We didn't realize until too late that if it was a big dick contest, the Sergeant Major's was bigger."

Pete fought a laugh because more than once Pat had let his mouth overload his ass. This time, however, Pat was right in getting in Newhope's face. Plain and simple, the MP had been wrong in the way he'd handled the situation with Mindy. In fact, Pete wasn't fully decided against having a little talk with him, too.

"You do realize we were trying to fix her up with a guy that absolutely abandoned her when she needed somebody

the most?" Pat stated more than asked.

Pete nodded. He didn't want to admit it, but most civilians would have done a better job of keeping Mindy safer than Newhope had. This was a sharp price for her to pay to finally prove to them that a military man was the last thing she needed in her life.

"So this is it? We agree to let her do her own thing?" Pete asked, glancing at his sister, who seemed oblivious to them as she tucked a figurine into a box.

"Hell, man, it's her life. I don't even think a civilian could have been a worse choice than that asshole."

Five

Mindy checked her hair once more in the mirror, then turned toward the living room. She stared over the living area as memories of the night she'd killed Sanback flooded her mind. She cringed to see how close the telephone was to the front door, but the only jack in the entire apartment was between the front door and the kitchen door. She walked toward the sofa where her brothers sat watching a pay-per-view wrestling special. It was odd how the living room seemed huge when she was alone, but when her brothers were home it was hardly large enough to accommodate their imposing figures. She'd never understood how two such manly men had ended up with an apartment with a rose pink couch, but they had. She leaned over the back of the sofa and kissed Pat on the cheek. "Thank you for swapping rooms with me. And thank you for helping," she finished, planting a kiss on Pete's cheek also.

Their smiles were warm, but their eyes never left the rough and tumble action playing on the huge plasma television in the corner. She fought off a laugh because it looked like they were planning to barricade themselves in the house for the remainder of the evening. There were two six-packs of beer in an open, ice filled cooler to the left of the coffee table. There were enough snacks on the table to feed a third world country.

"You still haven't told me how you got that puffy lip," she teased Pat as he struggled to open his mouth to accommodate the man sized burgers they'd bought down the street. "Did some girl bite you?"

He grunted, wiped his mouth on his arm and chewed

his food slightly before speaking. "Just a little run in with somebody that's had it coming for a long time."

"Oh, so you aren't the only one with marks?" she asked as she reached into the plate of French fries sitting between them on a throw pillow.

He nodded confidently, and took the French fry from her fingers as she opened her mouth to gobble it down. "Not hardly."

"Oh come on, give me fry." She smacked his hand and reached into the plate again "I'm sure the guy had it coming," she finally bit down on a crunchy fry.

"So, little sister, are you going out?" Pete rolled his eyes toward her as he swallowed down a bit of his burger, "Where are you going?"

Mindy grabbed her purse and walked toward the door, "Out."

"That's not an answer." Pete made room for his burger on the coffee table and rose to his feet and moved toward her. "Have you been seeing this guy for a while?"

"Yep," she said simply resting her hand on the door knob. "I'll probably be late."

"So when do we get to meet him?" Pete quizzed then swept his tongue over his teeth just in case any burger was left behind. "Why doesn't he come here to pick you up?"

"Because that's the way I want it, I have no intention to force him to endure the big brother inspection." She said as she fumbled with the buckle on her purse strap. "I hope you understand, but I've realized that life is too short not to go after what you want."

It was probable that her brothers wouldn't like that idea, especially since Sanback. It had to be her choice, it was her life.

Pete glanced toward Pat who'd turned his attention from his burger to their conversation. "He's a pussy."

Pat pushed several fries into his mouth. "That's what it sounds like."

"He's not a pussy," she stomped her foot, sometimes they made her so mad. "Just because I refuse to let you meet him yet doesn't mean he isn't a great guy."

"What does he do?" Pat rose from the sofa licking the last remnants of his burger from his fingers.

"I'll tell you when I think its time," she chimed. "Why should I give you a reason to criticize his job?"

"Oh hell, he's a hairdresser or some shit like that," Pat said with a lisp, batting his lashes quickly.

Mindy stood by the door, and watched her silly brother. His actions were wrong on so many levels that it was all she could do not to burst into laughter. She bit her bottom lip as she fought the desire to smile. "Would it make you feel better if I told you he was a boot camp barber?"

"Bite my ass, Mindy." Pete waved off her evasive answer. "I know there're some bad apples in every bunch but all military guys aren't like Sanback. I think you're making a mistake. You don't know the civilian world enough to be part of it."

"At least it's my mistake." She twisted the door knob and pulled it open. "I'll gladly accept the consequences."

"Well, it's a good thing because a man like the kind you want can't handle a woman like you." Pat moved back toward the coffee table, snagged a Twinkie and threw it toward Mindy.

She closed the door and almost burst into laughter. She certainly did like making them miserable. It wasn't that she didn't appreciate what they were trying to do. It was just that they were failing to let it be her decision. There would come a day when they'd both have wives and she couldn't depend on them to defend her anymore. She needed to have a man of her own, one she'd selected because they were compatible not because he wore a uniform.

~ * ~

She pulled into the mall parking lot to meet Shane, locked her car then jumped into his waiting car.

"Sorry I'm late, but my brothers were giving me the business about dating a pussy." She stated honestly as she leaned toward him and met his warm wet lips with her own.

Her fingers touched a small cut beneath his right eye before leaning in and kissing it. Everything about him was sexy. Every inch of him was pure male and he made the womanly urges within her throb with alertness.

"And you defended me, right?" he asked as he raised his face and kissed her fingers.

"No, now they think you are a hairdresser. I just let

them draw their own conclusions and someday, when I spring you on them, they won't know what to say." She glanced at him as she sat her purse into the floorboard between her legs.

"Oh, so now I'm not going to always be a secret?" His hand trailed across the small of her back as she leaned forward.

"No way." She leaned back and pulled his hand into her lap. "I just want them to suffer because they think I should do exactly as they say."

He nodded and looked down the roadway. "They are head strong that's for sure."

She turned her attention back to the cut beneath his eye. "What happened?"

He drew in a slow deep breath. "Pat came to visit me today."

The reality of his words shook her so much that her heart almost skipped a beat. Did he say Pat? She whipped toward him in the seat. "Did you say Pat? My brother?"

He nodded. "Your brothers are pissed that I let you stay at your apartment after the shooting."

"Did Pat do this?" she questioned as she touched his eye again. "And you're the reason he has a puffed up lip?"

"Guilty as charged." He looked into her eyes. "But unfortunately, it isn't over because he didn't get as big a piece of me as he wanted."

Mindy listened in shock as he described the confrontation. She'd never dreamed that Pat would blame Shane for what happened with Sanback.

"Don't sweat it." Shane pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. "When you're ready we'll tell them, until then I can take whatever they want to dish out."

"I'm so sorry this happened." Tears formed in her eyes. "I'll tell them about you. I never dreamed this would happen."

He laid his hand on her knee. "It's okay. He's a tough hombre, but nothing I can't handle. Besides, I'm cool with it as long as he thinks he's protecting you."

Reality slapped her in the face. She'd thought it was funny when she decided to keep her relationship with Shane a secret. It wouldn't have been quite so funny if someone

was seriously hurt in the scuffle they'd had this morning. There was no reasonable excuse for a twenty six year old woman to act like a child. She wasn't a ten year old trying to hide cigarettes from her parents.

~ * ~

The thoughts of the fight hadn't left her mind for a second since she'd learned about it. Part of her hated Sanback for the hell he'd caused in her life. But did she have a right to hate him for causing trouble in her life, when she'd taken his? There should be a time to resign the anger and forgive, and for the best interest of the men in her life, that time was now.

"What's wrong?" Shane sat his glass onto the dinner table and reached for Mindy's hand. "You're quiet. Are you mad at me about what happened with Pat?"

Her eyes widened and she shook her head. "You didn't do anything wrong. I didn't give you a choice."

"But they don't see it that way," Shane explained as he waived off the waiter advancing to their table. "All they see is that I let you go back to that house alone."

"You would have stayed with me, I know that. But I certainly didn't want you to think that I'd slept with you so that you wouldn't leave me alone." Her face full of regret as her eyes begged him for forgiveness.

"You're stubborn. But I'm just as stubborn."

She tilted her head and studied him. "How so?"

"Because I slept in my car the first night you were there." His eyes searching her face. "I sat outside during my shift last night hoping like hell you'd swallow your pride and call me."

She cupped her hand over her mouth in surprise. "You can't be serious! You were there the whole time?"

He nodded. "Do you know how big a jackass it would take to leave you alone after what you went through? As big a jackass as your brothers think I am."

Oh God, it was worse than she'd first thought. Much worse. She'd flexed her father-given muscles and made Shane leave when she wanted nothing more than for him to stay. Then she'd gone a step further and denied him the right to tell her brothers that even if she was stubborn that he hadn't left her unguarded. In grand style, she'd made her

brothers hate Shane.

~ * ~

Mindy and Shane stepped from the car and walked toward the beach a few hundred feet away. It was difficult to find places that her brothers might not see her with him, but luckily the secret would be out soon.

"You're beautiful, do you know that?" he asked suddenly, as she wrapped her hands around his arm.

She jerked her face toward his. "Me? I think I'd fit more into the average category."

He traced his eyes over the dark features of her face, "What would make you say that?"

"According to my brothers, beauty is beneath blonde hair." She admitted. "And that's one thing I'll never have."

"Beauty isn't about hair color. They're confusing beautiful with the stereotype of easy. You, on the other hand, are beautiful."

"Jesus, I'm standing by the ocean with the incoming tide and you're going to drown me in lies."

He turned toward her as her dark hair blew in the salty air. "Look at you, dark hair, dark eyes, and flawless olive skin." He pulled his fingers down her cheek, brushing away her hair. "Perfect lips, and curves that probably measure closer to perfect than anything your brothers have dated in months."

"Thank you, even if I do doubt your sanity." She blushed.

"But I wasn't talking about that stuff when I called you beautiful. I was meaning the way that you absorb the world. The way you don't take the small stuff for granted, that makes you beautiful."

He stopped and lowered his face toward her as she reached to trace a scar above his left eyebrow. "I would love to hear the story."

"I didn't think you liked war stories," he said, his tone somber as he leaned in to kiss her.

She pulled away slightly and whispered, "Maybe it isn't the stories after all, but the way they always insisted on telling them." She tilted her face into his kiss. "I want to know all about you. About the places you were stationed, and how long I'll have to wait for you to take me back to

your special place."

He cleared his throat and trailed a finger down her arm. "I'm leaning more toward taking you to my quarters. That rock was hard."

"I'd gladly give myself to you on a bed of nails," she whispered, tiptoeing to pull his lips to hers.

"Barbed wire." He pulled her into his arms. "I cut a rolled fence at the Bosnia Serbian border and it recoiled and cut my face."

He deepened the kiss. Her need was as obvious as the hard on between his legs.

"I need you, Shane." She sighed as she looked at him with her dark alluring eyes and swollen lips. "The other night when you were inside me I knew that nothing could hurt me."

Those were the kinds of words that made a man forget everything except his cock and where she wanted it to be. She could see the desperation in his eyes as he looked around, in search of a private place to hide.

"We aren't the only people here." He locked his index finger into the belt loop of her jeans, using his last bit of strength to battle her spellbinding powers.

"Where?" she asked as she unbuttoned his shirt. "How fast can we be there?"

He looked desperately around, grabbed her hand and made a dash toward his car. He opened the door for her and leaned to kiss her when she sat inside. The kiss deepened and she considered begging him to taking her right there. With a grunt and a raging hard on he ran around the car and jumped inside. The engine roared to life and he drove quickly around the winding road. She toyed with him. First she rubbed her hands down his chest. His muscles were taught and felt wonderful to her touch. She crawled onto her knees, nibbled and licked his ear until he growled with pleasure. She worked to unfasten his belt, then his jeans.

"Ten more minutes," he promised as he drove like he was in it to qualify at Indy.

"That's a long time," she protested with a dramatic pout. She reached her hand inside his jeans, pulling his rock hard shaft free.

His breath caught and he looked down no more than a

second before she took him into her mouth, all of him. She could hear his hands as they tightened the grip on the steering wheel. He shivered as her lips flicked the head of his shaft. She wouldn't have cared if she had been sitting at a red light on Rodeo Drive as she gave him head. Luckily, they were on a secondary road with little traffic. She rose up and stared at him, licking her lips, then kissed him as if he wasn't driving a speeding vehicle. Then suddenly she was out of her jeans and moving toward him.

"I can't take it," she groaned. "I've gotta have you, now."

She straddled him and pressed herself onto his hard shaft in one smooth, swift motion. He gasped. He brought the car to a screeching halt, eased onto a field road and into the cover of some roadside trees. She bounced on his shaft, in search of a release that she desperately needed.

"Now." He slid the seat back, killed the lights and wrapped his hands onto her hips. "Let's be sure you get exactly what you're after."

Who would come first? She was desperate for an orgasm, and she planned to get it even if it landed them on the hood of the car with her bent over doggie style.

She looked down to where she slammed her crotch violently onto him. Fire rushed through her to see her wetness swallow him up time after time. It looked good, to watch him disappear inside her. He bit his bottom lip and helped her pump onto his shaft. The sounds of her breathing changed and moments later gave way to a breathless panting that signaled her approaching climax.

"Oh, God," she sighed. "Oh, that's it."

He grunted when her body convulsed as she held her breath. "Breathe, let it feel good."

Her shaking subsided but tears slid down her face. He pressed his palms onto her cheeks. "What's wrong, are you hurt?"

She shook her head. "I'm falling in love with you."

"Are you okay with that? With who I am?" he asked, his expression anything but light.

"I'd follow you to the ends of the earth." She tapped his lips quickly with her own.

"I don't need you to follow me to the ends of the

earth." He held her face closer. "I just need to know that if I have to go there you'll be waiting for me when I get back."

A smile slowly grew across her face. "I'll be waiting."

Six

Her brothers were waiting for her when she finally rolled out of bed. She hadn't made it home until half past four. She'd had little choice but to sleep in. She walked toward the bathroom at 08:00. Their eyes instantly locked on and followed her until the door closed. She showered, applied a paper thin coat of make up to hide the circles beneath her eyes. She brushed her hair and teeth. Slowly, she drew in a deep breath and looked at herself in the mirror. Her brothers were going to give her hell for staying out all night. She didn't care, it was well worth it.

"I missed breakfast, huh?" She made her way back into the living room and flopped down between them on the sofa.

"We figured you had breakfast before you came home," Pete said, his eyes narrowed with suspicion.

She turned her weary head toward him, looking up from a slumped position where she had propped her feet on the coffee table that was distanced for a 6'3" sitter. "I'm acting like you guys now, aren't I?"

"If we're going to be out all night we tell you," Pat said, standing up and pacing back and forth in front of the couch.

"Well, I would have told you, but by the time I figured it out it was too late to call," she explained with a tongue in cheek attitude. "Besides, I told you I'd be late before I left."

"You could've at least left your cell phone on so we could get in contact with you." Pete's eyes were cold. She recognized her father's cold look of warning in them. "We were worried about you."

"I didn't want to be disturbed." She yawned lazily. "Kinda the same way you both leave your phones laying on your dressers when you go out."

"Where were you?" Pete finally blurted, locking his demanding eyes on her. "And who is this prick you've been seeing?"

She turned her head up to him again. "He's no prick. I don't date pricks. If you'd taken time to get to know any of my dates, you would know that."

She forced herself back to her feet and waddled toward the kitchen. She wasn't good at staying out all night, that was more her self-righteous brothers' department. Soon she would get the chance to tell them about Shane, but she wasn't sure exactly how to do it.

"Damn, Mindy, get that freshly fucked look off your face," Pat ground out trailing her toward the kitchen.

She paused, and glanced back toward him. "Excuse me, did you just call me freshly fucked?"

"Yes I did, do you deny it?" He moved closer, grabbed her arm and spun her toward him. "I'm ashamed of you."

Her mind drifted back to the night before. She'd absolutely blown Shane's mind by taking what she wanted right there in the car. She'd further confused him by telling him that she was falling in love with him. But he had a few tricks up his sleeve, too. He took her back to his quarters in the NCO housing units. He opened the door and allowed her inside and she was overcome by the pure male scent in the room. He'd turned his footlocker onto its end beside the bed. It held a bottle of wine chilled in an old ammo box and a single candle that looked like it would burn for days. He led her toward the bed, foregoing the grand tour until he had a little relief of his own. She pressed her hands past his still unbuttoned shirt and leaned in, kissing his chest in random spots. He clapped and the light went out. The flick of a cigarette lighter ignited in the room and he leaned toward the candle. She had never imagined that a man like him could be romantic, but it seemed there was a side to him that could melt a girl like the hot southern sunshine.

"Hello!" Pat growled, waving his hands in front of her face. "I asked you a question."

"You actually asked two questions, for which I have

two things to say you, hypocrite." She pointed her finger at him. "First, I wouldn't call it fresh as it's been almost twelve hours. And second, let he who isn't freshly fucked cast the first stone."

He stared at her as if she'd lost her mind. He nodded slowly in disbelief as he crinkled his eyebrows into a deep furrow. "What?"

"The hickey on your neck, dear brother," she said, wobbling her head in sarcasm. "It looks like you did a bit more than watch wrestling last night."

She pushed through the kitchen door and poured a glass of juice. "Anybody want some juice?"

There was no answer. She pulled a pan from the cabinet to create an egg sandwich when Pete stormed through the door.

"Are you doing this just to spite us?"

She looked up at him as she held the spatula. "I'm doing this for me, it has nothing to do with you. If you didn't put yourselves and men like you up on a self-glorified pedestal, then you'd see I'm not wrong for doing so."

"You might as well forget it, Pete, she's a lost cause." Pat said as he entered the kitchen.

His words stung like a bee on sunburned skin, and she couldn't help but lash back out. His eyes grew large when she jerked the frying pan from the stove without a single thought and began swinging it at him, the contents scattering all about the kitchen.

"You listen to me, Pat Austin. You don't have the right to call me a lost cause!" She continued to swat at him, and he ducked the blows, his hands protecting his face. "I have the same blood running through my veins that you have in your own. Maybe I did have a good time last night but unlike you, I guarantee that I'll remember his name this time next year."

"Oh stop it, it's different with guys." He dodged another swing of the frying pan.

"In your mind you think it is different! And that's lucky for you because in the real world you're nothing but a male whore. Don't you ever criticize me again, you self-centered egomaniac. I can count my men on one hand and I'd be willing to bet that if you had to count the sluts to your credit,

you'd need every finger and toe in this whole fucking building."

"There again it's different with men." He was enjoying the torture too much for her liking.

He jumped back, hands in the air, with a loud chuckle as he continued to dodge the hot frying pan. She gritted her teeth because it was for certain that no one in the world could make her as angry as quickly as her brothers.

"It's easy to see why you got popped in the mouth." She spat before she thought.

His smile fell away. "I'll pretend you didn't say that."

"I suppose it would be different if I had been out with one of your own kind?" she quizzed, deciding not to push her luck. "Then it would be okay because I was a notch in somebad-ass' bed post."

Pat reached out and pinched her on the leg. "If it had been with one of our kind you'd need a walking cane after waiting six years."

She lunged forward swatting again, him still dodging her like a teasing adolescent in a game of keep away. She gritted her teeth as she swung and if she ever got lucky and made contact he'd have a bruise to add to his collection. Pete grabbed her from behind as she continued to back Pat through the apartment, and as simply as that she was unarmed.

"Calm down!" Pete yelled as she kicked against him. "You act just like Dad sometimes."

"Get your hands off me," she screamed so loud that the neighbors could probably hear. "I am grown and I don't need a damn caretaker."

"No, you need your ass whipped that's what you need." Pat rubbed his hands together. "And there is no time like the present."

She backed away as he walked toward her. She hated it when they ganged up on her, not that she could fight either of them alone and win. She backed into the kitchen as Pete stood there holding the frying pan. She sat down at the kitchen table and looked up at them.

"It's time for me to leave," she announced as tears streamed down her cheeks. "I should never have moved in with the two of you."

Their faces changed suddenly from smirked grins to solemn expressions of regret. They looked at her as if she had just announced a family member had died.

"Don't look at me that way, what did you expect?" she asked. "You both live the way you want to, date who you want, screw who you want and I never say a word. Do you really think that I like all those superficial whores you bring home? Well I don't but I keep my mouth shut."

"Mindy," Pete interrupted.

"I'm not finished," she said as she held her hand up to him. "I know they are with you just because of what you are, not who you are. I know that neither of you would ever go out with a woman like me, but it's the women like me that will really love you someday."

"Look sis," Pat interrupted.

"Pat." She locked eyes with him, tears still flowing down her cheeks. "I'm sorry that I popped off about you getting hit in the mouth. I was wrong for that. And I'm sorry that I'm not what you want me to be, but I have far too much pride in myself to open my legs for every uniform that walks by." She didn't care that her big bad-ass brothers were seeing the weakest part of her. "If my choices are to be like the girls you want me to be or lose your respect, then I guess I just lost your respect."

Pat stepped forward with open arms. "No you didn't. You just gained it."

"That's right little sis, you sit right there and I'll cook your sandwich." Pete rinsed the skillet beneath the faucet and sat it onto the stove eye.

She couldn't believe what had just happened, for one time she had actually stood her ground against the both of them and won. She proudly wiped away her tears. "You'll leave me to date whom ever I want?"

"If he's good enough for you then he's good enough for us." Pete looked over his shoulder toward her as he flipped the egg in the skillet. "How long have you been dating him anyway?"

"A while," she explained as she nudged the chair beside her for Pat to take a seat. "He's really a good man, and you'll like him."

Pete sat a steaming sandwich in front of her and they

both took a seat at the table. "Tell us about him." Pat said.

"What if I do better than that, what if I bring him here tonight and you meet him?" she asked glancing from one to the other. "Or do you have dates?"

"Since when do we date on Sunday night?" Pete poked at teasing finger into her ribs.

"You promise not to try and intimidate him into not seeing me anymore, right?" she quizzed. The last thing she wanted was for Shane and Pat to tie up again.

"We promise." Pat put his hands in the air. "Even if he is a little civilian prick."

She pointed her finger at him as she chewed her sandwich. She wanted to laugh because they had no idea the man they were calling a prick was the very man who had backed not one, but both of them down when it mattered most. She also had to consider, however, that neither of the twins was happy with Shane Newhope at the moment.

~ * ~

"So, is he picking you up tonight?" Pat asked as Mindy walked into the living room late that afternoon.

"No, we're meeting for dinner, then he'll follow me back here." She leaned forward over Pete's lap for him to fasten the clasp on her seashell necklace.

"The last supper." Pat offered tugging at a strand of Mindy's hair.

She pointed at him. "Don't go there."

"I'll be good, I promise."

"I'm not sure we should let you go out of the house wearing clothes like that," Pete said, biting the inside of his bottom lip.

"Why?" she asked.

"I'm not sure civilian boys can handle a gal like you," Pete teased. "You're a damn hottie even if you are my little sister."

She looked at him like he had just forecasted the coming of Christ. "Thank you, Pete, that was very sweet."

"Yeah, it isn't that we won't date girls like you," Pat picked up the remote for the television and turned the volume down. "It's that we know they would shoot us down."

She stood between them, then kissed each of them on the cheek. "Take the chance, they might surprise you."

She walked into the bathroom and took one more look at herself in the full length mirror. She had to look perfect tonight. She wanted Shane to look at her and think *hell, yeah* not *what the hell did I do?* Her favorite jeans were hip huggers that hugged her in all the right places, proving that it wasn't just her brothers who ran a few laps around the track. The black belt with silver spikes gave her attitude and Shane would like it. Her shirt was simple but demanded attention; hot pink, low cut, curve fitting and hit just above the belt.

"What time do we expect this civilian heartthrob?" Pete's eyes teased Mindy.

"Stop it," she snapped. "I will be back between 18:30 and 19:00. He has to be at work at 0:400, so we won't be late."

Pete burst into laughter, "How often do you have to discuss the factor of time with him?" he asked. "Do you talk to him in military time, too?"

"That's all I know. It took little effort for him to adjust to my knowing military time."

"I bet he counts on his fingers." Pat held up his right hand and touched each finger with his left fingers one by one. "She said 17:00. Do I add twelve or subtract twelve?"

"Hold that thought." She pointed her finger. "You'll see he's no dummy."

Seven

Mindy flipped her phone closed and grunted. It still amazed her that the hunk of man who was waiting at the door of the restaurant was hers. There was just something about him that made her hot the instant she looked at him and with any luck that feeling would never end. He walked toward her car as she pulled into a parking space. Mindy noted that he'd drawn female attention, but it was easy enough to see why. She stepped from the car and walked toward him.

"You've drawn attention to yourself," she said as she wrapped her arms around his neck and he pulled her close against his chest.

"I've got all I want in my arms right now," he teased as his lips to meet hers in an open mouthed kiss that left the admirers to drool.

"Let's go sit at the bar while we wait for our table," she tugged his finger. "I have to get you out of sight before they out number me and steal you away."

He pulled her back into his arms for one last quick kiss. "Not a chance."

Mindy walked proudly with him as his hand pressed on the small of her back and slid more than one time over the curve of her ass. She looked at the women who still admired Shane and talked among themselves. "He's just as good as he looks, but he's also taken."

"Thank you. My ego won't need to feed again for a long time." He leaned into her as they made their way through the crowd and toward the bar.

At the bar, there was just one vacant stool. It seemed

they'd be waiting somewhere else.

"Sit down," he said, nudging her onto the stool as he wrapped his arms around her from behind. "I can keep myself occupied without a seat."

A few minutes later, the bartender set their drinks on the bar. With his chest pressed against her back and one arm wrapped around her, he reached for his beer with the other. She looked up at him when he turned the long neck bottle up and took a swig, and damn if he wasn't about as sexy as they came.

"You're staring at me." He sat the beer back onto the bar.

"That's because you're so hot." She traced her finger down his beer bottle. "If you didn't look so good, I might be able to keep from looking."

"Oh hell, now you're as full of crap as your brothers." He leaned in and kissed her neck softly.

"Speaking of my brothers." She turned toward him and arched her face up at him and was pleased when his lips met hers for a soft, moist kiss.

"What about them?"

"I want you to meet them tonight."

He reached for his beer bottle again. "So, you're bringing out the civilian hairdresser and giving up the secret?"

She could tell that mixed emotions had swept through him when she'd asked him to meet the twins. She nodded. "I can't keep you a secret, because you're too good."

"So what brought this on?" he asked.

"Well, obviously, I've got to get things under control before you and Pat kill each other. But they gave me the business for being out all night and it blew up into this huge fight."

"Why do I see myself being crushed when I walk through the door?"

She swallowed and sat her drink onto the bar. "No, it isn't like that, I'd never do that to you. I finally made them realize that I'm a real person with real feelings and I can date who I want."

"And they agreed with that?" Shane's eyebrows shot up.

"After I threatened to move out."

"How do you think they're going to handle it when they find out it's me? I think I'm at the top of their shit list right now."

"We'll just explain it to them." She shrugged. "I honestly think they'll be pleased once they figure out it wasn't what they were thinking."

"Newhope, party of two," the hostess called over the intercom. "Newhope, party of two."

"Well, let's get me some protein so I can meet your brothers." He twisted the stool and reached for her. "I might have to fight my way back out of the house."

She stepped from the stool and looked up into his eyes. "You need protein, but it isn't because of my brothers."

~ * ~

Mindy's pulse raced as Shane followed her into the parking lot at the apartment building. She was about to introduce her brothers to the man of her dreams, and hopefully she'd have time to explain before all hell broke loose. Her charade had been fun but it hadn't been worth the consequences. Now, she had to find a way to patch the relationship between her brothers and Shane before they killed each other.

Shane stepped into the lot and walked up behind her, pressing his body against hers as he leaned and kissed her neck. He growled deeply. "I love that perfume."

"Well, I'm glad you like it," she said as she turned toward him and planted a wet kiss on his lips. "Let's get this over with so I can have you all to myself."

"We can't go in right now." He adjusted his crotch. "Give me a minute."

"Don't be nervous. They'll understand."

"I'm not nervous, but I'd really rather not meet them with a hard on," he said, glancing down at the bulge in his jeans.

Her eyes grew large. "That might not be a good idea."

She watched him as he walked around in attempts to clear his mind and reduce his hard on. His jeans were fitting in all the right places, a little too much at the moment. His black T-shirt was tucked neatly into his jeans and was covered by an unbuttoned khaki brown oxford emphasizing

his big chest.

"Okay, I'm ready," he said as he tried to get her attention away from his body. "Mindy."

It was very obvious she was drawn into a trance by his perfectly scrumptious body. "Let's do it," she said as she grabbed his hand. "It's a good thing I can't get a hard on because we'd both be in trouble."

He almost howled laughing. "Don't make me think about that again."

She opened the door and Pat and Pete jumped to their feet. "Be nice," she mouthed silently to her brothers. She pulled the door open wider and crooked her finger toward Shane. He walked through the door and stood there like a soldier under review.

Pat looked at Pete, then Pete at Pat. They both looked at Mindy, then back to Shane.

"What in the hell is he doing here?" Pat shot, his face suddenly red with anger.

She took a deep breath, holding her hand out toward him. "Hold on, Pat, let me explain something to you."

Pat charged around the sofa. "You can't seriously be dating this piece of shit?"

"Pete, I need your help," Mindy said softly. "Keep the hot head over there, please."

Pete turned toward Pat and gave him some encouraging word that, at least for the moment, kept him at bay.

Mindy glanced at Shane and then stepped closer to her brothers. "I know you're both pissed about the way things went down after the shooting. But I need for you to listen to me."

If Pat was hearing her words, she couldn't prove it by his actions. His eyes never left Shane Newhope. "This better be good, because I've about had my fill of him standing in my living room."

"Stop it!" she snapped. "We got to know each other while I was staying in VOQ because he called me a dozen times a day to check on me. The night that I left the VOQ he asked me out. In fact, he took me home from the VOQ and checked the house to make me feel better. When he brought me home later that night he checked the house again,

offered to take me to a hotel or back to the VOQ. He even offered to stay with me, but I wouldn't have any part of it. He slept outside in his car that night."

Pat softened his gaze and blinked as if her words were sinking in. "Why didn't you tell me that?"

"I swore him to secrecy. I didn't want the two of you to know that I was dating someone in the military."

Pete shot Newhope a surprised look. "You mean you were willing to fight this big idiot rather than tell the truth?"

Shane took a deep breath. "I made a promise to Mindy. With all due respect, I didn't owe Pat shit."

Pat's muscles relaxed and a hint of understanding teased his lips. "I'll be damned. He was willing to get his ass kicked to keep his word."

"My ass kicked?" Shane's brows shot up. "Did you have some help on the way?"

Mindy let out a long sigh of relief, this was what she had hoped would happen. She hadn't been prepared for what might have happened if the two had decided to finish their fight. She didn't feel that she and Pete would be able to do anything other than watch.

"Wait a minute," Pete said pulling Mindy into a headlock. "You little twit, you told us he was a civilian."

"No." She struggled away. "You assumed it."

"You'll pay for that one." Pete shook his finger at her.

"Now that we have things all cleared up, you guys remember Gunny Shane Newhope." She lifted his shirt tale and hooked her finger in his belt loop.

Sheer joy flooded their faces. She winked at Shane who had turned his attention down to her.

"Hell, yeah!" Pete almost shouted as he reached for Shane's hand again. "Damn, it's a relief to see you."

Pat looked at Mindy. "You're lucky we didn't kill each other. You little witch." He warned repeating Pete's action of shaking his finger at her. "I should turn you over my knee."

"I had no clue that anything was even going on until I realized that the two of you had matching wounds." She stuck her tongue out at him. "Can you be friends now? Do you like him again?"

"Damn straight, I like him," Pat piped. "Beats the hell out of a hairdresser."

"Are you two going to let him sit down or bow at his feet first?" Her tone turned humorous.

It was too funny the way they excluded Mindy from the conversation for the first few seconds as they both slapped Shane on the back and led him to the sofa. It was even funnier when they took a seat on either side of him, leaving her to sit in the wicker chair to the right.

"I owe you an apology," Pat said, changing the subject, allowing his eyes to meet Shane's.

Shane waved his hand. "Don't worry about it, man."

"You should have told me," Pat said nodding his head. "Hell, it had to be Mindy that called you when I was talking to you."

Shane nodded. "She had rules and I wasn't willing to piss her off to keep you from giving me hell. The kind of hell you can dish out, I can handle."

"You were more worried about what she *wouldn't* be dishing out, huh?" Pete teased as he glanced from Shane to Mindy.

"Is anybody thirsty?" Mindy jumped into the conversation as she walked toward the kitchen.

Three voices replied, "Yeah, I am."

There she was in the kitchen loading her arms up with three glasses of sweet tea only to realize that the one person she didn't have room to carry a drink for was herself. She puffed a laugh and shook her head, finally realizing the reason she'd waited so long to tell Pete and Pat about Shane. She stopped before she walked back into the living room, unable to believe what Pat asked Shane.

"Tell me, Newhope, what did you do to Mindy last night to make her chase me with a skillet this morning?" Pat joked.

She could have curled up in under the kitchen table and died. She knew that the conversation was the kind of thing they were comfortable having, but she would rather not have been the topic. She needed to walk back out there to stop the conversation in its tracks, but her legs wouldn't move. Truthfully, she was waiting to see if Shane would really give her brothers any details about their night together. If so, she had sadly misjudged him.

"I plead the fifth, man, I'm not about to give details to

her brothers," he said. "What do you think I am, a civilian?"

She rolled her eyes and sighed with relief. Thank God Shane had passed that test. Of course, he would tell his friends, what guy doesn't, but telling his friends and telling her brothers was totally different.

"Count yourselves lucky that I offered, because this won't happen again." She pointed out as she handed the drinks to them one by one. "I had room to carry drinks for everyone but me." She turned and made her way back into the kitchen to retrieve another glass.

"Careful, Newhope, that's my little sister's ass you're looking at like it's an ice cream cone," Pat spat as he elbowed Shane to get his attention.

Shane met his gaze with a solid expression. "She may be your little sister, but in case you haven't noticed, she's all grown up and I really like those jeans."

Pete elbowed Newhope then lifted his tea to his lips. "Don't make us have to kick your ass, Newhope."

"Tell me she doesn't have a hot ass." Shane held his tea between his legs and lifted his palms into the air in question.

"Fuck you, man, it's against the rules to talk about your sister's ass." Pat snorted in disgust. "That's like kissing your grandmother on the lips."

Mindy strutted back into the living room. "Can we talk about someone else's ass, please?"

"Gladly." Pete said after taking a swig of tea. "And don't wear those jeans around him again. Men like him are all about sex."

She rolled her eyes. "I'm somewhat familiar with the type. But I'd just as soon not have that conversation, either."

"I can't believe you held out on us, Mindy," Pat said as she sat down. "Making us think you were off spending the night with a civilian."

"Please forgive me," she begged with a lopsided grin. "Maybe I knew that the two of you would steal him away when you found out."

"Us?" Pete asked, placing his hand on his chest in surprise.

"Yes, you." She said as she stood from the chair and sat her drink onto a coaster on the coffee table. "But I have

bad news, we're about to leave."

Shane's eyes caught Mindy's and he instantly rose to his feet. "You heard her, we're just about to leave."

"Pussy whipped." Pete shook his head. "It's a damn shame."

Shane looked at him, an evident smirk on his lips. "Guilty."

Laughter caught Mindy's ears as she walked toward the door, determined not to acknowledge those last comments between Shane and her brothers.

Shane intertwined his fingers with hers as they stepped outside. "Could I interest you in a movie at my place?"

"I thought you would never ask." She turned and wrapped her arms around him. "Or maybe we could skip the movie and get right to the good stuff."

"Your brothers are watching us." He glanced over his shoulder.

"Well, by all means give them something to look at," she insisted while pulling him into an open mouthed kiss.

"They're gone now." He pulled away.

"Now the celebration begins," she said with a knowing voice only seconds before they watched the silhouettes of her brothers' high five in front of the double windows.

"Let them celebrate if they want to," he said. "I've got a little party of my own planned." He snapped as he reached and swept her off her feet and ran toward his car. "And it has everything to do with those jeans."

About Arlene & Judith

Arlene and Judith are lifelong friends who share a love for writing. Both live in north Mississippi with their respective families; Arlene with her husband, Tim and their dogs.

Judith with her teenage daughters Alesha and Katie.

Arlene and her husband love to travel and she hopes that someday they can retire and travel extensively. As the years to retirement grow longer however, the rat race continues.

Judith and her children enjoy camping and the outdoors. It is their hope that someday they can see the country as they travel by RV.

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