

ELLORA'S CAVE *Sophisticate*



LOCKED AND LOADED

COUGAR CHALLENGE

SAMANTHA CAYTO

## **Locked and Loaded**

*Samantha Cayto*

Former army-turned-ER doctor Grace McKinnon is through with going to bed with nothing more than fantasies and a yearning to resurrect her personal life. She's determined instead to take the Cougar Challenge with a flesh and hot-blooded younger man. She discovers the perfect opportunity steaming up the curtain of exam room four.

Captain Mark Bennington has been locked and loaded—ready for action—since meeting Grace. He's on a mission to heat up the Boston nights while on leave. This sexy older woman is lighting his way, fulfilling double-time every sex wish he's ever made. But it's going to be the toughest fight of his life to convince her to take a chance on more than just a fling.

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Locked and Loaded

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**Samantha Cayto**

### *Dedication*

This book is dedicated to the original Cougar Challenge ladies: my dear friend, Dalton Diaz, and my new great friends, Ciana Stone, Desiree Holt, Mari Freeman, Samantha Kane, Mari Carr and Lynne Connolly. I'm so grateful to be a part of such a wonderful group of writers. Cougar Growl!

This book is also dedicated to my maternal grandmother, Cecelia. She didn't live to see this story, but I think she would have appreciated it given that she was a cougar long before the term was coined.

### *Author Note*

You'll find the women of Cougar Challenge and the Tempt the Cougar blog at [www.temptthecougar.blogspot.com](http://www.temptthecougar.blogspot.com).

### *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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Lauren Hutton: Lauren Hutton Good Stuff LLC.

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Sam Adams: The Boston Beer Company

## **Chapter One**

"Here you go, Doc Mac, the film for your next patient."

Dr. Grace McKinnon took the x-rays from the emergency room nurse and flipped through the patient's file. She raised her eyebrows. "Drunk and hitting walls at four o'clock in the afternoon. My, my, this young man is ambitious."

Silvie, a veteran of the ER, merely shook her head. "I don't think he's drunk."

Grace frowned and took another look at the patient's chart. "It says he's acting belligerent and had to be persuaded to get the x-ray."

"That's right. His friend brought him in under protest and cajoled him into being seen. There's a lot of tension in that young man, but the good news is that the friend not only seems to have the upper hand, he's also totally ripped. I didn't feel the need to call in security or anything."

"Great," Grace replied with a complete lack of enthusiasm. She was at the end of her shift. Tackling an angry guy who may or may not have been drinking, and who was not happy to have her help was not something to look forward to. She braced for confrontation as she entered the treatment cubicle.

She stopped short when a set of hard eyes locked onto her. Light blue and crystal clear, they were set deep into a square-jawed face right above a strong nose with bit of a crook from a long-ago break. Every detail stood out starkly because the man's blond hair was cropped short. Not quite a buzz cut, but close. He was tall and muscular, his impressive biceps visible under his t-shirt, and his hands jammed inside the pockets of his jeans.

The sight of this man took her aback. She stood staring at him, drinking in the primal perfection he provided. Her tired body perked up with interest, and she forgot what she was doing for an instant. He was military, had to be given his bearing and the

hint of a dog tag chain around his neck. Seeing him brought her back to her own army days. A wistfulness joined the heat flaring in her belly. She had loved serving and loved soldiers, too. But the doctor in her couldn't ignore the look on the young man's face. His expression was both weary and concerned.

"Finally!"

Grace pulled away from the lure of the man in front of her and turned to the man who had spoken. He was sitting on the examination table, an ice pack over his right hand. This was her patient, not the guy she'd spent a second or two, or hell three, ogling. This one was equally well-built and made her think military, too. His face, though, was haggard and angry, his hair a shaggy mass of reddish curls and his clothes were worn. His expression was pure mad. She worked to be patient.

"Mr. Conroy? I'm Dr. McKinnon." She put her best doctor tone into her voice, the one that said she was both the detached professional and the caring one. When he didn't answer, she continued anyway, talking the film out of its folder and shoving it into the light box.

"I have your x-rays here." She stood back to take a look at the film and bumped into something hard. Blue Eyes had moved up behind her for a closer look. He pulled back with an apology.

"Sorry, ma'am." There was a slight Southern drawl to his voice. "I'm worried about Sean's hand."

"I understand we have you to thank for getting him in here," she replied, keeping her tone even, trying not to show how his proximity unnerved her. He was only a kid, for goodness' sake. She could have fifteen years on him, and damn her soul if that point didn't tickle her deep inside.

Hands still in his pockets, he shrugged and glanced at his friend who stared at the floor, petulant look still plastered on his face. "I was afraid he'd broken it." With a nod toward the x-ray, he asked, "Did he?"



Grace pulled away from the lure of the unnamed friend and concentrated on her patient's test results. "No, fortunately not."

"Shit, Mark, I told you so." Conroy was surly and ungrateful. He was also suffering emotionally. It didn't take a doctor to see it.

"Watch your language, mister," the friend, Mark, retorted. "Sorry, ma'am," he added with a rueful grimace aimed at Grace.

"Not a problem," she assured him. "I've heard the word before. I served in the army for over fifteen years." Now why had she gone and told him something so personal? It was unlike her, unprofessional. Mark's face lit up at the news, however.

"Really, ma'am?"

"Who cares?" muttered Conroy, but he shut up and stared at the floor again when Mark shot him a stern look.

Okay, time for her to get her head out of her ass and get these guys on their way. Besides, there was something far more important for her to speak to this Mark about than her military service. "Mr. Conroy, I'm sending in a nurse to bandage your hand." Turning to Mark, she added, "May I speak with you a moment?"

"Yes, ma'am." He gave his friend another look that said, "Behave yourself" before following Grace out.

She gave the high sign to Sylvie before continuing farther away from the cubicle so she could talk freely. When she judged they were far enough away from Conroy, she turned and hit that wall again. Mark muttered another apology as he backed up a pace. He acted as flustered by the contact as she felt. But that was ridiculous. Her reaction was normal. He was young and ripped and designed by God to get a woman's juices flowing. She was forty-two and while pretty and fit, also ragged from a tough shift in the ER. No way this guy was into her. A pity because as a younger man, he fitted her idea of a fantasy lover. This wasn't one of those erotic romance stories she loved to read, however. She put aside her growing attraction and tackled the important issue at hand.

“Why isn’t your friend being seen at the VA hospital?” She crossed her arms as she demanded the answer, trying to put emotional distance between them. This wasn’t a bar, after all.

Mark opened his mouth and then shut it again. A few seconds ticked by before he finally answered. The look on his face told her he had waged some inner battle before picking a reply. “I had a hard enough time getting him to come here and it’s right around the corner from his apartment.”

“I’m not talking about his hand, Mr....” She paused waiting for an answer. She was surprised at how interested she was.

“Bennington. Mark Bennington.” He cleared his throat. “It’s ah, Captain Bennington, actually, of the United States Army.” He grinned briefly, a boyish grin with a cute-as-a-button dimple on the left side. The kind of grin that said he was proud as punch. As well he should be because God, if he was older than his late twenties, he wore it well, and to have the rank of captain was a real achievement.

He extended his hand and she took it. “Grace McKinnon,” she supplied which was stupid because she had already announced that she was Dr. McKinnon. Everybody knew that doctors stressed the title because they were proud as punch, too, of their achievement and needed to maintain a professional detachment from their patients. Of course this was not her patient. Still.

His hand was warm and rough and squeezed hers with just the right amount of pressure before he let it go. In fact if she used a little bit of imagination, she’d think he held her hand a few seconds longer than necessary. Wow, she must be really tired to think a thing like that. *Focus, Grace.*

“Okay, as I was saying, Captain Bennington, why isn’t Mr. Conroy being treated at the VA for PTSD? You do know he’s suffering from it?”

His expression turned pained. He stared at his feet and rocked back and forth on his heels a few times before heaving a big sigh. “Yes, ma’am.” When he looked at her again, his eyes were clouded with worry.

It was a kick to her gut. Hot and vulnerable, a deadly combination. She wanted to wrap him in her arms and hold him tight, make everything better. Crazy but the urge was strong. Instead she went with the mundane. "You don't have to ma'am me. I'm not in the army anymore."

He shrugged. "I am. Habit. Besides, I'm from the South so I grew up calling every woman ma'am, from my mother to the gal serving me fries with my burger."

"I understand." To be honest, being called ma'am by this guy turned her on even more. Best not to think about it. She was revved up enough. "How long has your friend been out?" *Yes, talk about your patient, Grace. That's your job, remember?*

"Almost a year. He was up and didn't reenlist. I had hoped being a civilian would help him. The emails he's been sending me said otherwise. I've got twelve days left of a two-week leave before I deploy again. I'm worried about him."

"Does he have family around here?"

"Yes, ma'am. Sean's from Boston, but they're not much help. His father has always told him to man up and deal, you know?"

She did know. It was hard for men, especially military men, to face emotional problems. Yes, she had seen plenty of good, strong men fall prey to post-traumatic stress while serving. She was worried. It helped, though, to have a friend who cared. Sean was lucky to have Mark, if only for a few days. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out her business card and handed it to him.

"Here. I'm not a psychiatrist, and I'd really like your friend to get the help he needs from the right people. But call me if things get worse and you need to talk to someone."

He took the card and studied it for a moment before putting it into his own pocket. "Thanks, I will."

He smiled and man it made him even more attractive and younger looking. Her body jolted in reaction, arousal erupting in all the usual places. Good thing she had crossed her arms. As a doctor, she understood she couldn't help her body's response. Her female parts were capable of imaging how good the captain's male parts would

make them feel. They didn't care that his body wasn't looking for her middle-aged one with its wrinkles and sags. It wanted an equally young, hard female body to rub against. Even if she was wrong about that and this was the perfect chance for her to take the Cougar Challenge that her friend, Elizabeth Winters, kept urging her to do, the situation was all wrong. Captain Bennington was not her patient, but his friend was and hitting on a guy in the ER was unethical if not downright illegal.

The really dumb part was how much her brain was getting in on the act. Images of her tangled with all those perfect male muscles popped up unbidden. Her body didn't care about the practical or the ethical. It only knew what it wanted and what it wanted at that moment was Captain Perfect naked in her bed. She mentally shook herself. The whole attraction was ridiculous under the circumstances. This was reality, not a romance story.

She was tired, that was all. All she really needed was to clock out, go home, order delivery from her favorite Chinese restaurant and catch up on episodes of *30 Rock*. Then she could retire to her comfy, albeit empty, bed and read her latest book until her body exploded with a sleep-inducing orgasm. Wow that sounded pathetic. A little self-help once in a while was fine, but it had become her way of life. She needed to get out more and date real men, age-appropriate real men. Or, maybe she did need to take the Cougar Challenge. She'd been lurking for a while on the Cougars' blog site. Those women were obviously happy with the way their challenges worked out. They inspired her, although she was still uncertain. She had always been such a sensible, duty-bound woman. Throwing caution to the wind and having a fling with a younger man was so unlike her. Could she do it? She didn't know. Hanging around any longer with the tempting Captain Bennington wasn't making her head any clearer. Seeing Sylvie leave the cubicle, she jumped on the opportunity to make a getaway.

"Looks like your friend is all set. Take care and good luck."

Mark glanced over his shoulder, his mouth tugged in a hard line. "Thanks." Wagging her card, he added, "For everything."

"You're welcome." Grace wheeled around and walked away, trying not to hurry. It was hard. She sensed Mark's eyes on her all the way down the hall. Damn, maybe she'd better pull out her DVDs and run a Johnny Depp marathon. She needed to put this guy out of her mind and fast.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What's that?"

Mark yanked the business card out of Sean's reach before he could snatch it. "Nothing," he replied. Pocketing the thing, he took the bottle of beer his friend offered. Drinking wasn't necessarily the best idea, but alcohol did seem to mellow Sean at least for a while. If the guy drank too many, he turned aggressive again. Man, taking care of his friend was getting harder and harder. What was going to happen when he had to leave? His head hurt thinking about it so he let it go for the moment. Sean slouched on the couch, staring at him, waiting for a better answer. Mark played it cool, sank farther back in his chair and took a healthy slug of his drink.

"It's the contact info for the doctor who saw you today, is all."

Sean scowled. "Shit, dude, I told you I don't need to see anyone. Toss it."

"I'm not keeping it for you." That was the truth. Not the whole truth, but at least half of the truth.

Sean scoffed around another swallow. "Like you need a doctor, Mr. Tough As Nails."

Mark winced. The guys in his unit thought he was too tough to be bothered by anything. They didn't realize how much he withheld from them because he was their leader. They needed to think he wasn't affected by what they saw, what they did. He was. Of course, he was. He had his moments of fear and doubt and wanted to punch walls now and again just like they did. He had to keep it together, though, for the sake of his men. That was what being a leader was all about. He was proud he did it so well. Not that he wanted to share this part of him with Sean. Maybe he should. Maybe it

would help his friend open up. He didn't feel up to it now, so he confided something else.

"I like her."

His friend stared at him blankly. "Like her, as in want to bang her?" he asked incredulously.

"Jeez, dude, get your mind out of the gutter." Mark took another long pull of his beer. Images of the woman in question sprang forth in his mind, her body wrapped around his, hugging him close, rubbing him hard. She was soft and warm and welcoming. Blood flowed to his cock and he gripped the cool beer bottle tightly to try to ease the sudden ache.

"Okay, like her as in making respectful love to her?"

"I'm thinking of asking her out, that's all."

"Dude, she's like, old enough to be your mother."

Mark eyed the other man over the rim of his bottle, a strange surge of anger welling up. The hell she was, and regardless of the woman's age, she most definitely did not remind him of his mother. Dr. Grace McKinnon was a tall woman, shapely, yet fit-looking under her doctor's coat. Her skin was smooth and pale, her hair very dark, almost black. She had worn it straight back from her forehead in a ponytail, and if there had been any silver in it, he couldn't tell. Her eyes were green with specks of gold. She was pretty, not stunningly beautiful or anything, but pretty. And hot. Definitely hot. His body had reacted to her the moment she entered the cubicle. His little soldier had saluted immediately. Thank God for tight jeans, otherwise he would have died from embarrassment. Best of all, there had been no wedding ring. He hoped it meant what it usually meant and wasn't because of where she worked. He wanted to see her again and this time somewhere more romantic than an emergency room.

Mark glared back at his friend. "She'd only be old enough to be my mother if this were the Dark Ages or something. Give me a break. She's pretty and sexy and very nice. I'm only here for less than two more weeks. I'm looking for some fun."

“Damn straight, so let’s go down to Hooligans and hook up with some young ass who will drool over Captain Hero and throw you some out of patriotic duty.”

“Wow, how is it you manage to make sex sound so unappealing?”

Sean shrugged. “I’m just telling it like it is. I know it won’t be like cuddling up with Miss Head Cheerleader from bumfuck North Carolina, but dude, she dumped your uniformed ass during your first tour of duty, remember? She married the class nerd who served his country by working his way up middle management.”

Mark sprang from his chair, nervous energy suddenly demanding he move around. “This isn’t about Meghan,” he insisted. “Meghan was a million years ago and I’m over it. All I’m looking for is to have a decent meal in a nice restaurant without having to worry about suicide bombers. I want to have an interesting conversation with an intelligent woman who doesn’t ask me how many people I’ve killed and what does it feel like to be over there. God, I really get tired of that shit. Grace McKinnon is ex-army. She won’t ask me those questions. She’ll ask me other things like what’s my favorite movie, or something, and I’ll ask her the same stuff back.”

“And, then you’ll bang her.”

Mark gave up and barked out a laugh. “If there is a God.” His friend was hopeless. At least he wasn’t hitting walls or crying. Shit, he was in over his head with Sean. Maybe one of the questions he would ask Grace was what more he could do.

“So, what are you going to do, bro, call her at her the hospital or something and ask for Dr. Mom?”

Mark rolled his eyes, taking the business card out of his pocket. “Don’t have to. Her mobile number is on this.”

“Whatever.” Sean drained his beer and headed for the kitchen. “Bet you don’t have the balls to call her.”

The thought of actually dialing the number and asking an older, more sophisticated woman out did make his blood run cold and his belly quake. It was kind of like getting

shot at if he thought about it. So he did what he always did, he manned up. Pulling out his phone, he punched in the numbers.



## **Chapter Two**

“Another night of takeout?”

Grace finished paying the delivery guy before she answered her neighbor’s question. Danny stood in his own doorway, shirtless as usual, jeans slung low. It was an awesome sight and given that he was around Grace’s age, the right kind of guy for her to ogle. Too bad he was gay. She made a face and went back into her apartment, leaving the door open, her arms filled with a bag of spring rolls, crab Rangoon and General Gau’s chicken.

“I’ve had a long day and given that I can only cook food that kids like to eat, this seemed the best option.”

“Yeah, except that it’s too often your best option these days, girlfriend.” Danny had followed her as she knew he would, shutting the door behind him.

“I have enough for two if you’re interested.”

He stopped just inside her kitchen, hands shoved in his back pockets, hip cocked. “What are we watching?”

“I was thinking Johnny Depp,” she replied as she unpacked her meal.

“I prefer Orlando Bloom.”

“That’s because you are a child molester.”

“Please, the man’s in his thirties.”

“Barely. Those of us past forty should be casting our net toward an older crowd.”

Danny suppressed a shudder. “I thought we agreed to forget my last birthday ever happened.”

"Sorry." A flashing light caught her attention and Grace glanced at her answering machine. She had a message. She was afraid she knew who it was from. Ignoring it wouldn't help, though. Stepping around her friend, she went to listen.

"Hi Grace, it's me, Aaron." There was a small chuckle. "Guess I always say that even though I know you know my voice. Anyway, I was wondering what you're up to tomorrow night. I know you have the weekend off and I thought you'd like to do some window shopping on Newbury Street and catch some dinner at Cammy's." A long pause ensued. "So, ah give me a call. Bye."

Grace hit delete and closed her eyes. Warm hands descended onto her shoulders and squeezed the tension building there. "When do you think your brother-in-law is going to realize you hate shopping, window or otherwise, and find the food at Cammy's mediocre at best?"

Grace moaned at the relief the impromptu massage gave her aching muscles. "Never," she answered in a weary voice. "Because he thinks I'm Mary, or rather he thinks I'm like Mary."

"Which you're not."

"Which I'm not," she agreed. There was a brief stab of grief at the thought of her sister. Five years later and it still hurt, although not as much. Time did help, not enough, but some. "He thinks we should get married."

Danny stopped his fingers and whirled her around to face him, hands clutching her upper arms. "He proposed?" Alarm shot through his words.

Damn, why had she said that? "Not in so many words," she clarified and moved back to the kitchen. She took plates and utensils out. "He's mentioned a few times how nice it is to be with me, how we've done such a good job together these last few years, and how he doesn't think he'll ever be able to go out and start dating again."

Danny, as familiar with her kitchen as she, selected a bottle of wine and popped it open. He filled two glasses and plopped one down in front of her while cradling his own. "Why should he bother when he has a convenient sister-in-law to play the role?"

"It's not like that." Divvying up the food, she took the plates to the living room and placed them on the coffee table. She shuffled through her movie collection, ignoring Danny's critical eye.

"It is like that. For heaven's sake, Grace, you gave up your career in the army and put your life on hold to help him through rehab and raise his daughters."

"My sister's daughters," she reminded him with a scowl. Damn, no movie appealed to her. Maybe she should go back to Plan A and watch *30 Rock*. She needed a good laugh, a really good laugh.

"Yes, your sister's kids, and your sister's husband," Danny agreed. "You did your duty, the right thing, but it's over now. The girls are in college and Aaron's a big boy, completely healed. He doesn't need you anymore." Plopping down on the couch, he picked up his plate of food. "Why don't we just catch up on episodes of *30 Rock*?"

Bless Danny, he was the perfect friend. Grace joined him and used the remote to find the show on demand. "His hip was crushed. It left him with a little bit of a limp."

"He's gorgeous. Women will overlook a limp."

"I know he's gorgeous and nice and generous. I could do worse."

"Sure," Danny agreed around a mouthful of General Gau's. "You could do worse, but why should you settle? You're a hot babe, Grace, and a doctor. You have options out there, believe me."

She did, sort of. The problem was she had been out of commission for five years, longer when you considered she had been deployed when Mary died in the accident. Dating was ancient history for her. She wasn't sure she had it in her to go back out there. A face popped into her head, square jaw, chiseled cheekbones with piercing blue eyes. Her nipples tingled at the image. Her thighs squeezed tight involuntarily to stroke the arousal budding between them. Okay, she wasn't dead. Thinking about that young man was proof her fears were well-founded, however. She was stuck in her past or in erotic romance fantasyland if she thought a guy so young was dating material.

And yet she recalled the stimulating talk she'd shared with Elizabeth Winters over lunch some months ago. An OR nurse who had been part of Aaron's surgical team, Elizabeth was the reason she worked at the hospital. The two had met and formed a fast friendship. The day Elizabeth confessed she not only loved erotic romance, but younger men/older women romance, was when Grace realized how much they truly were alike.

\* \* \* \* \*

Elizabeth Winters leaned over the cafeteria table with a gleam in her eye. "It's called the Cougar Challenge."

Grace wrinkled her brow. "Isn't cougar a derogatory term, like 'pathetic older woman'?"

Her friend shook her head in reply. "You have to embrace the concept and the term. What's wrong with going after hot, younger men? We're not our mothers or our grandmothers. We work hard to stay in shape and remain attractive. Our lives don't end just because we've turned forty."

"I suppose." Grace couldn't keep the skepticism out her voice.

Stabbing a tomato with her fork, Elizabeth waved it as she made her point. "You don't have to think in terms of forever. There's nothing wrong with a fling. You deserve it, Grace." She plopped the food in her mouth, chewed and grinned. "Think of a hard and handsome young man, then imagine running your hands over all that firm flesh."

Grace did and nearly choked on her own mouthful of salad. "I'll consider it," she said in a strangled voice.

Elizabeth smiled knowingly. "You do that. In the meantime, check out the blog. You won't be sorry."

\* \* \* \* \*

Grace had taken Elizabeth's advice, signed onto the Cougar Challenge website and certainly wasn't sorry she had. It was fun to see how things were working out for the

other women. She needed to think about it some more and to maybe go out with Elizabeth and cast her net. Elizabeth had found her younger man, Kevin, but she'd be willing to be Grace's wingwoman. Maybe Grace would get lucky and find someone like Kevin, or Mark, who try as she may, was not leaving her thoughts.

Her friend had encouraged her to imagine touching a younger man. Well Grace had no trouble with that kind of image, not with the memory of Mark's hard body planted firmly in her mind. It took no effort at all to remember how his clothes molded his sculpted muscles and to imagine what his body looked like underneath. What if he had been her patient? What if he had been the only man waiting for her in the examination room?

She could picture him sitting on top of the examination table, legs dangling over the end. He is wearing combat fatigues. No, not completely. His shirt would be off, his camouflage pants unbuttoned at the waist, his feet bare. Wisps of blond hair, darker than what is on his head, peep out from his waistband. His large hands grip the end of the table, the corded muscles of his arms bunch with impatience. The moment she enters the cubicle, he nails her with his gaze.

She stops, clutching the clipboard to her chest. Her breath hitches. She takes a deep lungful of air to steady herself and lets it out on a long, slow sigh. Her body flushes with the heat rising within her. The coolness of the hospital's air-conditioning slaps at her hot skin because she is wearing nothing but her lab coat and a pair of high heels, red ones. His eyes apprise her in one long sweep. She can see the hunger in them and feels the same. She wants to pounce, but takes it slowly, sauntering toward him.

She steps inside the space between his open legs. Her gaze lingers on the impressive bulge that greets her. Her hands are magically free when she reaches him, reaches for him. She runs them up his smooth front to palm his pecs. His back straightens and arches at the touch. His chest rises with a deep breath. His eyes are slits as he stares down at her. The small brown nipples are sharp points. She leans over to lap at one and then the other. A low moan vibrates at the back of his throat. His hands shoot out to

clasp her waist and pull her closer. His lips find hers and he swallows her up in a savage kiss. Her nails dig into his shoulders as she returns his passion.

A finger slides down and slips between her wet folds. She hums into his mouth at the feel of her clit being tickled and teased. Her juices slick his finger, letting it glide smooth and quick between her pussy and her clit. Her hips wiggle to urge him to go faster. His finger abandons her suddenly and she mews her displeasure, but it returns with his hand sweeping across her ass to cup the cheek and squeeze. It is her turn to moan and then gasp as that wet finger wanders over to circle the puckered hole in-between.

She deepens the kiss even as she works a hand between their bodies to find his cock head pushing out of his pants. With her thumb, she mimics his movements, making small circles around the weeping slit. He picks up speed while grinding his hips against her body. She holds on tight and presses closer, too. But she wants more, she needs more. She wants his cock inside her. She needs him to lie back on the table with her straddling him, with his cock pushing inside her aching pussy. It's been too long. This is not enough.

Summoning her full strength, she pushes away from him. Startled, hurt eyes stare at her. "Why?" they ask. She smiles and wags a finger at him before shoving against his chest with the palm of her hand. Down he goes to lie flat on the table, legs still hanging over the edge. Now he's hers for the taking. First she has to get rid of her lab coat. It binds her body too much. Her nipples, painfully hard, rasp against the stiff fabric as it floats against her. She yanks it off, tosses it aside, and reaches for the man waiting for her. His chest rises and falls with quickening breaths. His cock, red and glistening, beckons her.

She slides her hands up his thighs and pulls the zipper of his pants all the way down. He's gone commando, nothing covers how hard he is, how ready he is for her. She licks him from base to glans and is rewarded with a groan and a thrust of his hips. So she does it again and again until he is begging her to climb up and ride him. When

she raises her leg to do just that, his strong arms reach down to help haul her on top of his hot body.

She straddles his legs, clinging to the table edge to steady herself, while he grasps her waist to hold her in place. She positions her cleft against his erection and rocks her hips. The slide of his flesh against her clit sends her heart racing. The climax builds within her. She could come like this if she tried. But that is not what she wants. She wants his cock inside her now. Freeing one hand, she clasps his hard length and raises it toward her body. With one fluid motion, she buries him inside her aching core. A cry of pleasure tears from her throat. Yes, God, yes, this is what she has missed for so long.

She pushes up and drops back down. Then again. She rides her fantasy man as hard and as fast as she can. His fingers dig into the sides of her waist as he aids her in her ride. He thrusts his hips up to meet her as she descends, their bodies slamming together in perfect rhythm. Her breath comes out in short, harsh pants as the orgasm builds in her. She cries out each time their bodies meet. His voice joins her. She can't hold back, she can't stand the tension anymore. She's coming, it's bursting through her.

His body is heaving against hers. "Grace!" he yells her name.

"Grace," he said her name again, but his tone is amused. "Grace, hello, Grace?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Grace blinked her eyes as she snapped out of her fantasy. Danny stared at her with a knowing grin on his face. "Are you still with me, sweetie?"

She nodded slowly, still a little dazed by her bout of hot fantasy sex. Wow, she really did need to get out and find a man. But not tonight. Pressing play, she said to Danny, "Let's drop the whole depressing topic and let Liz Lemon make us feel like we're totally together people."

Danny heaved a big, long-suffering sigh. "Fine."

A second later, Grace heard her mobile phone ring. "Crap." Putting down her plate, she got up to answer it.

"Let it go," Danny advised pushing pause.

"No, it might be a patient."

"You're crazy to put the number on your card," he called back.

She looked at the number calling before answering it. The area code said it wasn't local, but then you could never tell with mobile numbers. "Grace McKinnon."

There was a brief silence, then, "Um, Dr. McKinnon, Grace, hi, it's Mark, Mark Bennington."

Her jaw dropped open, her heart skipped a beat, and her clit throbbed. For long seconds she fought to reorient her mind. Mark Bennington as in Captain Mark Bennington? The guy she had been thinking about? Well, drooling over really. Then her brain kicked in and she rolled her eyes. His friend, he was calling about his friend. "Is Mr. Conroy all right?" she asked, a concerned doctor once more instead of a love-starved ninny.

"Oh, ah, yeah, Sean's fine." He cleared his throat. "I'm not calling about him at all, actually." Funny, the guy sounded like she felt. "I just wondered what you were doing tonight for dinner." There was a pause and an awkward laugh. "You know, if you're not married or engaged or in a committed relationship, or anything."

Dinner? Grace looked over at her plate of Chinese food and glass of wine. Danny was staring back at her mouthing, "Who is it?" She ignored him and worked to get her tongue moving properly. "As a matter of fact, I'm eating now. With a friend," she added. "I'm not any of those situations you mentioned." She laughed awkwardly herself. God, what was the matter with her?

"Oh." He sounded disappointed. "I was hoping we could get together sometime. Tonight's obviously out. How about tomorrow?"

This young man was asking her out on a date. A date! As in, he wanted to see her again without her lab coat on, or maybe, with just her lab coat on. Holy shit! "Um," was all she could think to say.



"If you're not busy, that is." Now he sounded hopeful. He really wanted to go out with her. Holy shit, again!

She must have mouthed the words because Danny was all over her like white on rice, making inquisitive faces and mouthing questions. She batted him away and turned to look at the wall. What to say, what to say? No, of course, the idea was absurd. He was too young. The situation was weird. She wasn't ready to take the challenge.

"I'm free tomorrow night." It was if someone else's tongue had moved into her mouth. She had not intended to say that. Yet, in the back of her mind, she could see Elizabeth cheering her on.

"Great, that's great." He was nervous. How sweet—and hot, can't forget that piece of information. The man was supernova hot. "There's a restaurant on Newbury Street I hear is good."

"Cammy's?" she asked, heart sinking.

"No, it's called Edge, but we can go to Cammy's if you prefer."

"No," she assured him quickly. "Edge is fine."

"Great," he said again *because you know kids today have such limited vocabulary*.

*Stop it*, she chided herself. *This was not, repeat, not a kid*. "How about we meet there around seven," she suggested because she really needed to step up and act like the assertive woman she was. She had always had a sensible policy not to have guys pick her up at her place on the first date. You never knew who the crazy ones were.

"Great, I mean sounds like a plan. Do you want directions to the restaurant?"

"No, it's okay. Newbury Street isn't very long. I'll find it."

"Okay, then, see you tomorrow at seven."

"Seven," she confirmed.

There was a pause. "Bye, Grace."

"Bye, Mark."

She hung up and Danny pounced. "Spill!" he barked.

"There's nothing to spill," she replied coolly, putting her phone back in her purse. She walked calmly to the couch. Her heart was racing and her legs were weak. What had she done? "I have a date for tomorrow night, if you must know."

Danny slid in beside her and grabbed the remote before she could restart the program. "I must. I want details. Who is this guy?"

Grace strived for casual. It took a big swig of her wine to achieve it. "He's someone I met today in the ER. He brought his friend in with an injured hand. I gave him my card because the friend's suffering from combat-induced PTSD."

"They're military?" Danny shoveled food in his mouth as he watched her avidly for answers.

"Army, yes, although the patient is ex. The guy who asked me out is still active duty."

"I bet he's totally jacked."

"He is," she confirmed with a sigh. "Totally."

"More," Danny prompted when she fell silent.

He wasn't going to shut up until she told it all. "Okay, he's like Orlando's little brother, only blonder and with a more muscular build."

Danny swallowed hard and downed his wine. "Oh, my God, that's fantastic. I can't believe we were just talking about your lack of love life and G.I. Joe calls out of nowhere. That's kismet."

"You're not listening to me," she chided. "I said Orlando's younger brother. He's a baby."

"What's his rank?"

"Captain."

"How young can he be? They don't exactly recognize savants in the military. Rank has to be earned through years of service. He's probably in his early thirties."

"He doesn't look it, but even if he is, it's still too young for me."

"Bullshit. This is your fantasy."

"No, it's not!" She hadn't dared share the whole notion of the Cougar Challenge with her male friend.

"Oh, really? Let's take a look at your reading selection, shall we?" Danny sauntered over to her book shelf and pulled out a few of her paperbacks. "*The Cougar Takes a Bite. Cougar Love. Young Man/Hot Love.*" He grinned slyly at her. "Ding, ding, we have a winner. *Soldier Boy.*"

Grace groaned and threw her head back. "Okay, you're right," she said. "Anyway, I'm going. I said I would and I will. I think it's a mistake but apparently my tongue and my clit think otherwise."

Danny put the books back and returned to the couch. "Finish eating, we're going shopping tonight."

"What? No we're not."

"Yes, we are. You need an outfit for your date."

"I have clothes."

"No you don't. I've seen your wardrobe, remember?"

"Fine. If we need to shop why can't we do it tomorrow during the day? I'm bushed."

"Because tomorrow we'll need time to have your hair done and for waxing." Danny had the same tone of voice one uses for small children.

"I'll give you the hair." It had been months since she'd had a cut and color. No sense in letting the gray hair shine like a beacon during dinner. "Except I doubt Jenna has time for a last-minute appointment on a Saturday."

"For this, she'll find time. Trust me."

"Does everyone I know think I'm pathetic in the romance department?"

"Pretty much, yes."

"Great," she sighed channeling Mark and his apparently favorite word. The thought of him sent blood rushing to her clit. She took a deep breath and savored the feeling. It had been so long since a man had turned her on. She had almost forgotten how good it was. Danny was staring at her, so she refocused her attention on him. "I don't need waxing, though."

Without warning, Danny shoved up her pant leg. "I can only imagine what it looks like at the beginning of these tracks," he intoned.

"It doesn't matter because he won't see any of it."

"A girl can hope, can't she?"

Yes she could, she thought, but said instead, "Could you be any more stereotypically gay?"

Danny swept up her glass of wine and finished it off. "I doubt it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Great. How many times had he said the word when he asked Grace out? He couldn't remember. He only knew he must have sounded like some dopey teenager with a ten-word vocabulary. Man, he was lucky she had agreed to go out with him. He was usually smoother than that with women. Since the big kiss-off from Meghan, he had kept it on the cool and casual side with the women he met and dated. Having had the charming experience of his heart being stomped to pieces once, he wasn't in the market for a repeat. A couple of drinks, a little dinner, some good conversation and all topped off with hot and sweaty sex was all he looked for.

So how come he didn't pounce on those things at the moment? They were right there for the taking in this local dive bar that Sean dragged him to night after night. Well the conversation part wasn't quite there. The women who frequented the place weren't much for talking and even when they did speak, he could barely understand them. It was a combination of their thick Boston accents and how utterly trashed they were already. Drinking started early in Hooligans. Drinking started early in Sean's

apartment, too. There was no way he could convince his friend to stay in for the night, however, so his only choice was to go to the bar with him.

“You want another beer?” the bartender asked. Mark shook his head. He’d had enough.

Sean rapped his knuckles on the bar top. “Another round over here,” he demanded. He was sandwiched between two young women in too-tight clothes and with too much makeup. There was a lot of loud laughing and grab ass going on. The women rubbed against Sean appreciatively when he ordered the drinks as if he had just given them their favorite thing, which he probably had.

The one facing Mark was giving him the come-hither look, practically licking her lips even while she felt up his friend. She was definitely his for the taking. A crook of his finger, and she’d drop Sean like the proverbial hot potato, or as the woman would no doubt say, *podado*. The thing was, he didn’t want a quick fuck with a drunk young woman. He wanted his quiet date with Grace, which would hopefully end with a long, slow fuck. Christ, his cock certainly hoped so. Ever since he’d heard her voice over the phone, he had been locked and loaded. Just the thought of seeing her the next night made the blood pool low and his head light. He hoped she’d wear her hair down and maybe a dress. She was tall so he bet her legs went on forever. Her thighs were probably slender and strong, the kind that could wrap around a man and squeeze him to death, a good death.

Okay, those thoughts needed to stop. His jeans were snug enough to hurt. He didn’t need a case of blue balls. He didn’t need to sit in this place and get quietly drunk, either. All he wanted to do was go back to Sean’s and take a cool shower to wash the sweat of the day away. A little self-help under the water spray might take the edge off, too.

Leaving Sean on his own was risky, though. The guy didn’t know when to shut himself off. Mark had talked to the bartender before about it, and the guy was on board where Sean was concerned. Still it didn’t mean Sean couldn’t end up in another bar or

someone else's place. The way the women were pawing the guy, likely he'd end up sleeping somewhere other than his own apartment. For sure Mark wasn't going to volunteer to wade in and make it a foursome. Maybe it was being thirty or maybe it was being promoted to captain, but he was looking for something or someone more mature.

He was looking for someone like Grace. He wanted tomorrow night to be a good one and he hoped she would like him well enough to see him more than once. He didn't have much time left and spending it with a nice, hot woman was just the ticket before being deployed back to Hell on Earth. Standing up, he drained his glass and put enough money on the bar to handle his drink and the ones already poured for Sean and the limpet twins.

Sean looked at him. "What the fuck, dude, you're not leaving already?"

"Sorry, but yeah. I'm tired, hot and need a shower. I'm heading back to your place." He paused. "You should come, too."

There was a loud duet of protest from the women. They sounded like cats being beaten. "Dude, no way. It's too early. You're acting like an old man."

Mark shrugged. "I guess that's what happens when you turn thirty."

Sean laughed and tossed back his beer. "That must be why you're chasing such old pussy."

Mark's hand shot out and grabbed the back of Sean's neck. "Don't talk about her like that, or I'll knock that grin right into the ground." He wasn't sure where the anger came from. He only knew he couldn't let go of his friend until he nodded in understanding.

"Sorry, Jesus, what's got into you?"

Mark unclenched his hand and shrugged. "Told you I was hot and tired. You sure you're not coming with me?"

“Why would I when I have such lovely company to keep?” Grabbing both women by the waist, he pulled them close to his body and nuzzled first one and then the other. The cats yowled again.

Mark shook his head and turned without another word. Part of him feared leaving his friend and felt responsible for looking out for him. A bigger part was too tired to do more than he had already in one day. This was more than he could handle, and he was selfish enough to want a little fun for himself. Less than twenty-four hours from now he would see Grace. His cock twitched at the thought.

A shower. He definitely needed that shower.

## **Chapter Three**

Hi Ladies! This is my first time blogging. I'm a friend of Elizabeth Winters. She's been trying to get me to take the Cougar Challenge for a while now, and guess what? I'm doing it. I have an honest-to-God date with a younger man, and a soldier no less. I was going to turn him down and yet I found myself saying yes. How often do you get a chance to fulfill a fantasy? I can be sensible some other time. Wish me luck.

Grace

Welcome Grace! After meeting these ladies, I learned that fantasies come along as often as you make them. Go for it!

Stevie

Grab on with both hands, Grace, if you'll pardon the double meaning. I did and got more than I ever thought I would. Without the cougar challenge I wouldn't have the great life I do now. Go on. Take that first step.

Autumn

Grace stopped outside the restaurant for a quick look at her reflection in the window. Jenna had worked her usual magic with her hair, chestnut with caramel highlights. The highlights had been Danny's idea and enthusiastically embraced by the stylist. Grace hadn't stood a chance. She didn't want to look like she was trying too hard to be younger than she was. But she had to admit the color gave her some much needed pizzazz. In fact, she looked damn good. If her goal was to be a successful cougar, and it was, then she was locked and loaded. She wasn't sure what she thought of the word, though. Certainly Elizabeth and the other women of the Cougar Challenge had



embraced the designation and made it their own. There was power in that, and now she was one of them. The support helped even if it was only cyber support.

Her hair was down in gentle waves, which was a little uncomfortable for a warm June night. It softened her face, though, and her Lauren Hutton makeup did its job. It evened out her features, giving her a healthy glow without sending in the clowns. She tugged at her dress hem. It was shorter than she liked, but she had deferred once more to the master. Danny had assured her she looked hot, not slutty, and she had won the argument over whether she should slip on her Spanx underneath, so that was something. She did feel sexy with the filmy material of the skirt swishing around her thighs. Her legs were waxed and bare, and she was wearing silver sandals with Baby Louis heels. Red toes winked back at her when she looked down, a perfect match to her nails.

Her friends had done an awesome job making her pretty for her date. Now it was up to her to actually go inside and meet the guy instead of stalling out on the sidewalk. As soon as she stepped inside Edge, she spotted him. He was already seated at a booth facing the door. He didn't see her right away because he was playing with the salt and pepper shakers and the sugar container, moving the objects around the table top as if lining up soldiers for a battle. His hands moved in quick, jerky gestures. *Holy crap, he is nervous!* The realization helped ease her own jitters. She stepped forward and was intercepted by the hostess.

"Table for one?" the young, perky woman asked.

"Actually I see my date right over there," Grace replied.

She watched the other woman's eyes follow her finger. Her eyebrows shot up when she saw Mark, but she kept her smile in place. "Right this way."

Even before they reached the table, Mark looked up. He smiled broadly at her and stood. He was still as gorgeous as she had remembered. In fact he was more so. Those eyes fixed on her drove up the heat index. She wanted to lift her hair from her neck and fan her hot skin. Her Spanx constricted her now aroused body like a reticulated python.

Still she noticed he was clean-shaven and wore a pair of crisp khakis and a button-down shirt. He had obviously made an effort to look nice for her. It increased her confidence.

"Hi, Grace. You look fabulous." He held out his hand as if to shake. When she took it, he merely held onto hers for long seconds, staring into her eyes, before letting it go. The warmth of his fingers clung to her skin. She flushed at his scrutiny and was unable to hold his gaze.

The hostess left with a low murmur about enjoying their meals. Grace and Mark remained standing. He stared at her. She stared at a spot beyond his shoulder trying to think of something to say. They stood that way for a few awkward seconds before she realized he was waiting for her to sit down first. She slid into her side of the booth and when he had joined her, she returned his compliment.

"You look great yourself." They both winced at her choice of words.

"Please believe me when I say I'm not usually that tongue-tied when I ask a woman out."

"I didn't notice any awkwardness," she lied, picking up the menu. "Unless you count my own."

Before he could reply, a waiter stepped up. "Hi, I'm Josh. I'll be your server for tonight. Can I start you off with a drink?"

The plan had been to stick with soda water, to keep a cool head. She tossed the plan without conscious thought. "I'll have a dirty martini with Bombay Safire gin, dry, straight up with two olives, please." What the hell, better to be hung for a sheep as for a lamb. Either this date was going to be spectacular or a spectacular failure. Might as well be a little buzzed. Dutch courage wasn't always a bad thing.

Mark's eyes popped open at her order and she grinned back at him with a shrug. He looked at Josh. "Do you have Sam Adams on tap?" When he confirmed they did, Mark ordered a pint.

Alone once more, Grace and Mark did what every couple did on a first date, they hid behind their menus. "What looks good to you?" Mark asked, eyes peering over the large laminated booklet.

Hmm, this was part of the date she forgot to plan for. If Mark were a guy her age, she would assume he wanted to pay. She would protest, and mean it, but she wasn't sure how it went with younger people. Did he assume they would split the bill? No way to tell, so the safest bet was the old standby, ordering the cheapest thing on the menu. She'd either be saving her wallet or his or maybe both. Whatever, it worked. "The roast chicken looks good."

"It does," he agreed. "The surf and turf looks better, I think."

Lobster tail and filet mignon, one of the priciest selections. She shrugged. "I'm from the Boston area. I practically have lobster swimming in my veins. Chicken will make for a nice change." She looked at him with the sincerest smile she could muster.

Frowning, he closed his menu. "Grace, I'm going to be perfectly blunt here. This dinner is on me. No arguments," he added when she opened her mouth to do just that. "If roast chicken is what will make you happy tonight, then I want you to get it. For myself, I'm going for a bowl of clam chowder, a Caesar salad and the surf and turf. I'd be delighted if you joined me, but the choice is obviously yours. I don't want you to pick based on price. The army pays me plenty well enough to afford to take a gorgeous woman out."

Grace smiled at the compliment, inordinately pleased to hear him say he found her attractive even though it was clear given he had asked her out. She also knew the army didn't pay that well and a pricey Newbury Street dinner was not in his everyday budget. Still he was obviously sincere in his offer and she wanted to make him comfortable. So when their drinks came, she let him order two of everything, right down to the filet being cooked medium rare. He smiled at her once the server was gone. It was bone-melting and her heart beat picked up pace. She took a healthy swallow of

her drink trying to think of something to say. It had been so long. Small talk eluded her. Mark, bless him, beat her to it.

“So, why the ER? You know, instead of going into private practice or a specialty?”

Grace smiled, a nice buzz starting already. She was more relaxed. “I get that question quite a bit. I’m asked even more why I decided to join the army in the first place.” She waved her drink at him. “It was money pure and simple. I needed to finance medical school so I enlisted.” With a more dainty sip of her martini, she continued. “Now you may wonder why a Boston girl would join the army instead of the navy. The answer, sadly, is motion sickness. I’m very prone, which left out the navy and the air force. The marines were a little too, um, mariney, for me. So that left the army. As for the ER, it was a natural fit after tending to battle victims.” She shut up and gulped down more of her drink, afraid she had run off at the mouth.

Mark watched her, though, attentive. His eyes hadn’t wandered in that telltale sign of boredom. In fact he was nodding at her. “Now that you say it, it’s obvious. Did you like being in the army?”

“I did, actually. I liked the discipline and the challenge.”

“I like those things too, although I joined the army because that’s what you’re obligated to do when you go to West Point.”

“Oh,” she responded. West Point was impressive. They only accepted smart, ambitious people.

He grinned shyly and dropped his gaze. “Yeah, well it was kind of obligatory to go. Men in my family have gone since before the Civil War. They don’t always make the military their career. My father didn’t, but it works for me. I’m good at being a soldier and it feels right serving my country. More often than not, I go to bed thinking I’ve made a difference.”

Grace drained her glass. Before she could speak, their chowder came and they dug in. It was good and as it was one of her favorite foods, she savored the experience

before picking up the conversational ball. It wasn't so hard anymore. She felt more at ease with Mark. He really was a nice guy as well as an incredibly sexy one.

"You must be good," she observed. "Being a captain at your age says as much."

He paused mid-spoonful. "How old do you think I am, Grace?"

Oops. The martini was a mistake. It had loosened her tongue. Bringing up age was definitely a dumb move. "Oh, thirty-ish," she hedged.

He laughed. "I'm thirty. Not so young."

"Not so old, either," she replied in a low voice.

Putting down his spoon, he crossed his arms and gave her a hard stare. "Okay, age is the elephant in the room so why don't we admit we can see it. Honestly it doesn't bother me and I don't want it bothering you." He leaned toward her. "How old are you?"

She considered lying for about two seconds. "Forty-two." She couldn't hold back the grimace. Mark simply nodded and went back to his chowder. "That's twelve years," she added.

"I can count."

"It's a big difference. Why doesn't it bother you?" He wasn't the only person at the table who could tackle things head-on. Best to know now if the date was heading nowhere. She didn't trust his casual dismissal of the matter.

Mark put his spoon in his now-empty bowl and shoved it aside. "Grace, I knew you were older when I asked you out. If it mattered to me, I wouldn't have asked you out. If it mattered to you, you wouldn't have accepted."

As she mulled over how to respond, Josh returned to take their bowls and hand them their salads. "I can't say I haven't thought about it," she confessed. "I can only say it doesn't bother me enough not to be here." She could have, should have, confessed right then and there how much the idea of a younger man turned her on. She chickened out.

He grinned at her over a forkful of salad. "The judges say we can accept that answer." Shoving the food in his mouth, he chewed and swallowed, the grin never fading. "The food here's good, don't you think?"

The flush ran up Grace's body and stained her cheeks. God, she wanted this man. "Yes," she answered in a breathless voice. "It's wonderful."

Dinner was great, and if use of the word showed a lack of vocabulary, he didn't give a damn. It was everything he had hoped for, an excellent meal with a hot woman. Grace had been tense when she'd first sat down and so had he. A little alcohol and honesty, though, had done the trick. Once the age thing had been settled, they'd both moved on to the kind of small talk that marked a first date just as he'd envisioned. He had to admit she was older than he had expected but what did it matter when she sent his blood zinging through his veins. With her hair down, *thank you God*, her face was soft and inviting. Her dress's neckline dipped provocatively low. He could see the swell of her breasts peeping out, although he was careful not to let his gaze linger. What he wouldn't give to cup his palms around those soft globes. Instead he grasped his coffee mug and contented himself with watching her lick the last of a piece of chocolate cake off her fork. Her enticing chest rose and fell on a deep breath.

"I'm stuffed. That was a wonderful meal. Thank you."

She smiled at him. She had done that quite a bit over the course of the evening. It made him ache. He took a gulp of hot coffee to distract himself. "I'm glad you enjoyed it. I did, too. Sean said it was a good place." At the mention of his friend, his happy dipped. No telling what his friend was getting himself into at the moment.

Grace's happy dipped too. She frowned. "Is he okay? Do you need to get back to him?"

"I don't know if he's okay. I mean he obviously isn't okay. But I don't need to get back to him. There's only so much I can do, and right now, selfishly, I'm sorry I even mentioned him. Let's talk about you instead. Why'd you leave the army?" As soon as

the question left his lips, he knew he had asked the wrong question. A tremendous sadness overtook her expression. "Sorry," he hastened to backpedal. "I can see you don't want to talk about it. Forget I asked."

Grace shook her head. "No, it's fine, really. Not talking about the things that upset us or make us sad is what can lead to exactly what Sean is going through. I left the army because my sister died." Leaning forward, she played with her coffee mug while she continued. There was a faraway look to her eyes. "I was on my third tour in Iraq when I got called into my CO's office. You know that's never good, and the look on his face when I entered told me it was really bad. I knew he was going to tell me someone had died, but I assumed it was a service member or even a civilian I worked with. I didn't think of back home. You never think of bad things happening back here.

She paused, taking a sip of coffee. When she put the mug down, he reached for her hand, clasping it in his own. It wasn't something he thought about. He simply did it. Her skin was incredibly soft and warm. To his relief, she didn't pull away. Instead she twined her fingers with his and continued talking. "My sister Mary and her husband were coming home one Saturday night from a party and some guy crossed the divider. He wasn't even drunk, simply tired. Mary was killed instantly. Aaron, her husband, ended up in a coma for a few days and so badly injured it took months of PT and OT to function properly again. He'll never be a hundred percent physically."

He squeezed her hand. "I'm sorry." They were always inadequate words.

With eyes only a little misty, she finished her story. "Even though my two nieces were already teenagers, they still needed a parent. I was all there was for a long while. I mustered out based on a hardship." She looked at him, looked at their clasped hands and smiled. "They're both grown now. The younger one started college last year. It's time for me to live my life again. I haven't been on a date in over six years."

Wow, he hadn't seen that confession coming. There was uncertainty in her eyes, as if she had told him some big turnoff. Raising their still joined hands to his lips, he

kissed the back of her fingers. "It's been over a year for me, actually. I'm glad we did this for both our sakes."

Further conversation was interrupted by Josh with the bill. Reluctantly Mark released Grace in order to pay. He grinned and shook his head when she sweetly tried to cover the tip. Once they were outside, he snatched her hand up. Again she didn't resist. The contact put his body on full alert. It was as if he were on patrol, adrenaline pumped, every sense straining. God, he wanted this woman, but it was early enough that the sun hadn't fully set. Too early to go back to her place which is what they'd have to do for any full body contact. There was no way he could take her back to Sean's dump even with Sean absent.

"I hear there are a couple of good clubs nearby. You want to go?" He strived for casual, to keep the "I want to rub my body up against yours in a major way" out of his voice. He could tell instantly his suggestion was a bad one.

"Um, sure, club hopping sounds good." Her eyes were wide open and looking straight at him.

"You are a really bad liar, Grace. You don't want to go club hopping."

She laughed and tossed her hair back, exposing her lovely long neck. He wanted to lean over and bite it. "No, I don't. Sorry."

"Not a problem, but I have to be honest here. I really don't want our date to end yet. Is there something else you'd like to do? How about taking a walk in the Public Garden?" Which would be boring unless he could talk her into making out behind a bush or something. Her call, though. As long as she didn't let go of him.

Agonizing seconds ticked by as she weighed the question. Just when he was afraid she was going to call it a night after all. She rocked him back on his heels.

"I bought a condo last fall not too far from here. A few minutes' walk, in fact. Would you like to come back and have some more coffee, or wine or beer? I have beer." The way she said it meant she didn't normally have it on hand and was proud she



could offer it. It also meant she'd planned on asking him back if things went well. Obviously things went well. Damn if his little soldier didn't salute the idea.

"Going back to your place sounds like a *great* idea."

She laughed, getting how he had deliberately used the word "great" and led him down Newbury Street.

She hadn't exaggerated when she said it was only a few minutes away. Before he knew it, they were inside a nice condo in an old brownstone building. The place was simple and as neat as a pin. It didn't have the usual girly stuff which told him either she was more army than not or hadn't had time to buy a lot. As soon as she locked the door, she leaned against the wall and slipped off her sandals.

"Sorry, I have to get these things off my feet."

His gaze riveted on her small, dainty feet and slender calves, he merely nodded. "No problem. How had he missed the red toenails? What would they look like pressed against his ass while he dove into her hot body? Her fingernails were a matching color. Those he had noticed and had already wondered if they'd scratch his back when he made her come. "Excuse me?" She had asked him something but the blood roaring from his fantasy had stopped up his ears.

She cocked her head at him. "I asked what you'd like to drink."

"Oh, ah whatever you're having is fine with me, ma'am." He winced. Way to make her feel old.

She rolled her eyes at him and grinned, taking it like a good sport. The living room and kitchen were separated by an open counter, so he had no trouble watching her saunter to the refrigerator. Her dress clung to her shapely ass. He could stare at it all day, but thought better of it. No sense in being too obvious. The woman had been untouched in years. She needed wooing, not leering. He looked around the condo and spotted her bedroom through an open door. He could see a neatly made bed and because that sight tested his resolve to go slow, he turned his attention to the living

room. He wandered the small space, pretending to be interested in her book collection, and then he did spot something of interest. On one shelf there was a small rectangular box he recognized only too well. He opened it up before he could think better of the breach of privacy it might mean and stared open-mouthed.

"One Sam Adams." Grace held an open bottle out to him, another one in her hand. She looked at what he held and blinked back at him. She obviously wasn't going to tell him, so taking the beer from her, he asked.

"How did you earn a bronze star?"

Her mouth formed a thin line. Snatching the box from him, she shut it with a sharp snap and put it back where he found it. "It was nothing." She turned and sat down on the arm of her couch. She took a small sip of her beer, clearly not intending to say more.

He knew he should let it go, but hell she had the thing out where anyone could see it. "It couldn't have been nothing, Grace. They don't give out bronze stars, with a V device no less, with your mess kit. You got that for combat bravery. How did a doctor end up in combat?"

"You were over there, you know the whole country is a battlefield."

"Yeah, but still." He couldn't wrap his mind around it. It wasn't that Grace was a woman. He had fought alongside women in battle. He knew the "no women in the front line" rule was bullshit. It was that she was a doctor. Doctors were awarded the bronze star for being outstanding doctors in wartime. The Valor Device added to the medal, though, piqued his curiosity.

"I was doing my job, no more, no less, just like everyone else," she responded in a clipped tone.

Sensing her discomfort, he let it go. "And you don't want to talk about it."

"And I don't want to talk about it," she confirmed with another small sip of her beer. He could tell she didn't like beer. She must be only drinking it to make him feel at home.

Damn, she was a wonderful woman, and he wanted her. The way she was sitting, he could see more of her legs. They were shapely and long. He wanted them wrapped around him badly enough to throw caution to the wind. Downing a healthy slug of his beer for courage, he went over to her. She didn't flinch when he ran the fingers of his free hand through the soft waves of her hair.

"You could make a man forget his own name."

A pretty blush stained her cheeks. Her gaze dropped. "That's very sweet of you."

"No ma'am, that's my line. You're very sweet and beautiful and desirable. I intend to kiss you, just so you know."

Her mouth opened in a silent "oh". Plucking the beer that neither of them wanted from her hand, he set both bottles down on the coffee table before gathering her in his arms. She went willingly, hugging his waist as he cupped the back of her head to guide her mouth to his. The moment their lips met, she sighed and opened to him. Her tongue welcomed his inside and twirled around it.

He moaned at the contact and slanted his head to deepen the kiss. He clasped her body tighter, letting her feel his hard cock straining against his pants. He wanted her to know how much he desired her, how much she turned him on. Twelve years meant nothing. All that mattered was the need raging through him, through them both. Grace didn't remain passive or try to push away. She grabbed him harder, rubbing against his erection. He moaned again and dropped a hand to gather up the hem of her skirt. Soft firm skin greeted him before he touched something that felt like a Kevlar vest.

Mark pulled out of the kiss enough to see her face. "What's this?" Running his hand up, he could tell the thing plastered her skin all the way past her lovely ass and to her bra.

Grace's eyes opened to tiny slits. She bit her lip before saying, "Shit, my Spanx."

Spanks? "Huh? Did you just say you want me to spank you?" The thought nearly made him come.

Grace groaned and dropped her forehead against his chest. “No,” she said in a muffled tone. “It’s a modern day girdle.”

A girdle, like what his granny would wear? That was stupid, but he knew enough not to say what he was thinking. He felt around all the body parts the thing covered, intrigued by thoughts of what it hid. His fingers slid between her thighs and to his delight, he found a slit in the armor. Grace gasped when his finger slipped inside. Oh, man, he hit naked flesh. Moist, hot, plump flesh.

“This is convenient,” he grunted into her ear because all he could think about was releasing his cock to replace his finger.

But Grace laughed. “It’s not for what you’re thinking. You try slipping anything besides your finger in there and we’ll be heading for the ER.” She gasped again when his finger flicked her clit. “Yes,” she sighed.

That was all he needed for encouragement. Pulling his finger out, he released her enough to slide both hands up under her dress. When he had a firm grip on the top of the girdle thing, he pulled it down and off. He ended up on his knees in front of her. The perfect place to go exploring. With a firm, yet gentle grip, he clasped the back of her thighs and licked a trail with his tongue from the side of a knee to the sweet juncture he had probed before. His head was under her dress, covered with darkness and heat. He could smell her arousal and planted his tongue between her folds, desperate for a taste.

Her body jerked at the first lick. Hands clasped his head, urging him closer. He lapped at her clit, long and slow. Grace moaned and bucked against his face. He held her more firmly, determined to make her come now that he knew how much she wanted it, wanted him. Her fingers dug into his skull as he picked up speed. His tongue flicked her clit. His lips sucked and tugged at the nub. She yelled his name and writhed. He hung on tight, not stopping until she started to collapse. Wrapping his arm around her legs, he stood up to carry her on one shoulder. She squealed in surprise, but didn’t struggle as he hauled her toward her bedroom.

## **Chapter Four**

Grace's head spun as Mark carried her into her bedroom, yanked off her comforter and laid her down on her bed. He was breathing hard, and she doubted it had anything to do with the effort of carrying her. His eyes were darker, and pinning her to the spot with a hunger she hadn't seen in years. The front of his pants was tented with the magnificent erection she had felt when they kissed. Despite her fabulous orgasm minutes ago, she was dying to have that cock inside her.

"If you're going to say no, Grace, please do it now," he begged.

"Silly man." To make herself perfectly clear, she sat up enough to pull her dress over her head. Her bra went next and she sank back down and let him look. It was hard. She wanted to cover up, insecure about her older body, yet she knew he would have none of it and if he was going to be turned off, now was the time to know. She held her breath as his gaze slid slowly down her body. She willed herself to be confident the way the other cougars were.

"My God, you're gorgeous," he said in a low voice. "Why you'd want to bind yourself in that contraption, I'll never understand." He swallowed visibly. "I want to be inside you right now. May I?"

His words and the obvious sincerity of them did almost more to turn her on than his tongue. The dull throbbing of her clit picked up speed. Her nipples tingled and hardened even more. "Please," she invited.

Mark grinned as he toed off his shoes and yanked at his belt. It wasn't his usual boyish grin, more of a wolfish, "I'm going to eat you" kind of grin. Except that he already had eaten her and she was the one who was starving for more. His clothes disappeared in seconds. He stood by her bed, naked and beautiful. His body was honed to perfection, every muscle sculpted. His cock jutted out ready for action and glistened

with pre-cum. He fished through his wallet and pulling out a condom, tossed the wallet aside.

"I promise this is new and reliable," he said as he covered himself. His head jerked up. "Which sounds like I was planning on this happening, and I sort of was, but it was more like a hope than an assumption."

Grace laughed to set him at ease, and opened her nightstand to show him the box of condoms she had put there the previous night. It was all Danny's idea, but no need to tell Mark that. He laughed too.

"Excellent." He joined her on the bed, on his side, facing her. He caressed her hair before leaning down to kiss her. His tongue danced with hers, and she sank farther into her mattress with boneless pleasure as the heat slowly built within her once more. Mark trailed his fingers down her face and neck, stopping when he reached her breast. His thumb flicked at her hard nipple, making her moan deep into his mouth. He moaned back.

Not wanting him to have all the fun, she reached between them to encircle his cock with her fingers. It jumped in her hand, and his hips bucked forward when she tugged his stiff flesh. Groaning, he nudged her hand away and rolled onto her. He released her mouth. "Sorry, Grace, but I can't wait."

"I don't want you to," she replied and inhaled sharply when he entered her.

He stilled. "Did I hurt you?"

"No, don't stop," was her strangled reply. It had been so long. Her body had almost forgotten what it felt like to be filled by a man. But she was slick from her earlier orgasm and primed for another. She opened her legs as wide as she could and welcomed him deep inside her aching pussy.

He moved slowly at first, his strokes long and easy. He was trying to be gentle with her, yet now that she was acclimated to the invasion of his cock, she wanted it faster and harder. Pressing her heels against his tight ass, she urged him on. He got her message, picking up the pace, his cock thrusting in quick, short strokes. His mouth

found hers again. His tongue mimicked the rapid movements below. Grace's climax crested, crashed, her pussy clamped down tight. Her fingers dug into his shoulders. She cried out and heard Mark echo her. His body slammed into hers a few more times before he collapsed on top of her, a dead weight.

Right away he tried to move off her, but she held him tight. She loved the sensation of a man lying on her. She had missed it, she had missed all of it. Hugging her lover closer to her, she closed her eyes and simply enjoyed herself. Tonight her life had started again. Sleep claimed her, and she let it, a smile on her face.

\* \* \* \* \*

Grace opened her eyes to sunlight peeking from behind her curtains. The clock on her nightstand said it was five past nine. Her body told her she'd had one hell of a night. She winced at the ache in her lower back and inner thighs. But she smiled at the sight of the large, strong body lying beside her. Mark was turned toward the wall, still sleeping. He had spent the night and had woken her once during it to coax her into another round. She had been more than willing. Now all she could think of was how morning was not her best look. Quietly as she could, she snuck into the bathroom to pee and touch up her makeup. She was in the middle of hiding her bags, when the door opened. Mark lounged against the doorjamb, looking at her through the mirror with sleepy eyes. His cock was fully locked and loaded with a condom on.

"Hope you're not going to that trouble for me," he drawled.

Grace spoke to his reflection. "Well I'm not doing it for me."

He shook his head and came all the way in. He hugged her from behind and nuzzled her throat. "You don't have to put that gunk on. I find you plenty hot the way you are." For emphasis, he rubbed his cock against her ass.

Grace gave up. Turning in his arms, she gave him a shove. He stood back with eyebrows raised and a concerned look. She ran her hands up his pecs and circled his hard brown nipples with her thumb. "I think I owe you something," she teased.

"Huh?"

She licked a nipple before dropping to her knees. His cock waved in front of her. Claspings its base, she swallowed the hardness as far down as she could.

"Holy fuck!" Mark braced his legs farther apart and entwined the fingers from both hands in her hair. "You do not have to do this," he whispered. "But damn that feels good."

Grace grinned around the mouthful and tugged and lapped while her other hand played with his balls. She wanted to take him in completely, but he was just too big so she contented them both by working the head of his cock. As a doctor, she knew a man's pleasure spots better than most women. She flicked the skin underneath the glans with her tongue. Mark rewarded her with grunts and jerks until suddenly, he pulled her up literally by her hair.

He spun her around and bent her over the countertop. "Watch," he commanded as he slowly impaled her pussy from behind. Eyes wide open, she watched him as he watched her. She gnawed at her lower lip as he filled her and gasped as he went as deep as he could. "I'm going to fuck you nice and slow until we both can't stand it anymore," he promised.

Sliding his hands down to her waist, he held her firm as he began to thrust with long strokes. He acted as if he were lazy and had all the time in the world, the way his cock slid in and out with maddening slowness. But his face told a different story. His eyes blazed and his jaw was clenched. His chest rose and fell in ever more labored breaths. Her breathing had picked up, too. Not enough, though.

"I need more," she gasped.

"Easy, darlin', I've got you." He reached around to slide a couple of fingers between her labia. As he rubbed her clit, her climax climbed higher and faster, and the position forced him to enter her with shorter, harder thrusts.

"Yes, that's it," she encouraged. "Come on, Captain, make me come."



"Yes ma'am." His fingers twirled around her clit until she doubled over even more, forehead pressed against the counter. The climax burst throughout her body like a flower blossoming, radiating from the center. It left her limp and breathless and only vaguely aware of Mark pressed against her back, arms braced beside her head. He clamped his teeth on the back of her neck, shuddering at his own orgasm. When he was still, he let go of her neck only to press his forehead against her shoulder. "Got any plans for today?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark eyed his objective with grim determination. This was going to be a tough assignment, but he needed to man up and get the job done. No way he'd let Grace see him fail. Not that he had anything to prove to her. He knew he had satisfied her in bed and out of it. Still, a man had his pride. He nodded once. "Okay, I'm ready."

"All you have to do is watch me," Grace assured him. "It's really very simple. I mean we're eating a lobster, not performing neurosurgery. If you can clean a rifle, you can get meat out of a boiled crustacean. These are soft shelled, too. A snap."

Mark remained unconvinced. Nevertheless, he wasn't about to look like a wimp or an idiot in front of the most fantastic woman he had ever met. Man, this was turning out to be the best leave of his life. Grace was amazing and the sex was mind-blowing. They were both making up for lost time, having made love twice in bed and twice in the bathroom, one of those times in the shower. That was a fantasy of his that he hadn't quite managed before today. He could cross it off the list and try for another. He was certainly ready for more action. But first, there was the little matter of the lobster. The tail on his plate last night had been plucked from the shell already. Grace had insisted he had to eat an entire boiled one at least once while in town. She had also talked him into going to the aquarium. It had been fun, although honestly doing anything with this woman was fine by him.

"Mark, you need to pay attention," she admonished gently.

"Sorry." He picked up his lobster with both hands the way she was.

"Fan out the tail and twist the shell where it meets the body. Like this." With a deft flick of her wrist, the lobster was now in two pieces.

Mark mimicked her motion, although his results were less impressive. He had rendered it in two, but had also crushed a bit of the shell at the same time, causing liquid to spurt on him.

Grace chuckled. "Not bad. Now you know what the bib is for."

Looking down at the tacky plastic tied around his neck, he saw the picture of the lobster mocking him. He tossed his chin toward Grace. "How come you're not wearing one of these?"

"I don't need one," she replied. "I'm what you'd call an expert." She couldn't finish the sentence without laughing. "Come on, the claws are next."

They dismembered their meals and she showed him how to use the crackers and pick. Every move was precise and confident. She knew what she was doing and he was fascinated by her. Plucking meat from one of the arms, she swirled it in drawn butter and held it out provocatively between two fingers. "This is the best kept secret of a lobster, the knuckle meat."

He leaned over the table and took the offered morsel in his mouth, sucking a couple of her knuckles in too. "Hmm. That is sweet," he agreed when he released her.

Her eyes sparkled with amusement. She yanked a lobster leg free and held it up to him. "This is the second best kept secret." Sucking it into her mouth, she clamped her teeth down on the shell as she slid the leg out slowly.

Holy Mother of God, if she kept this up, he was going to have to leave wearing the bib around his waist. He groaned softly. "You are killing me here, Grace."

She laughed again and nodded. "I know. I'm sorry. I don't know what got into me."

He grinned. "I did, Grace. I got into you. Would you like me to get into you again?"

It was her turn to groan. "Eat your lobster, Captain Bennington," she retorted primly.

Clamping down on a lobster leg, he mumbled, "Yes, ma'am."

\* \* \* \* \*

It was probably a bad idea to spend what was left of their now weekend date by going to check up on Conroy. Grace just couldn't shake the nagging feeling about the guy. She could tell, too, that it was weighing on Mark even though he insisted he wasn't worried. If they didn't check up on the vet, he was going to figuratively end up in bed with them anyway. Might as well see how things were going with the guy. Maybe everything was fine and they could continue to enjoy what was left of the weekend. She didn't think so, but she could hope.

The area of Boston where Mark said Conroy's favorite bar was located, the area where Conroy himself lived, was not the sort of place she would wander around alone at night. She was with Mark, though. She felt safe with him, his strong arm wrapped around her waist, hugging her close. He wore the same clothes as on their date, with the sleeves rolled up because of the heat. It had the effect of showing the world his impressive biceps. Guys were giving them a wide berth as they sauntered down the sidewalk. He stopped in front of a rundown bar that was trying to look like a quaint Irish pub.

"This is the most likely place," Mark said as they eyed the front door. "It's pretty rough inside. I'd leave you out here, but it's pretty rough out here too. Sorry."

"There's nothing to apologize for. I pressed for this and I'm not worried about the inside or the outside as long as we stick together. I trust you to keep me safe."

He swung her closer for a quick kiss. "Why thank you, ma'am." He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Let's see if he's here."

It took a few seconds for her eyes to adjust to the gloom of the place. Before the smoking ban, it must have been even more dark and bleak. In any event, there was not

much to see. It was pretty packed for a Sunday night, people sitting around and drinking, standing around and drinking, and shooting pool way in the back and drinking. From the looks of the patrons and the raucous wall of sound that hit Grace the moment she entered, it was clear drinking had been going on for a while. She clung close to Mark as he cut their way through the crowd to the bar. It was easy to spot Conroy's red hair. He sat way at one end, a couple of young women hanging on him.

Mark stopped behind his friend and tapped him on the shoulder. Conroy whirled around, fist raised. Mark dropped Grace's hand to put both of his up in surrender. "Whoa, sorry, buddy. I wasn't thinking."

Conroy's expression was fierce and he didn't change it or lower his fist for long seconds. Mark stood patiently, waiting for his friend to process what was going on. It was obvious he had experienced this before. If Grace had had any doubt about Conroy's PTSD, it was gone now. She waited, tense, ready to intervene if Conroy followed through with his threat.

He didn't. Lowering his hand, he grinned. "Hey, look who's back. How'd your date with Doctor Mom go?" His gaze flicked to Grace as Mark silently lowered his hands. "Shit, I guess you got lucky. Hey, Doc." He raised a beer bottle toward Grace in greeting.

Mark's arm curved around her waist again. He tugged her close and glared at his friend. "Try not to be such an asshole, Sean. We're here to let you know that I'm hanging with Grace for the rest of the night. You didn't answer your cell."

Conroy shrugged and tipped his beer back to drain it. The women with him gave Grace the once-over and dismissed her. They were not dismissing Mark, however. "Why don'tcha stay and play with us, Mahk?" one of them offered, thrusting her barely clad breast forward.

Grace rolled her eyes.

"You got something to say, moms?" her friend challenged. Grace raised her eyebrows at the woman, at a loss for words. *Am I supposed to get into some kind of cat fight?*

She was saved the trouble by Conroy, of all people. He laughed. "Easy, Kerry, the doc here was in the army. She'll beat your pretty ass for sure." He rapped his knuckles on the countertop. "Another beer, Joey."

Mark shook his head. "We're leaving. I need to go back to your place and get clean clothes. I don't suppose you'll come with us."

Conroy just laughed and turned away. Without another word, Mark spun around and headed for the door, Grace in tow. Once they were outside, he grabbed her for another quick kiss. "I'm sorry about that." He turned to lead her down the sidewalk, still clinging tight to her waist.

"Why are you apologizing? It was my idea. That man needs help."

"I know." He sounded frustrated, and she realized she was dumping too much on him.

"He's not your responsibility. You've done as much as you can."

"Maybe." He gave her a slight smile. "Anyway, let's get my stuff and go back to your place. I've had a great day, Grace, and I want to have another great evening. No more Sean for now."

"No more Sean," she agreed.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was wonderful to get back to the quiet and peace of her home. Mark's presence didn't detract from the feeling, either. He made it better because her body was already aroused with thoughts of how they might spend the evening and the night. The way he eyed her, he had to be thinking along similar lines. Because he had changed into jeans, she couldn't tell as well if he was aroused. Still, there was a good-sized ridge behind his zipper. It promised delightful possibilities.

"You keep looking at me that way, Dr. McKinnon, and I'm going to take you right here and now."

The breath whooshed out of her lungs. Her clit throbbed and her nipples tingled at the thought. She pictured him shoving her against the wall, lifting her leg and driving his cock inside her. She imagined clinging to him and sobbing as the climax overtook her. She wanted it. She wanted him. Now.

Grace took a step toward Mark and the doorbell rang. She stopped and frowned. Who would come over on a Sunday night? Oh, God, not Aaron? She had left him a message about being busy the previous night. He wouldn't be so bold as to simply drop by. Raising a finger up to Mark, she said, "Hold that thought." When she opened the door, she found Danny on the other side with a small bowl in his hand. She narrowed her eyes at him.

He smiled broadly, not even trying to hide his effort to see past her. "Hey, there. I was hoping to borrow a cup of sugar."

"Sugar?"

"Yup," he replied, pushing his way gently into the apartment. "I'm making chocolate chip cookies and wouldn't you know I forgot to get more sugar at the store. Hi, I'm Danny Briggs, Grace's neighbor." He stood in front of Mark, with a shit-eating grin on his face, one hand extended.

"Mark Bennington." He took the offered hand and was nearly knocked off balance when Danny gave a vigorous shake.

"My," Danny practically cooed. "The army does keep our boys fit."

Mark stared at the other man, with a deer-in-the-headlights look.

"Ugh," Grace exclaimed under her breath. Damn her nosy friend, although she did have him to thank for the waxing and the condoms and the beer. She hadn't intended her questionable date to turn into a night of marathon sex, but given that it had, she was very glad to have been prepared. The day had been fantastic, too. She was relaxed and happy with Mark, as if they were old friends. His presence by her side kept her in a

constant state of arousal, as well. Never in her life had she gone for two nights in a row with a guy, but she was raring to go with Mark.

"Don't get comfortable, Danny," she called over her shoulder as she opened the cabinet door for the sugar.

"Isn't she delightful? I've known her for less than a year, but if I weren't gay, I'd have proposed already."

Oh. My. God. Grace tore out of the kitchen and shoved a five-pound bag of sugar at Danny. "Here." She gave him the evil eye, hoping he'd take the hint and leave before she killed him.

Taking a second to juggle the bowl and the bag, Danny grinned back at her. "Thanks, girlfriend. I'll be baking 'til the cows come home with this."

"Enjoy." Grace grabbed one of Danny's elbows and propelled him to the door.

"Nice meeting you, Mark," Danny called as he was shoved out into the hallway.

"Ah, yeah, you too," Mark replied, uncertainty in his tone.

Grace whirled around and pressed her back against the closed door. "Sorry about Hurricane Danny. He can leave a lot of destruction in his wake."

Mark grinned. "Naw, he was just checking me out. That's what friends do. Think I passed inspection?"

"His drool factor was pretty high, so I'd say yes."

"That's good," he replied coming toward her at a lazy pace. "Although what really matters to me, is passing it with you." Reaching her, he tugged her into his arms and kissed her long and slow. When they came up for air, he rested his forehead against hers and spoke quietly. "This has been one of the best days of my life."

The confession startled her. This was only a fling, wasn't it? Of course, what else could it be given the difference in their ages and the fact that he would be gone in a week or so. She pulled back a little to look him in the eye. She saw sincerity there as well as desire. His gaze was blazing hot, pupils wide and dark. Seeing the intensity of

arousal there, she relaxed and bathed in the attention. He was only a man trying to get a woman into bed. That's what made him say something so strong. No problem given how much she wanted to get him back into her bed, too.

"It's not over," she teased, nipping at his lower lip. "What would you like to do?"

"Oh, Doc," he moaned. "I've got a list that would take us a year. We've already knocked off one item." When she looked at him quizzically, he explained. "The shower."

She raised her eyebrows and squeezed his behind. Such a nice firm handful. "Really? That was so tame. Surely you've had sex in a shower before?"

Wincing, he shook his head. "Nope. That was a first for me. I have to confess I haven't been with a lot of women."

She pressed her lower half against him and rubbed the ridge straining within his jeans. "You could have fooled me."

"Oh!" he grunted and returned the rub. "You are killing me here, and thanks, I aim to please. Honestly, though, you're like number six. I was with my first girlfriend throughout high school and West Point. She was pretty conservative, so we didn't do much experimenting. Then she dumped me halfway through my first deployment."

"Oh, the bitch!"

Mark laughed. "I think I may have referred to her as such for awhile, but really it was for the best. Not everyone is cut out to serve or to wait at home for those who do serve. You know how it is."

"I do." Grace moved her hands to his front and worked them under his t-shirt. Running her fingers up his chest, she cupped his pecs. "Her loss."

"Yeah, well, what with other deployments, I haven't dated much since her and haven't had any relationships that lasted long enough for me to feel comfortable pulling out the list." He leaned over and traced her outer ear with his tongue. "It was a happy coincidence that you fulfilled one this morning."



"So what's at the top of that list? What's the one thing you'd really like to try?"

"Hmm," he replied with a frown. "No, I don't think so. If you have any chocolate sauce, we can try one farther down," he added with a grin.

She wanted to argue, but she could see he was uncomfortable. With a sly grin of her own, she nodded.

Picking her up, he twirled her around. "Hot, damn! This is the best day of my life."

Grace held on tight, enjoying the ride and the image of what they would do with the chocolate sauce. Maybe Mark was right. Maybe this was the best day of her life, too.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark watched the ribbon of chocolate slowly envelope one of Grace's dusky nipples. Half gone when they started, the bottle of syrup was almost empty. He had squeezed it and lapped chocolate up one side of Grace's body and down the other. He had almost had his fill of the sweet, but he doubted he would ever be done tasting this woman.

She was pinned under his body, her arms stretched over her head, held there by his hand clasped around her wrists. He hadn't intended to dominate her physically, that hadn't been part of the fantasy at first. But the way she writhed and bucked as his tongue and lips licked and sucked at her sensitive skin risked the fun ending too soon. If he let her go, she had made it clear she would get his cock inside her pussy as fast as she could. She was begging for release, but he wasn't done yet, not by a long shot.

With a snap of the bottle's cap, he tossed the container aside and latched onto her chocolate-covered nipple. He sucked hard and was rewarded with a cry from Grace. She arched her back up off the bed, pressing closer to him. With his free hand, he helped her effort to give him even better leverage to lave and nip the hard nub inside his mouth. Her legs moved restlessly, entwining his, trying to move him so that his cock would slide between her legs. He chuckled against her flesh, amused at her efforts and damn pleased at his control of her body. His cock was more than ready for her—hard,

aching, sheathed for action. It lay heavy against her thigh. When she writhed as she was now, it twitched with impatience. It wanted in her hot, tight core, too. Almost, not yet. He wanted to make this last.

“Mark,” Grace groaned, “please, I can’t stand it.”

With a final tug, he let go of her nipple and grinned down at her. “You have to stand it, darlin’. Remember this is my fantasy.”

“Fuck that,” she ground out. “Fuck me, now.”

He answered her with a kiss, tongue thrust deep inside her welcoming mouth, letting her taste the chocolate that lingered. His hand cupped her breast, rubbing her distended nipple with his thumb. Her skin was sticky. He let the friction drive her arousal even higher. She thrashed harder against his hold, her need spiraling out of control. He wouldn’t be able to hold her much longer without hurting her, and that was not in his plans. His own climax was building fast and hard, too. If he didn’t slide into her soon, he would disappoint them both. So he shifted to lie flat on top of her. He released her breast to use both hands to hold hers. Palm to palm, he held her arms over her head and pressed her body deeper into the mattress. His mouth never wavered in its assault. With his knee, he pushed her legs farther apart, spreading them as wide as he could. He settled between them, cocked his hips back and thrust home.

Grace screamed inside his mouth. The walls of her pussy clasped his rigid flesh in repeated spasms as her orgasm overtook her. She lifted her legs and tilted her hips to take him in deeper. She met each push with one of her own. He was embedded into her tight pussy so far his balls slapped against her ass. Her heels dug into his backside urging him on, riding the climax for long seconds. When her cries turned into short, quick whimpers of pleasure, he kept going, taking her with steady thrusts, trying to make it last, hoping to make her come again. He concentrated on keeping the semen from exploding out of him. He didn’t have long to wait, thank God. As soon as her movements slowed, they picked up again. He could feel the tension rise within her once more. She moaned deep and low. Her teeth clamped down to bite his tongue as her

body bucked against him. Mark let go. The climax burst out of him. He pounded hard and fast as the waves of pleasure surfed his whole body.

When he was spent, he collapsed on top of Grace. The two of them lay boneless, arms and legs tangled, chests heaving as they caught their breaths. Neither spoke, but they didn't have to. And he had been right. It had been the best day of his life.

## **Chapter Five**

Happy Monday morning, ladies! I have three words for you. Hot. Heavy. Sex. Thank you all for your support. Any time I started to doubt myself, I thought of your encouraging words. I've got a week of fun to look forward to. I'll keep you posted.

Grace

I am so glad I issued that challenge. :-) It brings a tear to my eye to think how many people are having Hot. Heavy. Sex. because of me. Sniff.

Monica

Grace tried to concentrate on the chief of staff's lecture, but all she could think about was Mark's sex list and what they were going to try that night. They had spent the better part of a week together, meeting after her shift ended, trying things that were new to him and sometimes new to her too. As sex acts went, they were pretty tame. They had licked chocolate off each other, sixty-nined, had sex on the dining table, sex on the couch and sex in her office. Okay that last one had been on her list.

She didn't want to think about how his leave was up in a couple of days. He would go back to his base, deploy to Afghanistan, and she'd return to her blasé life. It was a depressing thought. She preferred to scheme about the best way to get him to tell her his biggest fantasy. So far he had demurred and her curiosity was really piqued. How kinky could it be? She wanted to give him something to remember her by, something that he might pull out along with his cock from time to time to enjoy. At least he could until the real thing came his way. It would. He'd find a woman, younger than she, who would willingly retry the list. It was the right thing for all concerned, yet the thought of him with another woman bothered her. Stupid. He was a young man. He should be with a young woman, while she, Grace, would have to decide whether settling for

Aaron was the best plan for the rest of her life. After the intense pleasure of Mark, she was even less sure settling for anyone was tolerable.

As soon as the lecture was over, she ran out of the hospital and into Mark's arms. He had taken to meeting her there after her shift. They both wanted to wring as much out of their time together as they could. She kissed him hungrily, not caring if people she worked with saw her. There was nothing wrong with living a little. Mark looked younger than he really was, but she had never cared what other people thought anyway.

"God, kissing you sweeps away the life-sapping tedium of a staff meeting."

Hugging her close, he echoed the sentiment. "Kissing you chases away the irritation of spending the day with Sean. He used to be a fun guy," he added with a frown.

"How is he?" They had pretty much agreed to keep Sean out of their time together after the previous Sunday night. It was hard to completely ignore, though, the reason she and Mark had met.

"The same. He drinks too much and is testy and jumpy and morose when he's sober. He won't listen to me. I can't convince him he needs help." He shrugged. "What shall we do for dinner?" Arm around her waist, he steered toward the T station. Although she had a car garaged in the city, the public transportation system was more convenient.

"How about pizza?"

He stopped. "Really. Pizza's okay?"

"Of course. It's the one thing we haven't had yet together, and my generation eats it too you know. You kids didn't invent it or anything."

They continued on. "Shit, Grace, you are not of a different generation. Do you have a place in mind? Can we call ahead and pick it up, eat it at your place?" He pinched her side. "'Cause, honestly darlin' I can't wait to get you naked."

Grace gasped then laughed and pulled out her phone to call her favorite pizza place. "What do you want on it?"

"Anything you like."

"You might regret that." The restaurant picked up and she ordered mushrooms, green peppers and anchovies. Mark grimaced at the last item, but said nothing. When she was done, she asked, "Is there anything on your list involving pizza?"

He gave her a sly look. "Maybe."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark couldn't believe his good fortune. Here he was sitting stark naked on a beautiful woman's bed eating pizza and drinking beer. Life had never been better, except he was leaving soon and wouldn't see Grace for a year or more. He wasn't even sure he'd be able to see her when he got back. Neither had brought it up, but he would tonight or tomorrow morning because it was too important to let go. This had started out as a fling, made more stimulating by the age difference. A few days in Grace's company, however, had changed the rules of the game. He was taken with her in way he hadn't experienced since Meghan. In fact, when he thought of the childish love he had felt for his old girlfriend, it was nothing like the feelings bubbling inside him now. Things were different. Grace was different. The thought of leaving her hurt. The thought that she might see this only as a fling, and nothing more, hurt worse.

He needed to put these thoughts aside. At the moment, the pizza was half gone and the last of his beer was sliding down his throat. His cock was stiff and had been since he first held Grace in his arms that evening. Part of this particular fantasy was waiting while they ate. He wanted to draw out the anticipation, make them both crazy with need. If the ache in his balls was any indication, it was working. Grace sat propped up against the headboard, facing him with her legs spread. He could see her nether lips were wet from her arousal. Seeing the evidence of her desire made him even more hard.

"What are you staring at?" she asked and sipped lazily at a glass of wine.

"I'm staring at how much you want me."

"Oh, really?" she drawled.

"Yes, ma'am. Makes for a nice change given that my erection always gives me away."

"Men are simple creatures." She paused. "Your list is pretty tame, too, I have to tell you. Can't I convince you to share the big one?"

Oh, no. No way he was going to ask for that. It was something a woman gave to a man she trusted. He couldn't expect her to feel that way about him. It was too soon. But it was sweet for her to ask. "No, ma'am."

"How bad could it be? I mean does it involve rubber?"

He rolled his eyes. "No."

"Whips?"

He debated a second. "No, but if you want you could try it on me. I do not hurt women, ever."

"Good to know, and for the record, I could warm up to the whip thing." She heaved a sigh. "So not BDSM. Farm animals?"

He barked out a laugh. "Good God, no!" Grace grew pensive and when the silence dragged on, he prodded her. "What could you possibly be thinking that's worse than farm animals?"

She looked him in the eye. "Not worse, but another woman? You want a threesome. Maybe with a younger woman?"

Shoving the pizza box aside, he kneeled between her legs and put their drinks on the nightstand. He cupped her face with both hands, determined to make sure she believed him. "No, Grace," he answered in a low voice. "That is not on my list. One woman is plenty for me, and I do not, I repeat, *do not* fantasize about being with a younger woman when I'm with you."

“Okay, then you really need to tell me what’s at the top of your list because my imagination can run wild.”

Shit. It was embarrassing and presumptuous, she’d tell him no, and then maybe they could get down to fucking. *Big deal, just say it.* “Anal.” He grimaced as soon as he said it and waited for her reply. She surprised the hell out of him.

“That’s it? Anal? You want to have anal sex?” When he nodded, she added, “Who fucks whom?”

Oh wow, it had been so obvious to him. Clearing his throat, he answered. “I do you?” Even now he was freaked out about saying it, about asking for it. Hell, if she wanted to fuck him with something, then okay. It would not be on any list he would ever draw up from now until the end of time, but whatever Grace wanted, he’d give her.

“Okay.”

What? His brain froze. “I don’t think you understand me, here. I’m talking about sticking my cock up your lovely ass.” Crude, yet clear. He’d be lucky if she didn’t toss him out on *his* ass.

“I get it. I’m a doctor, remember. Human anatomy is my profession. I said okay.” Wrapping her hands around his, she added, “I’ve done it before.”

“Really?” She nodded. “And you liked it well enough to do it again?” She nodded once more and released his hand to grab his cock. It jumped.

“I think your cock is rooting for this.”

Mark closed his eyes and moaned his appreciation. “If it liked it any better, I’d be coming in your hand.”

“Can’t have that. Scoot back.” Eyes open, he complied. Grace kneeled on the side of the bed and pulled a condom and a tube of lube out of the nightstand drawer. She turned to him. “We have to do this slowly.”



"Yes, ma'am." He was afraid to speak, afraid to breathe. He couldn't believe this was happening. "Whatever you say."

"Lie down." He dropped down onto his back and steadied her when she straddled him. "We start with getting me as worked up as we can."

"I can do that."

"Yes, you can. Give me your right hand." When he complied, she squeezed a dollop of lube on his index and middle fingers. "Use that to massage my sphincter while you eat me out. Can you do that?"

"I'm an excellent multi-tasker."

"We'll see." She shifted so that her pussy was hovering above his mouth and squatted low enough to give his tongue access. He lapped at her clit with long, slow strokes while his finger played with the puckered hole of her luscious bottom. Just touching her there while licking her was enough to send him over the edge. To ward off the climax, he pictured taking his rifle apart. *Oh, man, I have to hold on.*

Grace clung to her headboard, writhing and moaning. He picked up the pace, and when she pressed her pussy lips against his body and shouted out her release, he poked his finger inside her. "Yes, that's it, don't stop," she gasped.

Her anal passage welcomed his finger with a tight heat that he had never felt before. He could only imagine what it was going to be like to have his cock there instead. His hardness increased with expectation. His balls pulled up tighter. He changed his rhythm, sucking her clit with gentle pressure, while his finger stroked inside Grace.

She bounced slowly down to take him in more. "Try two."

He thought it was too soon, but didn't argue. His cock was dying to replace the finger. It wanted in and he had to trust Grace to set the right pace. He added the second finger and was thrilled by how relaxed she was. It wasn't long before she came again. Her body swayed and she gave a low moan. He kept sucking and thrusting until she pulled away from his face and reached around to still his hand.

"Are you all right?" he demanded, worried he had been too rough.

"Shh," she quieted his concern and picking up the condom, covered his aching, straining cock. Then she slathered on the lube.

"Are you sure?" He hardly dared breathe, but he had to be sure.

"Shh," she admonished again, and eyes closed she lowered herself onto his rod.

Her descent was slow, agonizingly slow. The head of his cock popped past her sphincter and entered that amazing world of heat and pressure. It was unlike anything he had ever experienced. The fit was tighter than a pussy, tight enough to almost make him come immediately. He fought back the tide, wanting to make the experience and the pleasure last. He wanted to thrust up inside Grace hard and fast. Not being able to do that, having to stay still, kicked the heat up. He groaned. "God, Grace."

"Like this?" she teased in a husky voice.

"You're killing me." He opened his eyes enough to see her grinning down at him as she impaled her body on his. She pumped using short strokes. He wasn't going to last much longer. He had to make this good for her, too. He used the palm of his left hand to circle her clit and thrust his thumb inside her pussy. He could feel his own cock inside her other channel and that was it for him. Arching his neck, he yelled as the orgasm claimed him. His body quivered with the effort not to writhe. The blood roared in his ears but not so much he didn't hear Grace call out his name.

She collapsed on top of him. His cock slid out of her ass. He could do nothing more than cradle her in his arms as sleep claimed them both.

\* \* \* \* \*

Grace stepped out of the shower and stretched. The heat had helped ease muscles sore from the heavy workout they had received the past few days. She had no complaints, though. She had taken the challenge and now it was over. The memories of her time with Mark would stay with her for the rest of her life. She would never forget in particular the look on his face when she lowered herself onto him last night. It had

made him so blissfully happy. Such an easy thing to give. She was glad she had pressed for his number one fantasy.

She entered her bedroom quietly, hoping Mark was still asleep. He wasn't. He was lying in bed, grinning at her. "Why didn't you wake me?"

"You're on vacation. You should be able to sleep in. Besides," she added grabbing underwear from a drawer, "I'm afraid I wasn't up for another round this morning."

He shot up to a sitting position. "Did I hurt you?"

"No," she assured him because he hadn't. She was fine and even felt delightfully wicked about what they had done. "You worry too much."

He dropped his eyes and his voice. "I care about you, Grace."

Her heart did a slow roll, ending with a stab of pain. He would be gone soon. She wished it weren't so and it was stupid for her to feel that way. He was a young man on leave. He would get on with his life with a pleasant memory of his somewhat wild time with an older woman. Briskly getting dressed, she said, "I care about you, too, Mark." There was a brief silence while she rummaged in her closet for something to wear.

"I'd like to keep in touch while I'm deployed," he said in an uncertain tone.

Her breath hitched as she strived for a casual reply. "Sure. I'll give you my email address. Let me know where to send care packages. My sister used to send them to me all the time. I know what a difference they make." She shoved her body into pants and a shirt, blinking back tears. Stupid. So stupid. What was the matter with her? She forced a smile on her face and turned to look at him.

He stared back at her, frowning. "I'll appreciate the care packages, believe me, but just being able to talk to you would be awesome." He looked away briefly. "I mean I'd like to keep in touch and maybe see you again when my tour is done. I know that's a lot to ask," he added quickly. "We haven't known each other long and there'll be lots of other guys who'll ask you out. I'm just hoping, that's all."

Stunned and confused, Grace grabbed her hair brush. With harsh strokes, she took out tangles and braided her wet hair. She couldn't look at him and wasn't sure how to respond.

"Grace? Say something, please."

She turned to face him. His feelings were plain to see on his face. It didn't mean anything. He was caught up in the moment. She had fulfilled his biggest sex fantasy. His hormones and maybe some sense of gentlemanliness were putting words in his mouth. Once he was back on base, among his peers, he'd see things differently.

"I've had a wonderful time with you, Mark." Her chest was so tight she could barely get the words out. "But we need to keep this in perspective."

"Shit," he said quietly. Closing his eyes briefly, he laid back down.

"No," she hastened to ease his upset. "Don't feel bad. I'm trying to be the realistic one here. I am older and I need to be rational about this."

"Fuck that." His soft tone took the edge off his words, but the bitterness underscored them nevertheless. "I don't care about your age."

Grace shoved on shoes. She was going to be late for work. She had not intended to have this talk until later. It was for the best, she supposed. "You will care about it eventually. You'll come back and start thinking about the future, about getting married and having children. You'll need a younger woman for that."

"I'm not even sure I want to have kids, but are you saying you can't have them?"

"Technically I can, but the odds at my age, the odds for the age I'll be at the time we could even begin to consider something like that? Not so good."

"Well, damn it, Grace, I'm not proposing. I want to see you again, is all. Can't we just see where this may lead?"

She shook her head and grabbed her purse. "I can't see stringing either of us along when it's most likely a no-go in the long run. It's foolish. Look, I'm sorry. I have to get to work."

“Okay. We’ll talk about this later when I pick you up.”

She stopped at the doorway and took a deep breath. This was hard, horribly hard, harder than what she had done to earn that bronze star. “I don’t think you should. I think it’s best if we say goodbye now. You only have a couple of days left anyway.”

He shot up and made to get out of bed. “No!”

Holding up her hand, she said, “Yes.” Her tone was firm, final. She waited for his acquiescence.

The hurt she caused him was plain to see. His gaze was set firmly at a point beyond her, his jaw locked in a grimace. After a few tense seconds, he gave in. “Whatever you say, ma’am.”

Not trusting her voice, Grace turned and walked away.

\* \* \* \* \*

Grace shifted a bag of groceries and opened up her apartment door. Not having Mark with her made everything quiet and lonely. Work had dragged on, too, without the prospect of seeing him. Damn, how had things gotten so out of hand? She needed to pull herself together and put the hot young man out of her mind. He was not for her. He was never going to be for her. She shouldn’t have lost sight of that obvious fact. Entering her place, she didn’t bother to shut the door because she heard Danny opening his. Great, that’s all she needed, a tongue-lashing from her friend.

“Where’s G.I. Joe?”

Grace closed her eyes and prayed for patience. “I have no idea,” she replied pulling her meager food out of the bag.

Danny propped himself against the kitchen counter. “Don’t tell me you had a fight.”

She shrugged. “Not so much a fight as a reality check.” When Danny raised his eyebrows at her, she explained. “He wanted to keep in touch and see each other again when he got back.”

"The bastard!"

Smiling despite her misery, she gave her friend the details he was looking for. "I reminded him of the folly of staying together long term. Our age difference could survive a fling, but happily ever after?" She shook head and shoved the last of the groceries into the refrigerator. There was still some beer in there, beer she had bought for the first date only because Danny had insisted. In the days that followed, she had been glad to have it for Mark and had tried to enjoy it herself. Now it would sit untouched, a reminder of her time with him. "You should take the beer with you."

Danny followed her into the living room and flopped down on the couch beside her. "You're being an idiot, you know."

"I'm being realistic. I know this is not one of my erotic romance stories. This is real life. Once Mark is back among people closer to his own age, he will realize for himself that it won't work between us."

"Yeah, because he spent his leave in the retirement village known as the City of Boston and you happened to be the youngest piece of ass he could hook up with." She blinked at him. What was he talking about? Danny sighed. "See, your problem is that you forget he was hanging with his age-appropriate friend already and that they were perfectly capable of prowling for hot, young things. And yet, he asked you out. It says something about the two of you."

Grace opened her mouth to argue. The phone rang, taking her attention instead. She got up to see the caller ID and groaned. It was Aaron. Just what she needed. Then she realized, that *was* just what she needed. Aaron, sensible, safe Aaron, man who already fitted neatly into her life. She picked up the phone. "Hi Aaron."

"Hey, hi Grace." Her brother-in-law sounded happy she'd answered. "I'm glad I caught you."

"I just got home from my shift." Turning her back on Danny and his face of horror, she said, "I'm sorry about missing out on dinner the other night."

"That's okay, I know you're busy. I was hoping for another chance tonight. Are you free?"

"Yes, I am, actually. I'd love to meet you for dinner."

"Wonderful. Let's say Cammy's in a half hour."

Grace closed her eyes. "Yes, great." There was a kick to her heart. She ignored it. "See you in a bit."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark used his key to let himself into Sean's apartment. He had pizza and cola in the hope of keeping his friend inside and sober that night. He knew it was a long shot, but hell, what else was there for him to do? Grace. Shit, lovely Grace had kicked him in the balls in the nicest possible way of course. He felt kind of like he had after reading Meghan's Dear John email, a little sick, a little lost. It was stupid of him given how little time he had spent with this woman. They hadn't been going out for years or even weeks. It had only been a week really, hardly enough time to hurt as much as it did. If he had only kept his mouth shut, he could be with her now. Then he could have kept up with her by email and maybe she'd be so taken with him by the end of his deployment, she'd have welcomed him back. Maybe. It was too late now.

"Sean?" he called out, putting the food on the kitchen counter. Man, it was hot in the tiny apartment even with the window wide open. "Dude, where are you? I have pizza." Knocking on the bedroom door, he peered in and saw nothing but the unmade bed that was always in that condition. A quick look in the bathroom came up empty, too. Crap, had Sean gone drinking already? Of course he had. It was dinner time.

There was a noise outside the window. Mark frowned and crossed the room. He stuck his head out to see what was out there and his heart stopped for a second before pounding back to life. "Holy fuck, what are you doing out here!"

Sean was sitting over the edge of the fire escape, a bottle of beer in his hand. When he turned, Mark could see his friend carried more than a drink. He had a pistol. The

seriousness of the situation sent Mark into high alert. At the same time, he knew he needed to keep it cool the same as he did in battle. He lowered his tone of voice. "Sean, what are you doing?"

"Thinking," his friend replied before taking a swig of the beer.

"Thinking? Well, why don't you come inside and we can think together without the gun."

"Naw, the gun is part of the thinking."

Mark took a deep breath. "Dude, you are seriously freaking me out here. Please come inside."

Sean shook his head and stared straight ahead. "Go away, Mark. Go fuck your cougar pussy. This doesn't concern you."

Ignoring the slam at Grace, Mark searched desperately for the right words. "This does concern me. You're my friend, Sean. I want to help. You can talk to me. I understand how you feel."

"No!" The shout made Mark jump. "You don't know," Sean continued in a quieter tone. "No one really knows, least of all a guy like you who always has his shit together."

Not always. Mark's shit was definitely not together at that moment. What the hell was he going to do? Call the police, he supposed. They had people trained to deal with suicides. "Okay, man, chill out. I'm leaving."

Sean turned to look at him. His expression was fierce. "Don't call the cops on me. Right now I'm just thinking. I hear or see cops and I'm going to stop thinking. You understand me."

Holding his hands up, Mark said, "I understand. I promise I won't call the cops." He pulled his head back inside the apartment and took his phone out of his pocket. No cops, but he needed help. There was only one person he could think to call.



## **Chapter Six**

"How's your salad?" Aaron peered at Grace over his fork and smiled.

"It's very good," she lied. He was so happy to have her go out with him, she didn't want to spoil it. It wasn't a bad salad, really, and they were having a pleasant evening out. They had covered their respective jobs and how disappointed they both were about the girls electing to spend the summer working near their college. It was the usual stuff they talked about, nothing particularly interesting, yet easy.

"You know, I was thinking maybe we could take a week in August and go visit the girls." He looked at her hopefully. Danny was right. Aaron was a handsome man with curly dark hair with a touch of grey. He was shorter and beefier than she liked, but virile in his own way. If she put a little effort into it, she could enjoy sleeping with him. Couldn't she?

"Oh," she hedged, not ready yet to make a decision. "I'll have to check my rotation schedule."

"Sure. Let me know and I'll take care of everything. This is all on me."

"Aaron, you don't have to pay my way."

"I want to. After all you've done for the girls and me, it's the least I can do."

She opened her mouth to argue and her phone rang. "Sorry, this could be a patient." Rummaging around in her bag, she found the phone and frowned at the number. Damn. She considered ignoring the call for about a second before caving. "Hi, Mark." Instinctively she turned away from Aaron. She didn't want him to see her expression.

"Grace, thank God. I wasn't sure you'd take my call."

His alarm was obvious. "What is it? What's the matter?"

"Sean's out on the fire escape, drinking and holding a pistol."

"What!" She stood up and slung her purse over her shoulder. "Have you called the police?"

"He said he'd off himself if I do. Grace, I'm scared shitless here. I don't know what to do."

"I'm on my way."

"Really?"

"Yes, of course. Sit tight and try not to do anything to antagonize him."

"Believe me I couldn't be sitting any tighter if I had tracers flying overhead. Thanks, Grace."

"I'll be there as soon as I can." Hanging up, she took a step toward the door before remembering where she was. "I'm sorry, Aaron, I have an emergency."

"Of course, don't worry about a thing. Should I come with you?"

"No," she called over her shoulder. "I'll call you later." She stopped and before she could think better of it, she turned back to him. "Aaron, you're a wonderful man. You should find someone to enjoy the rest of your life with. Mary would want you to. You don't have to settle for what's comfortable."

*Neither do I*, she realized as she rushed to Mark.

\* \* \* \* \*

Grace flew through the front door of Sean's building and sprinted up the steps. The guy lived on the third floor, which meant he had a likely killing distance if he jumped. She didn't have to call or knock because Mark was waiting for her at the open door of the apartment.

"I was listening for you. That was fast."

"I got lucky with the cab." They were both speaking softly. She jerked her chin toward the window. "Out there?" When he nodded, she dropped her bag down on the

couch and took a deep breath. "Okay, I'm going to see if I can talk to him. You need to call the police."

"I promised I wouldn't."

When she simply stared back at him with her eyebrows raised, he said, "Right, I'll call the police. Good luck and thanks again. I didn't know who else to turn to. Sean's family doesn't get him."

She put her hand on his arm and the warmth of his skin did wonders to calm her nerves. He was strong and it made her feel safe and strong in return. "I'm glad you called me."

She went to the window and poked her head out. There was Sean draining a bottle and cradling his gun. He had a faraway look on his face. "Hi, Sean." She kept her voice as low and soothing as she could. The last thing she wanted to do was startle him off his perch.

"Go away," he ordered without even looking at her.

Flinging a leg over the sill, she straddled it to see him better and to talk more easily. She only had to keep him focused on her and not on killing himself long enough for the right professional to get there. "Sorry, Sean, but I'm too worried about you and so is Mark. You're freaking him out here."

Sean shrugged. "Sorry but I can't think about anyone but myself right now. Mark doesn't understand. He's like Mr. Perfect. Nothing gets to him."

"I doubt that. We all have different ways of dealing with the stress of combat. Maybe Mark is better at hiding what bothers him than we are."

"No offense, Doc, but you don't understand, either. Not like I do."

"Oh, really?" She was going with her gut, which was killing her, but her gut told her to open up. She had something to say that might help this man. It was probably long past time for her to talk about what bothered her, too. It was uncomfortable talking

about it in front of Mark, though. It shouldn't be considering what they had shared of themselves. But that had been about bodies and sex. This was far more intimate.

"I have a bronze star with a V Device." She said it as a matter of fact, not pride.

Sean snorted. "No way. You're a doctor. How'd you end up in battle?"

Grace closed her eyes briefly to gather her thoughts and courage. "My story's not remarkable. What happened to me happened to hundreds of other people. I was part of a small convoy heading out to a remote village to set up a one-day medical clinic. I was in the second vehicle and you know how it is. There's this interminable stretch of nothing, boring dusty nothing, and you get caught up in your own thoughts. Then it happens."

"I.E.D.," Sean said before she could. His voice was as dull as her trip had been until that moment.

"Yes. It was an improvised explosive device and it took out the first vehicle and part of mine. Then there was shouting and gunfire. One of the men in the vehicle in front survived the explosion, but as soon as he got out, he was cut down." She swallowed hard and forced herself to continue. "So, it was all this chaos and you freeze for a moment, not sure what to do. Then I grabbed my pack and jumped out, sure I was going to get hit. But by then, we were returning fire. The nurse with me was a young guy on his first tour. We got out on my side because it was the farthest from where the enemy was shooting. I could tell our driver and the man riding shotgun were hurt. We needed to get them out, but before we could, I saw the man who had been shot was still alive. He had crawled under the first vehicle."

The memories, and her emotions, the fear in particular, swamped her. She paused to catch a breath, pull herself together. Strong, warm fingers curled around the hand by her right side. She spared a glance in that direction and saw Mark kneeling by the window. He looked at her intently, nodded once in encouragement. Sean was looking at her now, too, instead of the street and his gun. His attention meant she had to

continue. The solid presence of Mark gave her the power to do so. She took a deep breath.

"I ran to him and the nurse followed. Together we pulled the guy up and carried him over to an outcrop of rocks. It wasn't much, but it afforded some cover. My nurse started working on the guy. When I looked back, I could see one of the injured men stir in the cab. Those two guys were sitting ducks where they were. Someone had to go back for them. Someone had to confirm, too, that the others were beyond help."

"You could have sent the nurse," Sean muttered.

"I could have." She shook her head. "He was so young and newly married, and Christ, there was a baby on the way. So I ordered him to stay put and I went back."

"Gutsy." This was Mark. She glanced at him and saw admiration in his gaze. She rolled her eyes at him.

"It's what I had to do. You do what you have to do."

"Yeah, that's the hell of it." It came out of Sean as more of a sob, but it showed he was listening. If he listened, hopefully he wouldn't jump or shoot.

She licked her lips and took another deep breath. "I checked first on the ones I thought were already dead. They were, poor bastards. I knew them both. Bullets hit close enough to feel the heat of them. I wanted to run. I wanted to cry. No time for that, so I ran to the guys who were still alive. The first one was tough but doable. He wasn't that tall or heavy. I had to carry him because he was unconscious. I can't describe how scared I was. I don't expect I have to."

"No, ma'am." Both men said it, Mark's voice barely a whisper.

"Anyway, I made it back to the rock, left him with the nurse and went back. The driver needed help too only he was this big, burly sergeant. Carrying the first guy had already wrenched my back as I would later realize. The big problem, however, was how I was going to get this second man out. I was pretty sure I couldn't carry him and dragging him was going to expose us both to greater danger."

"You did it." Mark's voice was louder this time. There was pride in his tone. She was afraid to look at him for fear of breaking into tears.

"Sort of. When I got back to the truck, I was able to pull him out and then by some miracle one of the guys returning fire made his way over to me and we both carried him. I was never so relieved in my life as to see that guy come up by my side."

She went silent, the memories barraging her faster and harder than she had even imagined they would. It wasn't clear she was doing any good, although Sean at least was still listening. In the distance, she heard sirens. Help was on its way. She had to keep him distracted enough not to make good on his threat to Mark.

"I'm sorry, I'm not telling the whole truth."

Sean squinted at her. "Yeah?"

She kept her focus on him, but Mark squeezed her hand. He was giving her his total support. "Yeah, see the guy who came to help did all the carrying. He gave me his M16 so that I could cover him while he hauled the injured man to safety. At first I fired at nothing in particular, just creating noise and distraction. Then a group of insurgents broke past the truck and headed toward us."

"How many did you kill?" Sean's question was blunt. His tone weary.

Grace's sigh was weary, too. Mark's warm, firm lips pressed a kiss into her palm. It calmed her and helped her continue in her effort to distract Sean. She heard doors shutting and footsteps from around the building. Any minute now and her job would be done. "I don't know. Four," she amended. Continuing to lie to him was hardly going to help the situation.

"Do you see their faces at night?"

"Sometimes, but the thing that really gives me nightmares is how close I came to not being able to save that second man. In my dreams, no one comes to help and I try and I fail." She stole another glance at Mark. His expression was sympathetic and encouraging. She bathed in the sight for long seconds, the memories of her experience not so bad when she had his support.

"You're afraid you're going to screw up, let people down, your combat brothers and sisters, your family. You can't handle the pressure." Tears ran down Sean's face. "It never goes away. The fear never goes away."

"It helps to talk about it. I've said that a million times to others but this is the first time I've taken the advice myself. Thank you, Sean." She meant it. She turned to Mark and mouthed "thank you" to him too.

"I want the fear to go away." The guy was crying in earnest now. The bottle slipped from his grip and shattered below. There was the sound of running feet.

"Sean, there is help. Please put the gun down and come inside."

She didn't think he was going to do it, and then he did. Putting the gun on the fire escape, Sean crawled over to her. She climbed back into the room and was enveloped instantly by Mark's arms. As safe and wonderful it was, she understood when he let her go and hugged his friend close as soon as Sean was inside. The two men collapsed on the floor, Sean clinging to Mark, sobbing.

Mark looked up at Grace. There were tears in his eyes, as well, and something else. He was looking at her with love.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark sat in the waiting room, sipping a cola to steady his nerves. Images of the past few hours of his life kept flashing by. He tried to concentrate on the most important ones, the ones featuring Grace. She was helping to admit Sean temporarily to the psychiatric unit of her hospital. She had advised him to go home because it could take a while, and he had politely said "no fucking way". He was not going without her and where would he go anyway, back to Sean's? Yeah that's where he wanted to be, the place where he had almost seen his friend die and where he had heard the woman he was falling in love with bare her soul.

In truth, though, the second part he didn't mind. He only regretted that it took an extreme situation to get her to open up and that while she had included him in the

telling, she hadn't been comfortable enough to tell him directly. There wasn't enough time, is all. If he had all the time in the world to spend with her, he was sure he could convince her they were good together. The age difference didn't matter. He wanted Grace. He needed Grace, and if what he had left with her was a couple more days, he'd take it. He'd convince her to take him back until his leave was up. If he had to beg, he'd beg. He would even play the "my best friend just tried to kill himself" card. And, yeah he was desperate, a man who was about to lose the woman he was falling in love with.

"Mark."

Engrossed in his thoughts, he had missed Grace's approach. He jumped up. "Hey, how's Sean?" She looked tired, but she was smiling.

"He's sedated. I've made arrangements for him to be transferred tomorrow morning to the VA hospital. His family's on their way. I think they finally understand how serious this all is and how much help he needs."

"Thank you. I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't been there."

She waved him away. "I'm glad I could help. I have to admit all of this helped me, too."

Mark nodded. "Getting stuff out is good. I knew you held something inside about how you earned the medal. I had no idea it was so rough."

"I don't think I really appreciated how much it bothered me, either. It was easy to brush aside the nightmares in the cold light of day. I had so much else to worry about, I kept burying it deeper and deeper."

She took a quick, harsh breath and moved closer to him. She clasped her hand in his and looked deeply into his eyes. The intensity of her gaze took his own breath away. "There's another reason why this whole thing helped me. It made me realize how much you matter to me. I thought I could have a nice, no-strings fling with a gorgeous younger man. I thought of it as my last hurrah before settling down for the rest of my life with someone safe that I don't love. I was wrong. At least my heart tells me I was wrong."



His breath came back in a whoosh. Raising both their hands, he kissed the back of hers, his gaze never leaving her face. "I want to say something here, but I'm terrified of saying the wrong thing, of pushing you away again."

She chuckled. "You can't. I promise you can't. I'm not sure if what I feel is love. I'm not sure we have a future together, age notwithstanding. There hasn't been enough time."

"Time doesn't always matter."

"No, not always. Still, we only have a couple of days and then you're gone. It will likely be a year or more before we see each other again. So why don't we take the days we have and see how it goes."

Mark didn't answer. He didn't think he needed to. This had been his plan all along. Instead of saying anything, he pulled Grace into his arms and kissed her long and slow. When they broke, he pressed his mouth to her ear. "You up for a list item?" When she nodded, he asked, "Know any closets close by?"

She gasped, but then she broke away from him, and tugging him by the hand, brought him around the corner and through a door. As soon as it was shut again, they were in near total darkness. Perfect. "Sorry, sweetheart," he whispered. "I need fast."

He needed fast? Well, so did she. Grace nearly giggled with delight as Mark spun her around and pressed her against the wall of the utility closet. She stayed where he put her and heard the rustling of clothes, heard the crinkle of a condom wrapper. Then his hands were on her, unbuttoning her pants, exposing her aroused bottom to the air. His fingers probed her labia, ran circles around her already wet clit. She gasped in pleasure when his cock entered her in one hard thrust. Her arms braced against the wall, she pushed back as he surged forward. He wrapped his arm around her firmly to hold her against him while his finger and thumb pinched her plump nipple through her shirt. As she writhed against his hold, he continued to set the wild pace, his fingers working her clit to a fury. His teeth sunk into the back of her neck while his body

bucked harder, faster. He growled into her skin and her harsh breaths filled the small room. She wanted to shout as the climax overtook her. The need for quiet made the wave of pleasure all the more intense. Her body thrashed against her lover's, his embrace tightening as tremors racked him.

When it was over, when the last of their pleasure rumbled through their bodies, Mark held her tight against his chest until their breathing evened out. Then he redressed them both, and checking through a crack in the door, led her back out to the empty hallway.

She looked at him wide-eyed. "Wow, I'd really like to get a look at that list of yours."

He pulled her in for another quick kiss. "I promise to email it to you, one item at a time. And when I'm back, we can start checking them off one by one. I bet you have a list, too. We should start that one first."

Grace smiled and wrapped her arms around her soldier. "We already did the moment I met you."

Hey, Cougars. I'm sniffing over my keyboard. Mark left today. I gave him one hell of a send-off! I'm going to worry about him. I'm going to worry about us, too, and maybe he isn't the "one". If it doesn't work, though, I'm not going to blame it on age. I'm over that bull. We need to spread the word. Cougars of the world, take the challenge! You won't regret it.

Grace

It sounds like he might be the "one". But no matter what, he's important to you. So worry all you want, and come here for moral support. Send him lots of care packages with naughty letters. I'd want that if I were a soldier. Hmm, actually I want that anyway. Off to call my man.

Monica

Nobody knows what the future is going to bring. You have now, and now is pretty damn good. All you can do is enjoy the time you can carve with emails and letters, and hopefully a

phone call or two, and then take it from there when he comes home. Oh, and when you come up for air, Kevin and I would love to have the two of you over for dinner.

I'm so proud of you for taking the risk with Mark. This is the biggest, best "told you so" I've ever had the pleasure of yelling from a rooftop. Please give him our best, or better yet, give us his addy to send some care packages.

Elizabeth

## About the Author

Samantha Cayto is a Boston-area native who practices as a business lawyer by day while writing erotic romance at night—the steamier the better. She likes to push the envelope when it comes to writing about passion and is delighted other women agree that guy-on-guy sex is the hottest ever.

She lives a typical suburban life with her husband, three kids and four dogs. Her children don't understand why they can't read what she writes, but her husband is always willing to lend her a hand—and anything else—when she needs to choreograph a scene.

She is a member of the Romance Writers of America and the New England Chapter and credits RWA, NEC and the wonderful friends she's made there with helping her become a published author.

Samantha welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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