

A photograph of a shirtless man's torso and upper arms. He is wearing a silver chain necklace with two dog tags. The background is a blurred outdoor scene with water and trees. The title 'Raven and Colby' is written in a large, black, cursive font across the upper right portion of the image. The author's name 'Stephanie Vaughan' is written in a smaller, black, cursive font at the bottom right.

Raven

and
Colby

Stephanie Vaughan

Raven & Colby

by Stephanie Vaughan

Raven & Colby - An Explanation

8/3/2002

A few months ago Raven challenged someone to write a story about her as a romantic heroine. Words to the effect that she was too sarcastic and cynical to ever be in a romance novel. Someone wrote the first chapter and Marianne wrote the second. Months have gone by and no more has appeared on their story. Until now.

Last night in the chat room I told Raven I knew what had happened and promised to write it down.

Here is chapter 3 of "Raven & Colby":

Chapter Three

"Nice bitch."

The words intruded into her reverie. Raven was walking lazily through the park, her neighbor's dog on a leash, enjoying the cooling of the afternoon air. Not a 'dog person' by any stretch of the imagination, she'd nonetheless agreed to give the poor dog some exercise while her neighbor was out of town at a funeral. The dog, a solid-looking 95 lb. female Rottweiler looked a bit taken aback at being caught unaware by a stranger and shot Raven a look indicating it was all her fault.

"Which one?" Raven quipped back. If the dog was startled, it was nothing compared to the head-to-foot astonishment she was feeling. There he was. Every 6'2" gorgeous inch of SEAL manliness that he was. She'd thought of him so often in the last few months that she'd begun to wonder if anyone else would ever appeal to her again. Thought of him and wondered where he'd gone.

"Yeah, I guess I deserved that," Colby replied. "Hey, I'm sorry I didn't get the chance to say good-bye. But that's how it is. I got the call and we were wheels-up in three hours."

When Raven had last seen Colby it had been a rainy day in February. He'd brought her flowers, done a bang-up impression of Gene Kelly and danced in the rain for her. Oh yeah, and kissed the living daylights out of her. Thinking about it now, she could still remember the incredible jolt of electricity that had rocketed through her body when their mouths had met. And the amazing sense of rightness when he'd held her in his arms.

But then his cell phone had rung. He'd answered it, nodded and grunted a few phrases back at the caller and told her he had to go. He'd taken her by the shoulders, gazed into her eyes for several long seconds and said "I'll call you. I mean it. Wait for me." And, like the world-class dope that she was, she had. She just hadn't realized he'd meant for five months.

"And I don't suppose they let you use the pay phone on the corner, wherever it was they sent you?"

He took her by the shoulders and looked deeply into her eyes and it was as though it was only yesterday he'd done the same thing. "No. They didn't. And you don't know how it was killing me that I couldn't."

She gazed back into the crystal perfectness of his beautiful blue eyes and thought what an incredible, stupendous, Guinness World Record moron she must be.

Because when she looked into his eyes and saw his soul looking back at her. . . she didn't care.

She didn't care that he'd been gone for five, hellacious, spirit-killing months. She didn't care that she'd had personal crises of every shape and description and no one to talk to about it. She didn't care that he'd left her hanging and doubting her own appeal, that someone she'd thought she'd connected with on such a profound level could leave without even the courtesy of a telephone call.

Because when his eyes connected with hers and she could see everything he was right there for her to accept or reject – he was all that mattered. She groaned and reached for Colby, hugging him to her in an embrace that was half lover and half sheltering friend. 'When he takes me in his arms the world is bright, all right.' An old song her grandmother had played for her as a kid echoing through her head, she reached to pull his face down into a kiss and thought "Shades of Fanny Brice."

Chapter Four

Well thank God for forgiving women, was all Colby could think. When he'd approached Raven he'd had no idea what his reception would be. A cold stare and a determined walk in the opposite direction wouldn't have been out of line. He wouldn't put it past her to wind up and slug him one — she was that kind of girl. Colby could tell just by looking at her that she didn't take anybody's crap. So why she'd taken his and bought his sorry-ass excuse for an apology was beyond him.

He'd been dying to see Raven from the moment he got back. Hell, the entire time he'd been gone--okay from the second he'd left her. It had damn near killed him to have to leave her like he had, her hands in her pockets and a kiss-my-ass curve to her gorgeous lips.

The call from his Chief had come just as things were beginning to get interesting with Raven. He'd had no idea when he'd answered his cell phone that what he'd thought would be a short training op had turned out to be five long months in a seriously messed-up corner of the world. And for the first time since he'd joined the teams, he'd spent his down time on the op thinking about home.

What *was* it about this woman that got to him, so deep, so quickly? He'd thought it was the challenge, at first. That, and the killer body with the legs up to there. But at odd moments he'd found himself thinking of how Raven's eyes got soft when she'd thought he wasn't looking and slipped that homeless guy a buck. Or the wistful set of her mouth when she'd tossed the last of her sandwich to a feral cat. Nah, obsessing about feminine body parts still counted as legit guy activities. He was okay — he wasn't too far-gone.

And with that thought happily in mind, Colby devoted himself to impressing Raven with the sincerity of his feelings by doing his best to inhale her, starting with her mouth. He tilted his head a little to improve the angle and began by sucking her lower lip gently into his mouth. He tugged lightly at the lip, toying with her by using his tongue to make darting forays into her mouth. Colby knew he was impressing her when she slid her hands into the back pockets of his jeans and squeezed.

Chapter Five

As she slid her hands into the pockets of his jeans, the last two working neurons in Raven's brain tried to form the thought that this must be her reward for living a long and otherwise blameless life. The firm muscle beneath the denim bunched in reaction, causing her to reposition her hands deeper in the pockets. Colby responded by dropping one arm beneath her butt and lifting her at the same time, reversing their positions and crowding her against a tree.

"What was that?" Raven asked, pulling her head away.

"What?"

"*What*", nothing. You know what. That little groan-thing you did."

"Trust me, it was nothing."

As much as she hated the turn the conversation was taking, some piece of her psyche no doubt determined to sabotage any potential she had for any happiness whatsoever made her ask, "You would tell me if you were hurt, wouldn't you?"

"It's no big deal," Colby responded. "Look, could we talk about something else? Like what we were doing two seconds ago?"

"What happened?" Raven pressed. "Were you hurt on the op? Is it 'Top Secret' — like *'I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you, babe?'* "

Like most times in life, her best impulses had not gotten her the desired results. She'd apparently succeeded in killing the romantic mood because Colby set her down and looked away, expelling a frustrated breath. "I'm trying to impress you here. It's just a tweaked ankle, and I was hoping I could get away without having to explain that I did it jumping out of the helicopter. After we'd gotten home."

"Oh. Well, does it hurt? Because I could massage it for you. I know what I'm doing. I used to watch 'E.R.' a lot. " Raven hoped he somehow wasn't listening to the gibberish coming out of her mouth. She hadn't heard dialog this lame since she'd done her sister a favor and taken her nephew to see the Pokemon movie. The truth was, she was rattled. The depth of her response to this incredible-looking man had made her edgy from the first.

She could understand *her* response: He was a certified American capital-H hero, who also just happened to look like Brad Pitt-meets-Troy Aikman-on-a-good-day-in-the-body-of-The Rock. He'd had her hormones begging for mercy practically from the minute they'd met. And, knowing what she did about what it took to be a Navy SEAL, she knew he had to be more than just a little bit 'smarter than the average bear'. What she didn't understand was how he could possibly be interested in her: Raven McKnight--small-town propeller-head.

No doubt being punished for sins in a previous existence, it was her fate that when the Karmic drop-zone had opened up she'd landed in Pendleton, Oregon. Her hometown's number one brag in the tourism brochures read "Equidistant to Portland, Oregon, Seattle, Washington, and Boise, Idaho." Yes, folks--born in a city world-famous for making blankets. And just to push the geek-quotient that little bit over the top, she loved computers. She would have moved north to Seattle or south to the Silicon Valley in a heartbeat, if her loving-if-hopelessly-dysfunctional family didn't need her to hold things together here.

Colby slid his hands up her arms, gripping Raven lightly above the elbows and shook his head. "Oh no you don't. Don't think I haven't heard that tune a time or two-hundred," he said, a small grin forming at one corner of his mouth.

Raven's brain was beginning to function at something close to normal again, but she still had no idea what he was talking about. "Excuse me?"

"It's all about seeing the Freddie Frog, isn't it?"

Chapter Six

“Freddie Frog?”

“Yeah. The ladies always want to see my Freddie.” Colby could tell by the slight narrowing of Raven’s eyes that she was aiming a good one in his direction.

“You know, I’d always heard that some guys like to give it a name, but I never really believed it.” She paused. “But is the reason why true, do you think?”

He raised an eyebrow and said nothing – waiting.

“Because they don’t want their major decisions made by a total stranger?” she answered, finally.

Colby fought hard to keep the belly laugh he was feeling from escaping. It wouldn’t do to let Raven know how completely delighted he was with her. He was relieved to see some of the feistiness that had so attracted him coming back into her manner. When she had reached out her arms in that first embrace, there had been a quality of resignation – defeat almost – in her eyes that had worried him.

What if something had happened during the time he had been gone to shake her confidence? What if some loser Oregon homeboy had gotten to her? Led her on? Broken her heart, even, before he had a chance to . . . To what? Get to her? Lead her on and break her heart himself? Suddenly he was having no trouble stifling his laughter. Yeah, like he was all that and a bag of chips.

“No,” he said, sobered. “A Freddie Frog is a tattoo. It’s old school, but a lot of guys get them after they qualify. It’s kind of a tradition that started with the UDT guys. I guess I’m a traditional kind of guy at heart.” He wondered where that particular bit of nostalgia had come from? It certainly wasn’t his usual rejoinder to a blue joke told by an attractive woman he was hoping to talk into bed.

“ ‘On her back is The Battle of Waterloo.
Beside it, The Wreck of the Hesperus too.
And proudly above waves the red, white, and blue. . . ’ she sang softly, a wicked twinkle in her eyes.

“No? Not a Marx Brothers fan?” she asked. And after a long, considering pause, “So if I can guess where it is, do I get to see it?”

“No, you don’t get to see it. And not only don’t you get to see it – you owe me a

dollar," he said, unable to resist the urge to yank her chain a little bit.

"It feels like I'm in a Marx Brothers movie. And I owe you a dollar why?"

"Because I totally called it. Admit it: This was all about seeing my Freddie. A couple of smokin' hot kisses, a little butt massage, and you think I'll just be on my knees for you? Don't you?" Colby watched Raven's face and waited for the fireworks.

Sure enough, he could see the steam building. He watched the flush rise slowly in her face and just as he saw her draw breath to cut him into tiny little pieces, he sank slowly to his knees in front of her. He grasped her lightly by the hips and, watched her eyes as he leaned slowly forward and placed a reverent kiss square on the front of her Levi button-flies. "Well you'd be right."

Chapter Seven

Raven felt a jolt of electricity shoot through her that instantly stopped all thinking processes in their tracks. Her body felt as though it were simultaneously melting, and bursting with energy. Her skin felt tight and so sensitive that she could imagine herself reduced to a boneless puddle at Colby's feet by his slightest touch.

She reached out to brace herself against his shoulders because those neon blue eyes were fixed on her with an intensity that drew her down to him. His mouth beckoned and her answer was as automatic and unplanned as her next breath. She slid down to meet his mouth and found herself sitting in his lap, legs spread to either side of his body. Her lower body aligned with his as though by prior agreement and she pressed herself down on him as her body did its best to fuse to his. She rocked her hips forward as her mouth found his in a blazing kiss.

She slowly became aware of a low, animal growl penetrating her consciousness and it took Raven several moments to realize it wasn't coming from either herself or Colby. It was coming from the Rottweiler as she placed herself between Raven and Colby and the man who, judging by the tan and green uniform he wore, appeared to be a park ranger. The ranger cleared his throat, obviously not for the first time, and said, "I'm sorry folks, but you're going to have to take that somewhere else. This is a PG-rated park and that looks to be an R-rated rendezvous." He softened his words with a sympathetic smile that told her this man remembered what it was like to be young.

Raven tried hard to gather any thoughts that didn't directly relate to Colby and her being bare-butt-naked and picking things up where they'd left off. The sight of him on his knees in front of her and the feel of those strong hands on her body were burned into her brain with laser-beam precision. Instead of making polite conversation, her mind strayed instead to thoughts of recreating the kiss, possibly finding a few variations on it, and *definitely* reciprocating – without the annoying presence of clothing.

Colby helped Raven to her feet and hugged her close to his side, while she tried not to be annoyed with how matter-of-fact his manner was. He was either incredibly cool under fire or this wasn't an unusual occurrence for him. She preferred to think it was his SEAL training that allowed him to appear cool and calm in the face of what she sincerely hoped was a raging hard-on. Personally, she could barely stand she was so aroused. But thank God one of them was able to string a coherent sentence together and, hopefully, hurry the ranger on his way.

"You're right, officer. We're old enough to know better. But I've been gone for five months and she wasn't expecting me. It's my fault for surprising her." Colby paused and she heard a conspiratorial note creep into his voice. "She's part Italian and after five months without, she's needing it *bad*," he concluded.

Chapter Eight

"That's right, sailor. I am so ready to take you home." Raven leaned into Colby's embrace, cupped him lightly through his jeans and tried for her best sex-kitten pout. Revenge, she'd always heard, was a dish best served cold. "And baby, if it takes me talking like Elvis for you to get off you know I will." After a brief pause for effect she continued: "I think you ripped your 'Priscilla' nightie last time, though. Will you be o.k. without it just this once?"

Raven thought she had a pretty good idea of how Colby would react. But a man's got to know his limitations. It was time to establish some boundaries.

Not missing a beat, in a surprisingly good Elvis baritone he said, "Tha's okay, baby. Long as you got them little white cotton panties you know I like. We'll improvise."

Raven shook her head in defeat. She looked around for the Ranger, who was no doubt long gone. Well, damn

if that didn't take half the fun out of nailing his hide to the wall – losing her audience, and all. Smarter than the average bear, indeed. He'd taken her shot and flung it right back at her. She hated to admit it, but there was something stimulating about trading verbal jabs with a man she was intensely attracted to.

Colby reached for her hand as he nodded at the dog, who was resting comfortably again under the shade of the tree he'd so recently had her backed up against. "Will Mutley there go in the back of my truck?" he asked, dropping the Elvis accent.

"She's a Maggie, not a Mutley, and she rides inside with us."

"Okay. But she's not riding in the front seat and I draw the line at putting a seat-belt on her."

"I don't know if I can be involved with an animal-hater."

"She's adorable. Cute as a bug's ear. I like her almost as much as I like you. Where can we drop her off?"

"How do you know she's not mine?"

Maybe I got a dog for protection since you saw me. A single woman living alone can't be too careful," she added, giving him a meaningful once-over.

"'Single woman living alone.' Yeah. That'll work. Let's go," he said, once again taking her hand and heading toward the parking lot of the park.

"So that's it? 'Let's go to your place and knock it out?'"

"Heck no. I'm not a pig--I'll buy you dinner first. You hungry? Do you like Thai food? I've had such a jones for Thai since I got back," he said, apparently warming to the idea of food. "Excellent suggestion. Food first -- then head-banging, head-board rattling sex."

Raven nearly swallowed her teeth and tried desperately to scrounge up a protest. But she couldn't seem to make her lips and brain form the words. Maybe because it so perfectly mirrored her desires. She wondered if there was such a thing as adrenaline whip-lash? He'd been pushing her buttons like an accountant on April 15th and she really thought she just might have a breakdown right there in the middle of the parking lot.

They were almost to a black truck she recognized as the same one she'd seen him use to leave her five months ago. "So what are we doing with the dog?" He squinted at her. "You don't get off on having her watch, or anything, do you? I mean, whatever floats your boat, I guess. But I'm going to vote 'no' --unless that's your deal-breaker."

Something in her snapped and now it was her turn to take him by the arms and back him up against something. "Colby, what's going on here? I need to know. Are you playing with me?" Things were moving pretty darn fast for this small-town girl. As attracted as she was, she needed to hear. . . something. She wasn't sure what the magic words were. She just knew that her heart would recognize them.

He took her face in his hands and gave her a surprisingly sweet kiss. "I'm not playing here."

Chapter Nine

"I'm not playing here, Raven," Colby repeated. "This makes the first time I've been home twice in the same calendar year since I joined the teams. My mom nearly dropped her casserole when I showed up on her doorstep today. I usually try to make it home in February because Mom and Dad both have birthdays that month. So it totally fried her circuits that I'm here in August, too."

"You're making that up," Raven responded slowly, as though testing him. "She didn't really drop her casserole." She paused. "You probably don't even have a mom and dad."

Trying not to let it show that that last remark had stung a little, Colby replied, "What do you think—I was hatched from an egg? Of course I have a mom and dad: Luther and Lorraine Denbow. Two older sisters and a younger brother. Would you like to meet them? Except for my little brother Eric, they all live in Pendleton. Or close enough. What do you say—want to go meet my family?"

Holy mother of God, what had he just committed himself to? He'd meant to segue smoothly into luring her to his favorite little Thai restaurant—the one with the dim lighting and the long tablecloths. But inviting her home to meet the family? Even beyond the prospect of raising expectations that a little stunt like that was sure to, Luther would have her heading for a double round of Jungian throw-down in under twenty minutes. He loved the old lunatic, but he'd built up a tolerance to him through twenty-eight years of dealing with him. 'Eccentric' was way too small a label to cover the magnitude of Luther's battiness. And his sisters were no walk in the park either. Throw in boy-genius Eric, and Mom was pretty much their sole entry in the 'normal' category, come to think of it.

He'd never invited a woman home to meet the family before, so he wasn't sure quite what he'd expected. But the indignant look that came over Raven's face didn't prepare him for what came next.

"Heck, no. I'm not up to a grilling right now. Your mom would start asking questions and pretty soon she'd have it out of me that I lust after her baby boy. Moms don't want to hear that the woman their son has just brought home has recurring fantasies that Larry Flynt would like to hear about. They want to know what color eyes they can expect their grandchildren to have and whether or not she can balance a check book."

"Did you say 'fantasies'?"

"I believe I may have. Why?"

Why? Was she out of her mind? Didn't she realize that hearing those words was every *guy's* fantasy? Better even than 'I'm not wearing any panties'? Or his previous personal favorite 'I've got a twin sister who's a little kinky'? He knew he'd logged more than his share of fantasy hours thinking of Raven while he'd been in Afghanistan. In fact, the entire flight home had been devoted pretty exclusively to thoughts of seeing her again and what he hoped would come after. But to hear her confess that she'd been contemplating lewd acts with his naked body had him readier than a fourteen-year-old sleeping in the room next-door to his older sister's slumber party. And, while he might wish it wasn't true, he remembered *exactly* how that felt.

"No reason," he croaked. Actually, he was pretty damn proud of how relatively normal his voice sounded. Only an expert would have spotted the slight pitch-differential caused by tightened throat and jaw muscles. He was a professional, dammit. She had no idea how close to the edge he was.

"Are you feeling okay?" Raven asked. "Your voice sounds a little strange and I just realized it must be hours since you've eaten anything."

Down boy.

Chapter 10

One minute they'd been standing in the parking lot calmly discussing dinner, and the next thing Raven knew Colby was hustling her into the truck. They'd dropped Maggie the Rottweiler off at her home and were now pulling into another parking lot, this one in front of a small restaurant whose sign read "Thai & Thai – Restaurant and Food." As Colby held the door open for her, Raven couldn't help commenting on the unusual name. "Great name – I wonder how they came up with it?"

He flashed his beautiful grin at her and shrugged, "No idea."

As she tossed off the smart remark, it occurred to her that Colby didn't seem to mind her sarcastic streak. In fact, sick puppy that he was, he even seemed to enjoy it. Good thing, because she was tired of trying to disguise it. Not that she ever tried very hard or for very long. It was too much a part of who she was to change it. Periodically, though, she made an effort to soften her hard edges a little and swallow the smart remarks that came as naturally as breathing. She sometimes wondered if she was the result of a college fling her mom might have had with Dennis Miller. Other times, though, she was sure she channeled pure Denis Leary.

Colby placed his hand on her back as he held the restaurant door open for her and Raven felt a shiver run up her spine at the contact. Her scalp prickled and her neck hairs stood up as she was suddenly totally sexually aware of the man touching her so lightly. She looked up to see if Colby felt it too, and as their eyes met Raven felt her world narrow until all she could see was the burn in his amazing blue eyes. She saw his face come closer as though to kiss her and she was reaching up to meet him, when she heard a cheerful feminine voice call out from just over her shoulder, "Hey, Denbow. Is this still the only place you can think of to bring a woman? God, you're pathetic." The words were acerbic, but the smile was warm and genuine.

She saw his eyes close briefly before he looked up and responded, "Hey, yourself, Denbow. And you're right – I didn't realize how much the clientele had deteriorated since I was here last." She thought she detected a sigh in his voice but the woman, whoever she was, appeared delighted at the exchange.

"That's Doctor Denbow to you. Aren't you going to introduce me?"

Colby kept the arm that had cradled her so gently moments before wrapped around Raven's shoulder as he made the introductions. "Raven, this is my sister, Dr. Margaret Denbow. Denbow, this is Raven." Raven thought she caught a warning look shoot from Colby to his sister, but it was gone a heartbeat later.

Colby's sister offered her hand in a shake and said, "Nice to meet you, Raven. Most people call me Peggy. Except Junior, here. With him I insist on my full title." She was tall and auburn-haired, where Colby was all wheaten blonde. But the eyes and contours of the face betrayed a family resemblance.

"Well, don't let me hold up your dinner. I'm just picking up some take-out for Ed and me." She gave them both one last once-over and said, "You know, Raven, once you get past the facial tic and the Tourette's he's not such a bad guy." And with a good-natured wink, she was gone. A waitress came to lead them to a booth in the back and Raven swore she heard something bordering on the scatological about older sisters coming from the man following closely behind her.

Normally Phad Thai was one of her favorite ethnic meals. But as they ate, she realized that she was barely aware of the food in the usual sense. The sight of his big hands handling the chop sticks so deftly led her thoughts to other places those hands might go to work. And the sight of his strong white teeth biting cleanly through the noodles made her think of what she'd else like to see him biting. Who knew straight white teeth were such a turn-on? And his lips, my God, those lips were about to make her lose her mind. They looked moist and a little slippery and it took no great leap of imagination to imagine that they were moist from . . . oh, dear. Deep breaths here, Ravens. She could recall hearing eating being described as a sensual experience, but she'd simply never realized. As least as long as they were in a restaurant she could pass the drool off as part of the dining experience.

Raven ran her tongue slowly across her lips and imagined that the salty sauce from the noodles was really. . . Colby caught her gaze and the lazy smile curving his lips told her that she'd better never play cards with this man. He knew *exactly* what she was thinking. Or close e-damn-nough. "Not still hungry, are you?" he asked softly.

"Oh, yeah," she answered, equally softly. "I was just thinking: what's for dessert?"

Chapter 11

"Dessert? It's anything you want," Colby said. "You tell me." And then he waited. Christ, he hoped they weren't talking about food here. He knew with absolute certainty that he would explode if Raven wasn't thinking the same way he was about where this was going.

Not that there was a whole lot of conscious thought going on here. But he had slowly become aware during the course of their dinner that something had shifted inside him. He knew that he needed to get closer to Raven. He needed to get as close as it was possible to get to another person. He needed to get next to her. All over her. Inside of her. He needed to take her breath into his body, and to give her his. He needed to hear her heart beating, and know that he was responsible for the way it pounded. He needed to feel her wrapped around him until he was so deeply inside her that part of him remained and never left.

And why that didn't scare the holy hell out of him, he had no idea. He'd heard his dad say that when you met the right one, you knew it. Of course, Dad said a lot of things but Dad was nuts so he didn't always pay attention. How did he know if this was the one time his old man might have been right? Why in the *fuck* was he thinking about the old man at a time like this?

He saw Raven take a deep breath, look down, look back up at him. He couldn't help notice what that deep breath did for the front of her white knit shirt and the hint of cleavage he could see there. Sweet boneless Christ, were those nipples standing up and waving at him? *Come to Papa, you sweet things*. Oh man, if they were any more perfect he'd have them bronzed. He had big hands, but Raven's breasts looked like a perfect fit. It couldn't be coincidence that they each possessed two. More like Fate, he decided.

"Would you mind going back to my place?"

He heard the words and realized belatedly that her lips were moving. He shook his head and tried to focus. "Whatever you want, sw--, Raven."

He caught himself as he nearly called her 'sweetheart'. He wasn't sure, but he didn't want to mess up and piss her off by calling her a name she didn't appreciate. He was too far along here to risk a glass of water in the face. Or worse.

"What do you say we go back to my place? I've had a picture in my head for a long time now, and I'd like to check it against reality. If you don't mind?" she said, a little hesitation in her voice.

"Mind? Why would I mind? Just out of curiosity, can I ask what the picture is?"

The combination of sensuality with just a hint of shyness, as though she didn't do this everyday, was killing him. She was beyond adorable. How a woman this incredibly hot could *not* realize she had him at her complete mercy amazed him.

"You. In my bed. Naked, I think. Yeah, definitely naked."

He thought his heart just might have stopped for a second, there. "No. That would be okay with me. In fact, I have to confess I have a couple of mental pictures of my own I'd like to check." Going for broke here, he said, "Want to trade fantasies? You can go first."

Colby saw the way Raven's eyes narrowed a little and it was hard to tell, as dark as her eyes were, but he was pretty sure those pupils were dilating big-time. But there was no mistaking the 'I want to lap you up like sweet cream' smile that came to her lips.

"Oh, bay-be," The way she drew the word out nearly made him come in his jeans. "You're on."

Chapter Twelve

The occasional cars moving in the opposite direction cast light on Colby's face as he drove them across town, from "Thai and Thai – Restaurant & Food" toward her apartment. Raven watched the play of light and shadow over his beautiful features as he kept his eyes on the road and drove. She'd always been a sucker for high cheekbones. His nose was long and straight – the word 'elegant' came to mind--and she was somewhat surprised that it looked to be in original condition. She would have thought in his line of work that it would have been broken at least a couple of times. And his mouth, with its slightly fuller lower lip, looked made for sin.

As he drove his left hand held the wheel, left elbow draped negligently on the open window, while his right hand rested on her thigh. Granted, it didn't take much at this point, but he was taking her right to the edge by drawing light little circles in the denim covering her upper leg. First up and back, then around in a circle, then up and back again. The stroking seemed absent-minded, unconscious even, as though he was by nature a toucher. She was dying to be doing the same to him but, quite frankly, she didn't trust herself. She'd been dreaming about him for so long, that she was afraid once she started touching, she wouldn't be able to stop. He was everything she loved in a man in one amazing package and she was taking him home.

He glanced over at her. "You're awfully quiet. What are you thinking about?"

You. How much I want you. How incredibly hot you are and how good you make me feel. How I can't wait to get you home and get you out of those clothes.

"I was just thinking you got here on a good weekend. I've been buried in work the past couple of months, but I actually have a chance to catch my breath for a week or so before it gets crazy again. Except for a couple of part-time techs, you're looking at pretty much the entire Pendleton, Oregon Chamber of Commerce Information Technology department."

She knew she was babbling again, but the closer they got to her apartment, the more reality came crashing down on her. What if Colby suddenly came to his senses and realized that Raven McKnight, small town girl and geek extraordinaire wasn't what he wanted after all? What if he realized she simply was who she was and that there was nothing magical or special enough to interest him?

She also knew that, one way or another, her heart was in for a beating. There was just no way this could have a happy ending. He would come home with her

and make fabulous head-banging, headboard-rattling love to her. And then she'd probably do something stupendously, predictably stupid like fall in love with him--just in time to see him leave again. She had an instant picture of him trying to claw his way out her door as she clung, sobbing, to his jacket lapels. But before she could complete her minute-masterpiece of depression, they arrived at her apartment and Colby was holding her door open, smiling that smile at her that would melt Mother Theresa herself. Raven had a sudden flash of empathy for the Chinook salmon that still swam in the Umatilla River a couple of miles away. She knew she was doomed, but she couldn't stop herself.

"Hey, you." He drew her out of his truck and into his arms in one effortless move. His kiss went from sweet to down and dirty in a heartbeat-and-a-half and she went right along with it. "So about my fantasy. . . "

She fought her way back from the edge of insanity where he was doing wicked things to her throat with his kisses. "No way, buddy. It was agreed. I get to go first." She struggled a little to get the words out between gasps. Oh, that felt too good.

His hands were moving up her ribcage now, where they had no trouble staying anchored as his thumbs brushed gently over the tips of her breasts. Her nipples peaked as his thumbs returned again and again, lightly caressing her through the thin material.

"But my fantasy is easy: You and me, we're both naked, I'm inside you. You're hot and wet." He was grinding his crotch into hers now. "Ideally we're indoors, but it's not critical. Depends on you--I'm flexible. Sweet Jesus, I'm flexible."

And with that he picked her up and asked, "Which one?"

She clung stubbornly to her principle. "Mine first."

"No, which apartment's yours?" He was looking determined and more than a little urgent now.

"Twenty-two. On the end."

"Excellent," he grinned. "A noisy one, are you?"

"I'm gonna slug you." A thought occurred. "Hey, what about your ankle? That can't feel good."

“Where’s your keys? Give them to me. As a SEAL I’m trained to take care of the most immediate need first. And my need is immediate.”

He got her apartment door open and the two of them inside. “It’s all about priorities.” He quickly scanned her apartment and, apparently not finding what he was looking for, set her down on the small table next to the door and began fishing in his pocket.

Intuiting what he was searching for, Raven rummaged in her own pocket and came up with gold, but too late, as Colby covered himself with the condom he’d pulled from his own pocket.

Raven stifled a groan. “Oh, baby, I wanted to do that.”

“Next time.” He grunted, making short work of the snap on her navy shorts and pulling them off her. She lifted her bottom to help him and prayed that her little Duncan Phyfe table would hold.

Holding her hips in place, he kissed her again hard and thrust himself home.

Chapter Thirteen

"Raven, honey, you've gotta go easier on me next time."

They were lying on her couch — a seven-footer, thankfully — still wearing most of their clothes. He was completely clothed, albeit with pants loosened if not actually off, while Raven lay sprawled across his chest wearing only a shirt and some Nike cross-trainers. He couldn't get past the downy softness of her perfect ass. He ran his hands over it in a rhythmic back and forth motion. There was something incredibly soothing about it.

"Oh, yeah? I thought SEALs were America's most elite fighting force. Don't they keep you boys in any better shape than that?"

The words were sassy, but he noticed she didn't bother to open her eyes and she mumbled because her head was tucked under his chin. He couldn't wait to see her eyes again; so obsidian-dark they almost appeared black. Just as soon as his heart rate got back to normal. Jesus, it was like he was back attempting his first HALO — adrenaline pumping, his pulse going a mile a minute.

"The fact that I'm in such great shape's the only thing that saved me. You're hell on wheels, sweetheart." To hell with worrying about whether or not she minded being called 'sweetheart'. She'd just have to learn to deal with it.

"You think so? The Ranger down the hall never complains."

"Yeah? Well, tell him to get his pansy Ranger ass down here and let him prove it."

That got her eyes open and her head up.

"Oh, no you don't. No more of your fantasies until we've done at least one of mine."

"I guess you're right. Fair is fair. What did you have in mind?" Oh, man, it just kept getting better and better.

She sat up on his midsection, adjusted her shirt, and gave him a thoughtful look.

"Okay, seeing as how I was so rough on you last time, we'll make this an easy one. I want you to take off your shirt, slowly."

"That's it?"

"That's it. Just take off your shirt."

"My shirt?" Huh? Where was the fun in that?

"Yes, I'll just be sitting over there," She pointed at the little table they'd put to such good use a few minutes ago.

She climbed off his lap and tugged her shirt down, blocking his view of her world-class *derrière*. As she walked the few steps it took to get back to the table, she tossed a glance over her shoulder to make sure he was watching. As if he could take his eyes off of her.

She turned around and used her hands to boost herself up onto the table and gave a little gasp when the warm backside he so coveted connected with the cool marble top. She did a bad fake job of simulating discomfort before she said, "Could you give me just a second before you get started? I want to get comfortable here."

And with that she pulled her shirt up to her shoulders, pulling her arms out of the sleeves, but leaving the shirt in place around her neck. She ignored him completely while she paid excruciating attention to fumbling with the front clasp of her bra.

"Just let me know if you need some help. I'm pretty good with my hands."

He was glad *she* was getting comfortable. He was getting more uncomfortable by the moment. If his pants hadn't already been unzipped, he would have been tempted to loosen them more. For a man who had been completely sexually replete not five minutes ago, he was extremely interested in what was going on on the tabletop across the room.

"No. That's okay. It's being fussy. Oh, look—I've got it." And just like that he had a breath-taking view of full-frontal nudity that was definitely calendar quality. But, too quickly, she pulled the shirt back down. She let out a big fake-sigh. "Whew. Much better. Okay, you go ahead now. Shirt off, please. Slowly."

Colby hadn't made it through BUD/S and all the subsequent training it took to be a SEAL by avoiding challenges. It was all in your approach and your mental attitude. He was going to have some fun with this.

He brought his hands in from where they'd been lying loose at his sides, and rested them on the tops of his thighs. He made sure he had her attention before dragging them slowly up his legs until he could hook his thumbs briefly in the pockets of his jeans. He let his hands briefly frame his crotch, letting her see that she definitely had his attention.

He crossed his hands over his front and grasped the bottom edges of his shirt and slowly began to pull the shirt upward. He wasn't vain about his looks, but he knew that he had a better-than-average package. As he dragged the shirt up over his belly he maintained eye-contact with Raven, watching the heat climb in her expression as she watched him strip.

Colby dragged it out as long as he could, but how long could it possibly take to remove one shirt? He pulled the shirt over his head and let his hands fall back to his sides, letting the shirt dangle from the tips of the fingers of his right hand. He slowly relaxed his fingers and let the shirt fall to the floor.

"Next request?" Where was the fun in taking off his shirt? In watching her watch, he'd discovered. And the expression in her eyes as she watched turned *him* on. Hugely.

That was definitely a throat clearing he heard. "Next, I'd like you to turn around."

He had no idea what she was up to, but he couldn't wait to find out what it was.

First, he heard feet hit the floor and the sound of them on hardwood, then nothing as she crossed the small rug in front of the couch. He heard the swish of her hair and felt her hands at his waist.

Without saying a word, she peeled back his jeans. He knew the instant she found his tattoo, but she still took his breath away when he felt her go to her knees and her lips met his bare skin in a kiss.

"Freddie Frog, I presume?"

Chapter 14

Afterward, Raven was never able to identify the exact moment her life spun out of control. Was it at dinner, when she'd invited Colby home with her? Or when she'd kissed him practically on sight, rather than going with any of a dozen really viable options that had crossed her mind? Or could it have been as early as six months ago when she'd taken her lunch to the park on a whim, and met the most beautiful man she'd ever seen?

Yes sir, she'd been a happy little camper just minutes ago. She'd successfully gotten him out of his shirt and was making good progress on his pants. She had discovered his tattoo and was expressing her utter appreciation of it – completely lost in the beauty of his body. She was just sliding her hands into his jeans to help them the rest of the way off, when the knock came at the door. More of a pounding, really, thinking about it.

Colby turned in the direction of the sound, reacting to the male voice just outside hollering for 'that hot party-woman Raven,' while she fell backward, landing flat on her butt. Just a half a second's consideration for either her or her wounded pride would have been nice. She chose to believe it was concern for her partially-clothed state and not pure caveman territoriality that had him heading for the door before she'd had a chance to do more than pull down the tails of her shirt to cover herself.

He opened the door to the willowy, twenty-something young man still wearing two pieces of what looked to be a very nice Armani suit, took a good look and called over his shoulder, "Honey, looks like your Ranger's here."

The two men continued to check each other out, while Raven did her best to look as though there was nothing unusual going on here at all.

"Hey, John. Colby, this is my neighbor John. John, this is Colby. So what's up, John?" she asked, trying for as close to normal as she could manage while sitting in the middle of her living room rug wearing not a stitch from the waist down.

The raised eyebrow told her John was going to take pity on her and not take a swing at the high, slow one she'd just lobbed over the plate. Apparently Colby hadn't felt the need to zip up on his way to the door.

"Chuck and I were heading down to the Rainbow Room. They've got Black 47 playing there tonight. We thought you might want to come with?" He looked innocently from Colby to Raven and back to Colby again. "But I'm going to go out on a limb here and guess that you're busy tonight. Bordering on 'tied up', even." It must be something about being a trial attorney that gave him the ability to deliver lines like that with a straight face.

"Oh, I don't think so. Unless, Colby – you don't want to go down, do you?"

"Mmm. Tough call." He offered a sigh and scratched his still bare chest. The scratch drew both sets of watching eyes – and for remarkably similar reasons. It was a beautiful chest: All toned pecs, ripped abs and just enough hair to let her know he was a man and not a boy. That was something she and John shared-- an appreciation of hunky blonde men. "If you'd rather do that than stay home and listen to Callas sing 'Carmen' like we'd planned, that's fine. You know me – I'm easy."

John must have just won a big court case, because he gave them both a cheery smile, saying, "Well, maybe next time then." Either that, or he remembered how long it had been since her last date. "Don't you kids do anything I wouldn't do." Definitely a trial attorney. Impeccable timing and an overwhelming need to get in the last word.

She waited until the sound of John's steps died away to say, "Well, I think that went pretty well, don't you?"

He shoved himself away from the door and began moving slowly toward her. There was a glint in his eye that made her get her feet under herself and try to get away. Yes, there was a definite stalking quality to that walk.

"Did anyone ever tell you, Ms. McKnight, that you are a tease?"

"What? *Now* you object?" Not only was she was finding it difficult to pull off an ice-princess tone while wearing no panties, movement only seemed to have kicked his predatory instincts into a higher gear.

"What's up, John? 'Would you like to go down, Colby?'" At least he didn't use the annoying falsetto that so many men seemed prone to when quoting a woman. Hot body or no, she would have been forced to end his life.

"Perfectly innocent comments, all, taken out of context." She was behind the sofa now, trying to keep a few body lengths between them. It was a bad time to remember that the man hunting her was a warrior by training. She didn't stand a chance.

Two quick strides, one grab and he had her. One more flip and she found herself nose-deep in carpet, surrounded by two-hundred pounds of male animal. Very excited male animal, by the feel of him.

"I think we're going to find out *exactly* what's up, Johnny."

Chapter Fifteen

The muffled sounds coming from the carpet beneath him made Colby stop and wonder when exactly he'd become a card-carrying member of the Knuckle-draggers of America. He hadn't been raised to treat women that way. He liked women and treated them with respect – not like the spoils of war. But there was definitely something appealing about pinning Raven down and feeling that luscious backside squirming against his groin.

And just when had he become such an ass man? He'd always been much more about breasts and long, long legs. But damn if he didn't feel like eating breakfast off of this one. Screw drool-worthy. Raven's behind was 'get out the plaster-of-Paris and make me a mold' quality. No, make that Latex.

God he really was a sick fuck. But he couldn't help it. Whenever he got within reach of her his brain short-circuited and his body went on high alert. And now that he'd tasted her and, thank you Jesus, been inside her the feeling was stronger than ever.

"I'm sorry, honey – you're going to have to repeat that. I couldn't understand a word you said."

He figured that would get her blood pumping. So he backed off a little on the full-body-press – enough so that she could turn her head to speak.

"I *said*, I know it's been a whole half an hour since you got laid and all, but aren't you worried about wearing it out? You don't have to make up for the entire five months or whatever in one night, you know."

He didn't even have to think about that one. "Actually, I kind of think I do. In fact, I'm pretty sure my 'whatever' is just getting warmed up."

This whole no-pants thing was really working for him. What a great idea. Talk about your time-savers. He slipped one arm around her waist to raise her up a little and felt her rock back with him, maintaining contact all the way. Hoo-yah – definitely on the same page here. His hand naturally gravitated forward to cup her crotch, while his fingers stroked her gently.

"Baby, we've really got to introduce you to the concept of a bed. Wonderful invention. Ohmygod don't you even think about stopping that." She was rocking rhythmically into his hand and suddenly he was racing to keep up. He had to be inside her when she went over the edge and she felt close.

"Raven—hold that thought," he knew he'd stuck a second condom in his pocket tonight. Where the hell was it?

Her "What?" came out somewhere between a groan and a shriek. "You can't do that." She sounded truly bereft.

"Sounds like somebody needs to work on her delayed gratification." Thank Christ, there it was. The sight of her looking over her shoulder at him through her hair, all mussed and wild looking, her breath coming short and fast had him fitting the condom on in record time.

"I got ya, baby. I've got you," he told her.

He entered her in one slow, luxurious move, and all conversation stopped. She squeezed him tightly with her inner muscles and everything but the sheer mind-blowing intensity of the sensation went out of his mind. He went from zero to sixty in about five seconds, thrusting deeply until he heard her groan and felt the shudder that came with it. And then he was beyond doing anything but driving himself faster until he came so hard he saw colors explode and his arms shook with the power of his release.

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He decided he was going to buy a lottery ticket, considering how off-the-charts great his luck was running. Did Oregon even *have* a lottery? He realized he had no idea. Man, he'd been living away from home too long. He had two full weeks leave before he needed to report back to Coronado. Two weeks to catch up on all the things he'd missed in five months that had felt more like fifteen: Sleep being one; visiting with the family was another; and making love as many times a day as humanly possible with Raven. They had a lot of lost time to make up for.

They were finally in her bed and it was big enough to fit them both comfortably with room left over. Although, he wouldn't have minded sleeping on bare ground if it meant sleeping with her. He probably ought to consider why that was, but he was too relaxed to work up a decent case of give-a-shit. He'd let himself examine it ad nauseum when he got back to California.

Raven made a noise in her sleep that he knew better than to characterize as a snore. If he knew her at all, and he was beginning to think he did, he knew she wouldn't react well to being told she snored. He must be going mental, because

he even thought *it* was kind of cute. He also knew she could use a few more hours of sleep, but it was time to bite the bullet and break the news to her.

"Raven. Wake up."

"Huh? You better not be talking to me, buddy." She peered at him through one barely-opened eye.

"Not a morning person, eh? That's okay, I'll make coffee. Your mom called a little while ago. She said she'd have brunch ready in about an hour and asked if you could stop and pick up some bacon on the way over."

## Chapter Sixteen

"Please God, tell me you're joking."

"No, she definitely said bacon."

"It is way too early for this shit. I can't be at my mother's in an hour. I need sleep, coffee and ESPN—in that order. And I think it is small and very mean of you to torture me like this."

"Hey, don't shoot the messenger. I promised your mom I'd give you the message. And a SEAL always keeps his word. Come on—get up. She's expecting us in an hour."

"That's the Boy Scouts, not the SEALs, and you did *not* just say 'us.' "

"Call her if you don't believe me. She made it pretty clear I was expected, too."

She continued to stare at him, willing him to say something like 'Ha-ha, really had you going, didn't I?' But he didn't. He just sat there, looking like the first picture in a Playgirl pictorial: Nicely tousled hair, a little blond morning shadow on his chin and a playful half-smile on his lips.

Those lips were really something. Raven focused on them, letting her mind run through a quick recap of what those lips had done last night. Yes indeed, for once in her life appearances had not deceived. She would carry a mental picture of him bending to her breast and taking it into his mouth through those wicked lips with her to her grave. Which might be sooner rather than later if she truly had to endure Sunday brunch at her mother's with Colby.

Between Caller I.D., the internet and interrogation techniques the Mossad could take pointers from, her mother would have every detail of her life and budding romance out of them before the toast got cold. Dammit, she wasn't ready to share him yet. It was all too new. And she wanted some more time with him and her fantasies before harsh reality set in. Well there was no law that said she had to cooperate with her own execution. She would just pull a pillow over her head and refuse to move.

"Come on, McKnight—don't be such a skirt. Suck it up and let's get this over with."



The swat on the butt stung, but he followed it so prettily with a kiss in the same location that she decided she just might forgive him after all. She was pulling the pillow off her head when she felt the mattress give as he leaned over to whisper in her ear, "And if you're a good girl and finish all your oatmeal, we just might find time for a pony ride later."

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"Don't forget the bacon." Perfect. The story of her life was now being written by a Newberry Award winner. Her sister Rachel had called to ask her to bring the Erykah Badu CD she wanted to borrow, as well as whatever tools she needed to fix mom's email. She tried to explain that there was nothing she could do to help AOL, but it was hopeless. Maybe she should just shut up and go with the flow before it turned into Raven and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day.

But it didn't necessarily have to be so bad. Did it? Maybe they could just get in and get out before anybody got hurt. Before Mom could turn the morning into a hometown version of "What's My Line?" meets "Fear Factor." But just thinking of the phrase 'getting in and out' had her mentally right back in the shower she and Colby had taken together this morning. He'd done things with her she was pretty sure Waterpik had never intended with their little invention. Or maybe they had, God love them.

Rose Mary McKnight met them at the door, obviously having been alerted to their presence by the rumble of the engine of Colby's diesel truck in her driveway. Raven tried to see her through Colby's eyes. She was tall, like Raven—obviously Native American, like Raven. Her mother greeted her with a kiss and quick hug, her eyes full of questions but saying only, "Hello, sweetie. Well this is certainly a surprise."

"Mom, I'd like you to meet Colby Denbow. Colby, this is my mother Mary. Mom, be nice. There will be no grilling the suspect. I'm sorry, but I totally forgot I said I'd come by. Colby just got back in town yesterday and we've been catching up." She made the mistake of meeting his eyes. "We already made plans for today so we can't stay long. But I wanted to come by for at least a little bit."

She rushed through it, telling herself it was only a little exaggeration. They really did have plans. It was just that virtually none of them could be carried out in the presence of a parental unit—but there was no way could she tell her mom that.

"Well can you at least come in for a cup of coffee and sit down for a few minutes? I'd like to do more than say 'Hi, how are you' to Colby."

"That sounds great, Mary. I know I don't have to tell you what an amazing person your daughter is. But sometimes I don't know where she gets all that energy."

He gave Raven a little wink/smirk combo that let her know he was counting on her not wanting to make a scene in front of her mother. As soon as her mother's back was turned she made a face back at him to let *him* know he'd better not push it. Great. Next she'd be sticking out her tongue.

"So what big plans have the two of you made today?" her mom asked, gesturing toward the dining room table. "Did you say that you had been out of town? What line of work did you say you were in, Colby?"

About as subtle as Jerry Springer's closing monologue. Next she'd be asking him for a tissue sample and a copy of his TRW.

"Mom, he's on vacation--no grilling." Amazingly, Colby seemed more amused than annoyed. Pleased almost. She wondered what *that* was all about?

"I'm home on leave from the Navy. My family lives here in Pendleton. My folks are retired, but my sister Margaret is a pediatrician in town and my other sister, Robin, is on the school board."

"We're going down to Raley Park, Mom. It's the Salmon Walk today and the Chamber has a booth set up. I promised my boss I'd swing by and make sure the computers are all behaving."

Another minor exaggeration. They were beginning to pile up like the cord-wood stacked outside in her mother's back yard. While it wasn't totally inconceivable that they might actually end up at the park for the festivities, the only way her boss would see her today was if she didn't see him first.

"Will that be any fun for you, Colby? Or are you in one of the races?"

"No, no races for me this year." He smiled sweetly at her mother as the hand that had been resting on Raven's thigh under the table reached over and stroked her crotch. "I'll probably just hang around and see if I can give Raven a hand."

Chapter Seventeen

"Raven, do you trust me?" He kept his voice low and prayed she would go along, no questions asked. "Don't look around — just do what I say."

He would do his best to get them away unobtrusively, without making it look like he was towing a balky six-year-old. He took her by the wrist and picked up their pace, trying not to be too obvious as he checked out terrain for a workable solution.

He found a narrow walkway between two buildings and ducked down it. It worked in all the movies so he decided to give it a try, pushing her up against the wall in a recessed doorway that sported a sign reading 'Employees Only.' "Don't look around," he whispered and then took his best shot at kissing the living daylights out of her.

"Oh, give it a rest, would you, Colby?"

He tried ignoring his sister's voice, but she went on: "I hate to use the term 'blight on the family escutcheon', but people *are* beginning to talk."

She'd obviously spotted them and followed them down the alley. He gave himself a mental kick for having thought he could come to a public event in his hometown and keep a low profile. But they'd given it a good run. They'd had close to three hours to wander the booths, hold hands and feed each other junk food before they'd been spotted.

He had to hand it to her, Robin was a real pit-bull when it came to getting the job done. She usually managed to disguise it with a fair amount of Denbow natural charm, though, which explained her natural flair for politics. And she was absolutely ruthless once she'd set her mind to accomplishing a particular goal. Mom or Peggy must have let it slip he was in town.

"Hello, Robin. Lovely as always to see you. But would it kill you to save a little tact and charm for your family and friends? We vote, too, you know." It came out sounding a little sharper than he'd intended, but her thick politician's hide would probably let it roll right off. If she even noticed. Besides, he was annoyed.

"You are such a little shit, you know that?" She held her arms away from her sides saying, "Do you think you could let go of Raven long enough to give me a hug? It's been over six months."

"Uh, oh, Raven. She knows who you are. It's too late for me, but you can still save yourself. Run."

He loved his family, but couldn't they see he had priorities here? "I was going to call. You know I wouldn't visit without trying to see everyone at least once. I don't exactly come here for the great surfing."

"Well that's great, you big dope. Except I talked to Mom this morning and she said you'd turned up on their doorstep, dropped your bag, and then practically burned rubber backing out of the driveway when you took off again."

"Your point, and I'm sure you have one, is. . .?"

Truth was, he knew exactly where she was going with her rant. If he'd given a second's thought to anything or anyone besides Raven after he'd seen her, he would have realized that his parents would wonder where he was when he didn't come back to their house last night. He was way too old to be worrying about this kind of crap. And if he'd been thinking with his big head yesterday instead of focusing so intently on hooking up, he would have done something that demonstrated a little intelligence—like getting a motel room. But he'd been so intent on seeing Raven again that he *had* behaved almost exactly as his sister had described.

"My point is, why don't you just give the p's a call and let them know what's up? Or, better yet, plan on making it to Sunday dinner. Bring Raven. Now that Peggy's spilled about seeing you two last night, you know they're going to want to meet her. Oh, by the way, I'm Robin. It's nice to finally meet you Raven."

The 'finally' was nice dig. She probably learned to do that at school board meetings and fund-raisers.

"Raven, this is Robin. Robin, this is obviously Raven."

Did it just *seem* like he'd made more introductions in the last forty-eight hours than Whoopi Goldberg on Academy Awards night? He'd get around to seeing everyone but, Jesus Christ on a horse, was it too much to freaking ask for a little personal time here?

"Robin--as much as it pains me to say this--when you're right, you're right. I'll give Mom and Dad a call and let them know what's going on. Just as soon as Raven and I figure out what that is."

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“So what’s next on the agenda, Miss Pendleton Chamber of Commerce?”

It felt good to get out of the sun and relax under a tree with a cold drink. And it felt even better to be able to completely let go and just drift. His body was used to hard physical training on a regular basis, but after coming off an extended assignment in a desert environment a little unstructured downtime was exactly what he was craving. Speaking of craving. . .

“I like the sound of that: ‘Miss Pendleton.’ I don’t suppose I could get you to wear one of those sashes, a tiara and nothing else, could I? We could put you up on the hood of my truck. Talk about your classic hood ornament.”

“I think I should warn you that if the word ‘headlights’ was about to form any part of your next sentence, you’re walking home. And I’m sorry big guy, but what’s next on the agenda is that you are going to lie down while I take off your shoe and look at that ankle. All the walking we’ve done probably didn’t help,” Raven said.

“The ankle is fine. If I had to, I could do fifteen miles with a full pack, easy. But if you really want to take care of something that needs a little attention, I’d suggest you move north a little. Say, about half way?”

“Well I’m sorry we can’t offer you your entertainment of choice--nary a full pack in sight. So I guess you’re just going to have to lie there and take it like a man while I take care of you.”

“So what am I telling my family?” She had his foot in her lap and was using her hands in a way he normally only appreciated when used on other body parts.

“What do you want to tell your family?”

He wished she would meet his eyes. He knew what he wanted to say. But he just wished he knew whether or not he had any company out here on the ragged hairy edge. Oh, well. No guts—no glory.

“I want to tell them that maybe the most amazing woman I’ve ever met lives here in Pendleton, and that I want to spend more time with her. And, even more amazingly, she seems to think I’m pretty okay too.” Now she met his eyes. “I want to tell them that I’ll come by later and visit, but that I’ll be spending most of my leave with you. Now what do *you* say?”

## Chapter Eighteen

"I say 'maybe' isn't going to get you to 'yes' on this deal. I want to hear that I'm *the* most amazing woman you've ever met if you want to park your truck in *my* garage for two weeks."

If this man had any idea of the power he had over her, it would all be over but the crying. Raven prayed he couldn't read in her eyes how exactly his words matched her deepest longings; how much her heart wanted to hear those words. Those and more.

Oh yeah--as if. As if she had a chance of anything with Colby beyond two weeks of the best sex she was ever likely to experience in her sad, sorry little life. Not that two weeks of having her world rocked regularly was a bad thing. If she was being honest with herself, she'd have to admit it was more than she'd even hoped for in a long time. Funny how tall, sarcastic and a take-no-prisoners attitude didn't translate into 'guys lined up to take her out.' So how did she explain Colby? And the answer was, she couldn't. But that didn't mean she didn't give thanks hourly for his lack of averageness in that department. And a couple of other departments Nordstrom didn't have, either.

"Aw, don't be upset. I was just understating so you wouldn't get a big ego. It's important to have something to strive for, don't you think?"

His smile went all the way to his eyes and beyond. He was propped up on his elbows, those amazing blue eyes smiling at her, and a look on his face that stopped her breath. *Oh, shit. I am so gone, here.* She felt the impact as her last shred of self-possession crashed and burned.

"Oh, absolutely." Knowing he wasn't hers to keep forever wasn't going to keep her from enjoying him in the here and now. Whether she deprived herself now or not, he would still be gone in a little over a week. And what were the odds that he would be so moved that he would want to come back to her? About as good as the chance that Bill Gates would hear about the kick-ass work she was doing in Pendleton and call her up for a job interview. Yeah, right. But she wanted to give him something to think about when he did go away. A little something to remember her by. She put down his foot and, hiking her skirt up a little, crawled up until she almost straddled his groin.

"Colby, how far away would you say those people are down there?"

"What? To the nearest booth over there?"

"Yeah. How far would you say that is?"

"How accurate do you need this to be?"

"Oh, just a ballpark. Just guess for me."

"Okay, a little over a hundred yards. Say, about one-ten. Why?"

"So, in your professional opinion, as a highly trained member of one of America's most elite —"

"*The* most elite," he corrected.

"You know, I think I could be forgiven here if I were to say that I was deliberately understating so as not to give you a big ego, but I won't. So, as a member of America's most elite fighting force, would you guess that the people at the nearest booth, approximately one-hundred and ten yards away, could tell that I don't have any panties on?" Just let him mull on that for a second or two.

When she saw his eyes flicker down to where her skirt rode up on her thighs, she reached down and pulled up her skirt just enough for him to verify that she was, in fact, telling the truth. A definite flicker of interest lit his eyes.

"So when did this little development occur?" Oh, yeah. Definite interest — and not just in his eyes, either. She could feel his 'interest.'

"Sorry, sailor, but that information's on a 'need to know' basis. And all you need to know is . . ." she watched his eyes as she undid the buttons on his traditional Levi's 501's. ". . . whether or not I have a condom in my pocket."

"Raven. . ." Colby gave her name a very satisfying little growl as he ground it out from between clenched teeth.

"How do you feel about a little open-air, uh, relaxation technique? You feel pretty tense to me. I'd say you're a definite candidate for this treatment."

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but it would be a bad thing for me, both personally and professionally, if we were arrested on a lewd conduct charge. And I can't imagine it would be all that great for your career, either."

Oh, my. He really was magnificently made. To hold all that leashed power firmly, but gently, in her hands gave her all sorts of ideas. *No, that would be too obvious, even from a distance.*

"Then I guess you should do your best to maintain your composure. Shouldn't you?" He did look positively pained as she rolled the condom slowly down his gorgeous, very erect cock. Satin over steel, indeed.

Taking a discreet glance around first, she raised herself up just enough for her body to clear his erect penis and then lowered herself back down a millimeter at a time. His head was thrown back and his eyes squeezed shut as he obviously fought a powerful urge to pump his hips.

She squeezed him as tightly as her inner muscles would allow and whispered, "Ssh. Don't move. I think they're looking. Don't draw attention to us. You don't want anyone to know that I'm naked under this skirt and that you're filling me up, oh baby, you're so *big*. . ." She heard her own moan, soft but heartfelt.

His hands gripped her hips like a vise and she felt the shudder that shook his whole body.

"Hooooooooo-yah."

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"Lady, you are one tough negotiator. A little unorthodox, maybe, but I think I could get used to your style. If only the State Department had more people with your can-do-me attitude. It boggles the mind."

"Well Mom always said, 'Nothing takes the place of persistence.' "

"Really? Your mom taught you that? Suddenly I'm looking at your mom in a whole new light."

They were still under the tree, but clothing had been rearranged and they were sitting with their backs against the trunk. Colby's arm was around her shoulders, her nose was buried in his neck, and she felt more content than she could ever recall feeling before. Since last night, certainly. She was breathing deeply, contemplating with Zen-like earnestness the mix of scents that seemed so uniquely his.

"So do you want to go do the dinner thing with the parents? It would probably be best to just go and get it over with. Mom's fine, and I think if we just coach you a little bit on Luther you'll do okay. "

"Now?"

Chapter Nineteen

"I like your girl, son."

"Hey, Mom. Yeah, she's . . ." words failed him.

He was leaning on the doorframe, watching Raven feed the dog cheese curls. Or, more accurately, watching her teaching Robin's oldest how to feed the dog cheese curls. She seemed perfectly content, and not at all aware that she was being observed.

"The key is getting some loft on it. No, no – not like you're playing 'pepper' with him. A little more arc to it, Jeff. *All right* – good job, buddy. You're getting it."

He dragged his gaze away from contemplating how, now that her hair was pulled back into a long braid down her back, her profile – and cheekbone, specifically--was so perfectly highlighted. He couldn't seem to get enough of looking at her. And touching her. And just being with her. He wondered briefly if it really was possible to wear it out? Probably not. But, either way, here's to trying. He didn't try to fight the grin that came with that thought.

"And she seems to know how to handle you. She looks to be what your grandmother would have called a handful."

Things seemed to be going okay so far. He was pleased that Raven seemed to have run the gauntlet of meeting the rest of the family all right and hadn't run screaming into the hills. Although the night was still young and it never paid to underestimate the Luther-factor. Truthfully, he'd been half-afraid that she'd get one look at the entire collective group, realize he came from a pretty eccentric gene pool and want nothing more to do with him.

"Mom, you have no idea." Handle him? Good Lord, at the rate she was handling him he'd be lucky if he survived the week.

"*Au contraire*, I think I have a pretty good idea. I've seen how you two look at each other. What, you think your father and I got four kids from a mail-order catalog? Let me tell you, kiddo, we did some pretty serious practicing in between times, too."

Her smile and the look in her eye made him stop and think about his parents as people, and not just his parents, for the first time in a while. And people who enjoyed knocking it out, apparently. "Well good for Luther. Glad to hear the old man was gettin' it regular. Bodes well for the next generation."

Colby couldn't recall ever having had an exchange quite like this one with his mom before, but it was probably good to clear the air. She needed to know he was a big boy here and he was going to do what he was going to do.

"So I understand from Luther that we won't be seeing much of you this trip. That you'll be staying with Raven?"

"Yeah. This trip is mainly about her. I only have two weeks and she and I need to get some things sorted out."

"Well I won't put you on the spot and ask you what your intentions are. You're a man and if your father and I didn't do our jobs right the first time and teach you right from wrong, it's probably too late now. But try not to fall too far off the family radar, won't you?"

His mom really was amazingly cool. Who'd have thought it? She was just giving him a hug when he heard Luther's voice from the next room, asking Raven if she followed sports. Potential trouble, but at least it wasn't politics. Once Luther got started on politics, it would be a short leap from the current president to the previous one, and from there it would all be downhill. He knew from experience that there would be talk of conspiracy theories and death lists and it would be only a matter of time until Raven asked him to take her home.

"I'd have to say I love baseball best. There's something absolutely lyrical about it, don't you think? And I love the fact that there's no time limit on a game. How unbelievable is that in today's world? And hockey. I think it's part of Nature's design that hockey season comes right after baseball season. It's great to have all the speed and the checking right after six months of watching pitchers shake off signs and trying to get inside managers' heads to figure out if they're going to squeeze or steal."

What a woman. They hadn't talked about baseball yet, so he'd had no idea she'd felt that way about his game. But he could tell by the way her eyes shone that the passion wasn't faked. He really had hit the jackpot here.

"Did my son put you up to that? He thinks I have no idea how much energy he puts into yanking my crank." Luther went on, "But what about football? Sounds like you know a little about sports — you must love football."

"Football is fine. I like the explosiveness of it. But it just seems like: 'Let's try this play. Oh, that didn't work. Let's try that play. Hmm, that didn't work

either. Better go try the first one again. Maybe they won't remember this time that we just ran it two plays ago.' But I'll admit I don't know as much about it as I do baseball or hockey. In fact, now that they've got that new goofball on Monday Night Live, I probably won't watch much this year."

He'd better step in before things got ugly. Football was Luther's big passion and she'd have no way of knowing he considered Dennis Miller the single biggest thing wrong with American football today, and quite possibly the anti-Christ. Personally, he thought it might secretly be that Luther didn't get the jokes – but that was immaterial at this point.

"Well, there you go. You're obviously just in need of further education. Football season is just around the corner. We'll get you over here on the weekends and show you what it's all about." Luther gave her a quick shoulder-hug and smiled sunnily. He was either completely smitten, or there was hope for world peace in our lifetime.

"Whoa there, Dad. Why don't you throw this one back? I think you've already caught your limit. Besides, I think we have enough time before dinner: I'm going to show Raven my baseball trophies." Maybe not the smoothest exit ever, but it would have to do.

Raven's smile was sweet, but her words packed a punch: "So are you going to show me your big Louisville Slugger, too?"

They were almost down the hall and into what had been his old room, but was now Lorraine's office. He had enjoyed watching Raven interact with his parents and he knew the rest of the family was champing at the bit for a crack at her. But he needed a couple of minutes to be alone with her, first.

"You just be careful what you ask for, missy. Fifteen minutes is barely enough time to test swing weight, let alone line-drive performance. Anything more than just a grip test and we'll be late for dinner."

The next thing he knew she was slipping her arms around his neck and whispering, "I don't suppose that door has a lock on it?"

Chapter Twenty

"No, no lock."

"Well, what if we . . ."

The knock at the door she was leaning against startled them both.

"Uncle Colby, have you seen Raven?"

Their eyes met and he shrugged. "Uh, give me a second and I'll look for her."

Jeff again, "Well, who were you talking to, then? I heard voices."

"Oh. . . yeah, here she is. I didn't see her — she was standing behind me."

She mouthed the word 'lame' at him and opened the door. "Hey, Jeff. So what's up, buddy?"

"Did Uncle Colby show you his bat yet? It's totally tight. It's a DeMarini double-wall."

"No, I didn't get to see his bat yet. I think he was just about to, though." She looked at Colby, "DeMarini, huh? Now why did I think it was a Louisville Slugger?"

"Oh, not even. DeMarini all the way, right Uncle Colby? Because. . ." he and Colby high-fived, ". . .because chicks dig the long ball," they finished in unison.

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"This is nice. I could hold you like this all night."

The wooden porch swing they were sitting in could really use a cushion, and she knew first-hand because the wooden slats were digging into the bottoms of her thighs--but she'd slit her own wrists before she'd mention it. Colby's parents lived on a quiet street in one of the older neighborhoods of Pendleton and they were watching the cars go by. They'd seen one so far. The sun was just barely down and the mosquitoes hadn't made an appearance yet. Colby's chin was resting on the top of her head and he periodically ran the first two fingers of each hand up and down her arms.

"That sounds perfect. But maybe we'd better move this party back to my place?" She rolled her head to the side and tried to see his face. She needed to judge his reaction to this next part. "My long weekend's over. I have to get up and go to work tomorrow. Not all of us are on vacation. Or leave--whatever."

The arms around her tensed and his previously unfocused gaze sharpened. "Can you take some time off? I know you said things were pretty quiet right now. How is the Chamber about personal time?"

Raven knew what she wanted to see in his face, and it seemed to be there. But she had to be honest with herself and the truth was, she didn't trust her own reactions any more. She wanted him too much to even pretend to be dispassionate. He could be the worst liar on the planet and she'd probably believe him; because she wanted to. She looked into his eyes and realized there was no 'probably' about it—she *would* believe him.

"I'd have to go in in the morning. But it's slow enough, that I think Dave would okay sometime off. I get three weeks a year and I never end up using half of it. Once I get in to the office I could call Robert and Sean, the two part time guys, and ask them to cover for me. They'd probably love to pick up some extra hours."

"Dave, Robert and Sean—aren't there any women in your office?"

Was that maybe a little jealousy she heard in his voice? Possibly even tempered with a bit of insecurity? A girl could always dream.

"I.T. is still mostly male. Most of them are really kind of sweet. Honestly? I think I make them nervous. It's changing but, let's face it, they're not the most socially adept group on the planet. Plus, being a woman *and* an Indian gives them two tokens in one employee. I call it multi-tasking their tokenism."

"Sweet? Don't you believe it. They're a bunch of horny motherfuckers. And I guarantee you, to a nerd, they're scamming to get into your pants."

"Excuse me. You don't know these people and I've worked with most of them for close to five years now--some of them longer. They're good guys and they treat me like a sister. We're buddies."

He was sitting up and getting in her face now. "I don't have to know them. They're men and you're a woman. An incredibly hot-looking woman with mouth-watering breasts and an ass to die for." He had her backed into the corner of the porch swing now and she could see the heat in his eyes.

"You may be the greatest thing to come down the pike since the wireless interface but there isn't a chance in hell that when they're talking to you, three out of four thoughts doesn't have to do with how they'd like to do a hardboot on your system. Maybe it ain't pretty, sweetheart, but it's the truth—I guaran-*damn*-tee it."

"Hardboot my system, huh?"

"Yeah. And if you need a practical demonstration, I'd be happy to take care of that for you. That's one seminar I wouldn't mind teaching."

"Robert and Sean -- motherfuckers who want to hardboot my system. Now there's a visual I could have done without. My working relationships with them may never recover."

"That's okay."

"I'm sorry, could you repeat that please? I'm not sure I quite caught that."

"You heard me."

"And how is it okay that my working relationship with my three closest coworkers may never recover? What am I missing here?" She put her hand over her chest, as though she could keep her heart from pounding it's way out.

He had her by the shoulders now, practically nose to nose. "Because it doesn't matter. You're going to have to quit and move to San Diego anyway."

"What. . .?" She heard her voice trail off and he was staring at her as if the force of his gaze alone could convey what he was feeling. She was stunned. Speechless. "I can see your lips moving, and I know you're speaking English. But I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Well unless you have a private jet I don't know about, I don't see how else we can make this thing work. You live in Oregon, I live in California. Something's got to give. I never know when I'm going to get leave for any amount of time and we can't keep doing this once every five months thing. At least, I can't."

"But I can't move to California."

## Chapter Twenty-One

“Do we have to settle this tonight?”

They were back at her place after saying goodnight to his family and she was looking at him like a cornered animal. He could tell she didn't want a fight, but what he couldn't figure out was, what the hang-up was. It seemed like a pretty straightforward problem with an equally straightforward solution. Problem: They were two people separated by a geographic factor who needed to be together. Critical additional information: One of the two worked in a geographic-specific profession, while the other worked in a field with job opportunities practically anywhere you could name. Put the two pieces of information together and the resolution was pretty simple, really – Raven needed to move.

His options were limited here and his frustration level was increasing with every minute that went by without Raven seeing things his way. But it wasn't really even his way – it was their way. He'd analyzed the situation and proposed the only workable solution he could see. He was trying everything he knew to get them together and keep them together.

It would be nice, though, if his brain could keep up with his mouth. He would have realized, if he'd given it any thought, that women and men didn't think about these things the same way. Men were practical types who focused on the problem at hand until they found a solution. Women needed all that emotional reinforcement and touchy-feely stuff. He realized now that it must have come across pretty blunt when he'd said what he had. He'd just opened his mouth and out it had all come. But Raven was so far from being the average woman that she should be able to see the reasoning behind what he'd said.

“No, I guess not. I have another week before I have to be back. But can you give me a clue what your thinking is? You haven't said much except you couldn't move to California.”

“You mean, besides being scared to quit my job, leave my friends and family and move someplace I've never even visited?”

Well, it was a start. At least she was talking to him now. He'd been a little startled himself when he'd heard himself announcing she needed to quit her job to follow him. But she looked more than just startled – she looked completely freaked out. If he could get her talking he could figure out where her reservations were coming from and show her they were nothing to worry about. They'd work it all out somehow. They had to.

"Yeah, I guess that's one way to look at it." He needed to touch her. If he was holding her she couldn't get all defensive and shut him out. "Come and sit with me while we talk about it."

She didn't come right away and that hurt. She moved toward him, but it was slowly, as if she wasn't sure. "Okay."

He took her hand and led her to the only chair big enough to hold the two of them; a big over-stuffed monstrosity that looked older than the two of them combined. Their bodies never seemed to have any communication problems and he'd take all the help he could get in persuading her. He pulled her down into his lap and wrapped his arms around her. She felt so damn good – they were perfect together and it was a total mystery to him how she could not see that. How could she not want to do everything in her power to make sure it didn't end? But he felt like he was talking someone down from a ledge outside a tall building: one wrong move and he'd lose her.

"So you've never had the urge to give up everything and move to California, huh?"

"Before now, you mean? Never. Well, not San Diego, anyway. Silicon Valley, maybe. Usually my little fantasy involves Bellingham, Washington and Microsoft."

"Well, what about one that involves the beach, California and a military-type guy with inconvenient hours who you, nevertheless, find irresistibly sexy."

"It's hard to change gears like that. I . . ." she looked up. "I'm sorry. I just had no idea you were thinking that way."

"So what did you think was going on? This sort of thing happen to you a lot, does it? Or did you purposely pick someone who didn't live around here?"

She looked genuinely puzzled. That was a start. "What do you mean?"

"Did you pick someone to get involved with who doesn't live in the area on purpose? So--I don't know--so you could just have fun and not have all the headaches of a relationship?"

"No. Surprisingly, things like this don't happen to me every day." The sarcasm was thick in her voice. "Hard to believe, I know. I would put meeting you in the same category as a comet hitting the Earth or Pamela Anderson winning a



Best Actress Oscar: Theoretically possible, but I don't plan my life around it. And I probably would have bet on Pam first."

Her tone was really pushing his buttons. "I didn't plan for this either, Raven. I've had a business plan since college and it definitely didn't include anything like this. Like you. But it's happened and it's not going to go away if I ignore it. And just so we're clear, I have no intention of ignoring it. So tell me what's really going on here? What has you so freaked out about this?"

"I never saw this coming, Colby. Never." She look on her face grabbed his heart and squeezed. Not at all how he'd imagined his woman would look when he took that first big step. "A hundred monkeys with typewriters could never have written this. Guys like you don't happen to girls like me. It never occurred to me that you weren't just. . . I don't know . . . playing--having a little fun while you were visiting your family."

He felt like he'd been gut-punched. "Wow. Some great opinion you have of me. Especially since I thought we'd already had this conversation. You asked and I answered: I'm not playing here, Raven."

"Well, sure you'd say that, wouldn't you?"

The frustration, and now the hurt and anger were all churning in his gut. He'd never been more honest, more open, more caring with a woman in his life. And to realize that he had been misreading her so fundamentally was a blow.

"I think I'm starting to get pissed here. You're saying all this time you thought I was lying to you? Why the hell would I? Not to get into your pants because, sweetheart, I was already there. I don't need to lie. *Fuck* yeah—I am pissed."

She turned in his lap and tried to put her arms around his neck, but the back of the chair interfered and he wasn't at all sure he wanted to make it easy for her. "Oh, no baby. No. It's not about you. It's about . . . yeah, okay, it is about you, of course it is. But it's not just about you. Jesus, could I fuck this up any worse?" He could hardly see her eyes through the hair that had fallen over her face. "It's . . . how can I say this? It's like. . . no, *you're* like my birthday and Christmas and winning the lottery all at the same time. And you happened to *me*. Do you have any idea how huge that is? Something like you has never, ever happened to me before. I keep thinking I'm having the best dream I've ever had in my life. How can you possibly be true?"

Oh, man. He'd die if he didn't get inside her right fucking now.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

She needed to get some sleep. Her alarm clock was set to go off in just a couple of hours and there was no way she could get out of at least putting in an appearance at the office. Even if things went according to her best-case scenario, she wouldn't get out before noon at the earliest, and that meant an afternoon nap was her only hope.

But the voice in her head kept rerunning the night's events in an endless loop of awful moments she wished she could edit out. If life were only on videotape, or – better yet – digital. Five minutes with i-Movie and life would be all better. But it wasn't and she couldn't. She was stuck knowing she had messed up and hoping it could all somehow be salvaged.

Part of her still thought it was understandable on her part. Was she really supposed to believe that Colby was somehow interested in something long term with her? She'd run out of similes to describe just how unlikely that was. And while there was nothing she would rather believe, life had slapped her down often enough to keep her from letting herself get too invested in the possibility.

But, what if? What if, somehow, it really was true? Maybe he'd stood too close to a concussion grenade wherever his last assignment had been and his brains got rattled? Not enough to make him drool or think he was G. Gordon Liddy; but just enough that he found himself unexplainably attracted to average-looking women with exhibitionistic tendencies. It could happen. Yeah, and Jessie Helms might cut a rap CD, too.

Raven let her eyes stray to where Colby lay sleeping next to her. What was it about sleep that made the most rugged-looking man appear sweet and even a little vulnerable? She could almost squint and let herself imagine the boy, and then young man, he must have been. He had a quality about him that made her think of the old school movie heroes her mom loved, like Gary Cooper and Jimmy Stewart. She could imagine Colby going up against the guy in the black hat single-handedly, just like in "High Noon." She could imagine him. . .

Oh my God. This must be what love did to you. Would you just listen to her mooning over him like some sixteen-year-old in the throes of her first big crush? How had this happened? When had she lost control of her life and her feelings? She realized with a clarity that almost qualified as an out-of-body experience that she was completely in love with this man. And it scared the living crap out of her.

She didn't know if she should even be proud in a perverse corner of her psyche at how exactly she had predicted the chain of events. Did that make her smart, stupid or both? Smart enough to have seen it coming and stupid enough to let it happen anyway. Yeah, like it took a real Mensa candidate to drop a rock and predict it would fall to the ground.

But this felt like completely new ground somehow. Colby was hardly her first relationship. She'd even been engaged once. But the conviction that sat in her chest like a stone that her life not only would never be the same, but was now inextricably tied to Colby's, was new.

She had no problem acknowledging that she had control issues. She'd never felt the need to pay some stranger a hundred and fifty bucks an hour to sift through her mental garbage to tell her why, though. It was enough to know that nothing set her off more than the feeling that she was not the one pulling the strings that controlled her life. And the fact that those honors had now been, even partially, handed over to someone else scared the hell out of her.

Colby stirred in his sleep, rolling onto his stomach, displaying his shoulders and back. There was no denying God had been experiencing an exceptionally fine afternoon's work the day He'd made Colby. Raven ran her hand lightly across his shoulders, feeling the undulations of warm skin covering a well-developed set of muscles. The Latin names describing the muscle sets just didn't come close to describing the perfection she was stroking.

He really had a beautiful back. And the column of his neck was nothing less than a work of art, she decided. The longer she looked, the more the ugly little troll of her insecurity retreated. Maybe she could do this. She didn't have to let the fear control her. Did she? Maybe if she thought of a relationship with Colby as being like riding the tallest roller coaster in the park, she could push her own buttons. It had worked when she was six years old and too scared to ride the Matterhorn at Disneyland. How would she ever live with herself if, when the opportunity of a lifetime – maybe several lifetimes – knocked, she'd been too scared to even open the door?

She didn't try to resist the urge to lean down and taste his skin in the magical curve where his neck blended into his shoulder. She couldn't have stopped herself to save her life. Or maybe she had it backward: maybe this was what would save her life. The velvety texture of his skin and the brush of his hair on her nose called to something deep inside her that felt totally disconnected from the rational. Without stopping to analyze, she licked the spot a couple of more times before sinking her teeth into his skin.

He woke quickly, rolling her onto her back. "Oh, it's you."

"Who did you think it was? Don't tell me that's the traditional SEAL wake-up call?"

"I was dreaming I was in a remake of 'Cat People'. At first it was you in the dream, but then it turned into Nastassja Kinski. And not like she looked then, either. It was scary."

The conversation stopped and as they stared at each other, she saw his eyes begin to spark. She felt his sex begin to stir against her belly and she glanced down to the point where their bodies met. She searched her mind for a snappy Raven-like comeback and found nothing. She was still in that primitive place that could only express what she was feeling in the most basic of physical ways.

She pushed on one of his shoulders and, thankfully, he cooperated. There was no way she could have budged him without his agreement. She kept pushing until he was on his back and she was firmly back on top. She let herself settle into place as she brushed a lock of hair out of his eyes.

She knew he liked her long hair, so she let it fall forward onto his chest as she leaned forward to take one of his nipples into her mouth. She let her tongue caress it gently, flicking in small circular motions, while she slid her body downward slowly, sinuously. She glanced up briefly to judge his reaction and saw him watching her with rapt attention. Good. She wanted him with her on this one.

She kissed her way down his body, taking light little tastes of his skin. He tasted wonderfully salty and she couldn't resist the occasional nip of his skin. She looked up again as she felt him twitch under her and saw that his head was now back, his eyes closed and his face wore a rapturous, expectant look.

She hadn't done this for him yet, and she found she wanted it as much as he did. In fact, she couldn't wait. She took him into her mouth and loved him.

She heard a groan and a "Oh, baby. You stop that right now." Another, longer groan. "I mean it. Cut it out."

Words were out of the question, so she just shook her head and did her best to say "Unh uh."

"Oh, you're being a baaaad girl, Raven. . . Holy Mary, Mother of God!"

## Chapter Twenty-Three

"Oh my God. What time is it?"

"It's ali-i-ive." She was finally waking up. Dropping the mad scientist voice, he went on, "It's a little after nine."

"Oh, no. My alarm must not have gone off. I'm late for work."

Her eyes still wouldn't open all the way, she had pillow-creases on one side of her face, and her hair was wrecked. He thought she just might be the most gorgeous thing he'd ever seen. But, no doubt about it, she was definitely not a morning person. "Oh, it went off all right. You slept right through it."

"Why didn't you wake me? I'm late and they're probably wondering where I am. We have a staff meeting every Monday morning and I'm missing it."

He leaned back against the doorframe and watched her try to pull herself together. He had his urge to go sit beside her on the bed and smooth the hair out of her eyes in a stranglehold. But he didn't have any confidence in his ability to stop at just stroking her hair. The two of them together were nothing short of explosive, especially in the formation of heat and rapidity of reaction aspects. No, he'd better stay right where he was.

"Don't worry about it. I took care of it for you." Could he help it if he was a capable guy? Women always liked that about him.

"You did *what*? What do you mean you took care of it?" Funny though, this particular woman didn't seem all that appreciative.

"I guess you're not a no-show at work very often, because they called looking for you when you didn't show up. I told them you hadn't gotten any sleep last night because you had no self-control to speak of and couldn't keep your hands off me. And me, horny sailor and all around nice guy that I am, didn't have it in me to keep turning you down. Had it in you, though." He thought the wink topped it off nicely. He really *was* going to have to stop yanking her chain, and he promised himself he would, sometime soon. But the look she always got on her face was just priceless. He knew it was wrong, but he was weak.

He watched her close her eyes and count to maybe three or four. Jeez, she didn't even have the patience to last all the way to ten. "You're just giving me crap, aren't you? You didn't really say that. Did you?"

"Oh, relax McKnight. I'm just playing with you. I told them you thought you had food poisoning and you were sleeping. They were fine with it. I actually started to feel a little bad about lying to your supervisor. He seemed like an okay guy. Except for wanting to get into your pants."

He hadn't felt even the smallest twinge of remorse, but no way was he going to let her know that. He could tell she was dog-tired and in no shape to deal with anything more strenuous than choosing which mug to use for her first cup of coffee. He'd lied without thinking twice about it and would again--any day, any time--if it meant smoothing the way for Raven.

"Colby, tell me you didn't say anything to Dave about your whack theory."

"What? You mean like threaten to break his little administrator's fingers if he so much as glances below your neck? What kind of a Neanderthal do you think you're dealing with? Besides--completely unnecessary. But don't worry if you don't get it. It's a guy thing."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean? 'I wouldn't understand, it's a guy thing.' Well, why don't you try explaining it to my feeble little woman's brain, huh? Talk slowly. Use small words. I'll see if I can keep up."

"No need to get defensive; just basic differences between men and women. Women are born knowing a hundred different words for beige--men are born knowing how to say 'look at my woman the wrong way and you'll be using a catheter to pee for the rest of your life' without using *any* words."

"Oh for God's sake open a window, would you, before I choke on all the testosterone."

"Whoa, there. You want to tell me where that came from?" He'd been playing, but he realized somebody else wasn't. He had no idea what was really going on here, but a little time-out seemed like a good idea about now. "What say you get dressed -- maybe even take a shower? I'll work on breakfast and we can talk about whatever's bothering you like a couple of rational adults."

She looked up at him from where she sat on the bed. Her stiff arms and measuring look said it all, he thought. But after several seconds she said, "Okay." He saw her open her mouth to speak again, only to shut it without saying anything. "Okay," she repeated, nodded once and headed for the bathroom.

What the fuck had that all been about? He shook his head as he sorted through Raven's refrigerator, absently cataloging available ingredients, while most of his mind was at work on the problem of what to do about Raven. Any one of his teammates, in that situation, would have thanked him sincerely and gone back to sleep. And then bought him a six-pack later. Any man who claimed to understand women was a fucking liar, and that included Dr. Phil.

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"Thanks for cooking, Colby."

"No problem. Not much to choose from, but we can always hit the grocery store later." He'd heard her coming way before she ever appeared. She'd be hopeless on a covert op, but that was okay--she had other qualities he admired. Her hair was still damp and a couple of droplets of water rolled from behind her ear down her throat. He thought about chasing them with his tongue. "You look better. How're you feeling? Still tired?"

"Yeah. I don't function well on no sleep." She looked remote. "And I'm never much of a morning person."

"I hadn't noticed."

"I was thinking while I was in the shower." Uh oh. Any time a woman began a sentence with any variant of 'I've been thinking', the man she was saying it to had better be ducking for cover. "I'm not used to anyone making decisions for me. This is so stupid. I feel like I'm eight years old and saying 'You're not the boss of me.'"

"I don't want to be your boss, Raven. I want to be your partner. Don't you see us being in this thing together?"

"What thing? That's what I don't get." She looked away, then back again. She was looking everywhere but at him. That couldn't be a good thing. "Oh, I suck at this. Colby, what are we doing?"

Oh, like he was the fucking roadmap, here. Where was the GPS to haul his butt out of this one? "I thought we were putting something together here. I see you and me in this thing for a long time—maybe forever. What do you see?"

"Are you asking me to marry you?"

Chapter Twenty-Four

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. How could she possibly have been such an idiot? Was there any chance, however small, please God, that she hadn't actually said them out loud? Judging from the slightly stunned look on Colby's face, she had definitely spoken the special words that were like Kryptonite to Superman. And she didn't have to be Robert DeNiro to recognize Bambi in a pair of high beams.

The silence was excruciating. She watched his face as the seconds ticked by. His gaze was focused on something she couldn't see--something behind her, maybe--and she watched him breathe in and out. When she caught herself actually counting the number of breaths, she made the realization that she had stepped. She was out there all by herself. Again.

"Never mind. Listen, I'm going to get dressed and go into work. I'm not that late. I have a lot I need to get done, but I'll try and get out early tonight." Yeah, and maybe Britney Spears would be making the keynote speech at the 2003 N.O.W. Convention.

She was pushing herself away from the table when his hand shot out to grab her wrist. "Hold on a minute, will you? I need a minute to think."

"It's okay, Colby. It's no big deal. But I really need to get to work. It may not seem like much of a job compared to defending the world for freedom, but it's the only one I've got and I need the paycheck." She hadn't meant anything deep, but she decided that it wasn't a bad metaphor. The job had been there for her when a lot of things, and people, hadn't.

"Raven. Can you give me just a minute here? *Please?*"

"We can talk when I get off work. You can have all day to think. I've gotta go."

"*Jesus Christ, Raven! I hadn't thought about it, okay?*" He was shouting and she realized it was the first time she'd heard him raise his voice. "Maybe I should have. Maybe that makes me an asshole. But I didn't. Can you just sit down and talk about it? We can figure this all out."

"No. . . I can't, Colby. I've gotta go." She heard a quiver in her voice and hoped he was too preoccupied with his own thoughts to catch it. She had to get out of here before she made another stupid mistake and let him see the hit her heart had taken. She'd like to preserve just a little dignity and the chances got slimmer every second she stayed. The only thing keeping her marginally together was

the fact that she had somehow managed not to let slip the most humiliating admission of all.

She pulled her arm free and bolted for the bedroom. She grabbed the first pair of pants and clean shirt she saw, gave thanks for cowboy boots without laces, and set a new personal best in dressing for work. She concentrated on getting cleanly out the door. It hurt too much to think about even looking at Colby. He was so everything she had always yearned for and it had all seemed so close.

"You can't be serious, Raven. You've got to stay so we can work this out."

His voice was soft and low and he was standing right behind her. She could feel the heat from his body and smell his wonderfully unique scent that brought back memories of everything they had shared in the past few days. Her mind and heart might be reeling, but her body still yearned for him and the hairs on the back of her neck stood up.

Grab the purse, get the keys, go,go,GO! "I've got to go. I'll see you later."

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It hadn't been a lie when she'd said she was going in to work because she had meant it at the time. But driving away from her apartment, the tears she'd been fighting now rolling down her face in a torrent that felt as though it would never end, she knew work was out of the question. She grabbed the cell phone out of her purse and punched in the number she knew by heart. The three rings it took for someone to pick up gave her time to wipe her streaming nose and eyes on her shirtsleeve.

"Hi Lola—it's Raven. Is John free?" A few seconds later, John's voice came on.

"Hey, girlfriend. What can I do for the lovely and the talented this morning?"

"Hey, yourself, girlfriend." He always managed to make her smile. "I don't suppose you'd happen to have any time free this morning, would you?"

"Nothing urgent going on. What do you need?"

"Some place to go."

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"Oh, sweetie. You look like shit."

"Good to see you too. Don't hold back, now. What do you really think?" She knew she looked like crap. She'd heard there was such a thing as a delicate cryer, but she'd never met one. Every woman she knew, and the few men who'd let go and cried in front of her, always looked wretched and she actually considered herself a standout in this category.

John's sedate law office, not to mention the Hockney sofa, might never be the same. She and John had been friends for years and most of the front office staff--as well as a couple of the partners--knew her. But he was the one person she could always count on to give her a sympathetic ear and a non-judgmental shoulder to cry on. It wasn't the first time she'd called him when she needed a quiet place to go; and she'd done the same for him in the bad old days before he'd met Chuck.

"I think your Navy man is giving you a hard time. What happened, did he break your heart? Do I have to go beat the crap out of him?"

"How did you know he was Navy? It never came up when you two met. Did it?"

He smiled the little crooked grin that never failed to charm a jury and said, "Ugh, don't ask. I ran into your mother at Dairy Queen."

"Oh. Sorry. But you have to know that if I didn't love you already, I would just because you offered to go beat up Colby."

"Honey. . . so tell me what happened."

"Just the usual."

"You mean some perfectly nice, if unworthy, man expressed an interest in getting to know you better and you shot him down?"

"Close. Some perfectly nice--if near-sighted--man expressed a momentary interest, only to come to his senses after he thought about it."

"Raves, you have always been your own worst critic. I'm not going to beat on you when you're already down, but would you at least think about the possibility that maybe he really likes you and wants to get to know you better?"

The intercom on John's phone buzzed, and his assistant's voice came through: "Mr. Beltran, there's a Mr. Denbow out here to see Ms. McKnight. He says it's extremely urgent."

They could both hear Colby's voice behind Lola's. "Raven, it's important!"

John looked at her, asking, "It's up to you – do you want to see him?"

"Oh, of course. But how did he. . .?"

The door opened with force, and Colby's energy immediately filled the room. "Raven. I've got to talk to you. I've got to go back to California. Right now. We're going wheels-up in twenty-four hours."

Chapter Twenty-Five

"Can you drive me to the airport? There's no time. I've got a connecting flight out of Portland that leaves in three hours." The adrenaline was flowing so heavy he shoved his hands in his pockets to keep from reaching for Raven. Between the need to get her back and the need to get on a plane that would take him away from her, he wasn't sure he trusted himself to touch her. Oh, screw it—she'd just have to deal with it. He reached out to pull her close—Jesus, she felt good. "I wasted a lot of time tracking you down. I have to leave *now*."

"Okay. I'll take you. But what happened? I thought you had another week." Her eyes looked red and watery and either she'd developed hellacious allergies in the last two hours or she'd been crying. God, what a fuck up he could be.

"Some brain damage up the line decided they needed us for what's supposed to be a short assignment; but you never know. I have to go, Raven."

She was obviously struggling to assimilate what he'd just told her into what had happened this morning. He half-expected her to tell him where he could stick it, and it would be exactly what he deserved. But, at the same time, he prayed that what they had together was strong enough to get her to try again.

"Okay. Just let me get my stuff." She turned to her friend and gave him a hug. A really long hug. What the hell was he doing hugging her back that tight for? He was just about to break it up when the next blow came, "Thanks, John. I love you."

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Airport good-byes sucked.

He'd tried to find a relatively quiet corner of the airport and, luckily for him, Pendleton's own tiny version of Huston control never got truly busy any time except the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. But the hard plastic seats and the occasional interruption by the P.A. announcer was a far cry from where he'd like to be: namely, back in Raven's bed listening to the murmurs and cries she made when he stroked himself into her as deeply as he could.

Holy shit, what a mess. For a supposedly smart guy, he'd jacked things up royally. What he needed was time and that was the one thing he was out of. He needed time to straighten things out with her and make her see that even though he'd been guilty of being stupid that they belonged together.

The trip to the airport from her friend's office had been a conversation-free zone except for the directions necessary to get them to the terminal and a brief discussion about what to do with his truck after she dropped him off. She'd been a little too quiet and accepting, though.

If he'd been dealing with any other woman he'd have thought what a sweet, docile little thing she was. But he knew Raven was anything but--not that she couldn't be sweet when the situation called for it. But this one didn't. This was more of your 'rant, rave, and throw things' situation—to be followed immediately by some hot, sweaty make-up sex. And damn if that didn't sound just the ticket right now.

But the clock above the arrival and departure monitors said that they had a little over twenty minutes before his flight took off. Which meant that they'd be calling for boarding passes any minute. Time. He needed more time. Oregon and California were too far apart. Eleven hundred miles didn't cut it when it came to maintaining a relationship.

"Come with me."

She was sitting across his lap, head on his shoulder, hand playing with his shirtsleeve, but his remark snapped her out of her daze.

"What?"

"Come with me. Come to San Diego. You can stay at my place while I'm gone. And, with any luck this won't take long and I'll be back in just a few days. Think about it: we'll have more time on the plane and you'll be right there when I get back. No delay waiting for me to get to Oregon from California. Raven—let's *do* it."

The gate attendants chose that moment to begin calling for his flight to board, rows one through twenty boarding first. He saw her look from the boarding gate, and back to his face, doubt written large in her eyes.

"Colby. . . I don't even have any clothes. What about my apartment? What about my job?"

He could smell victory. She didn't want the separation any more than he did. If he could get her on the plane and as far as San Diego, he'd be home free. He needed to know she was in his house, under his roof, in his bed—waiting for

him. He needed to know she was in the circle of SEAL wives and girlfriends; that she'd have someone looking out for her when he couldn't be there.

"We'll buy whatever you need in San Diego. The rest can be handled by phone. We'll figure out the details on the plane. Come on, Raven. Just do it. Think of how much fun we'll have. Just do it."

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"This is just a vacation. I'm only going to ask for a couple of weeks off when I call. I am not moving in with you, just so we're clear on this."

The noise of the jet engines made personal conversations tough, unless you didn't mind obvious listening-in and the occasional bit of unsolicited advice, so he leaned in close. They'd had to hustle to buy an extra ticket and make it to their seats on time and the extra effort had made them both a little sweaty. His face was inches from her neck and he wanted to start there and lick his way down. Deciding just a little taste to get him through wouldn't hurt anything, he lowered his mouth the rest of the way and placed a leisurely open-mouthed kiss on her neck, just below her ear. He let his mouth linger and used his tongue to taste her still-damp skin. He let a soft groan rumble up and vibrate on the delicate skin of her neck. No question: he was addicted. How was he going to function without at least a daily taste of her? A daily . . .

"Raven, did you know you have something on your neck here?"

"Besides you, you mean? Mmm, but you really *do* do that awfully well, you know."

"No, you have something on your neck. I think you're going to want to use the head and wash it off."

"Now, you see? I didn't think they'd let you smoke crack and stay in the Navy. What are you talking about?"

"Come on, I'll show you. You're going to need some help with that, anyway." He took her hand and tugged her toward the tiny airplane restroom.

Chapter Twenty-Six

There were no secrets in life any more. Everyone knew everyone else's business. The perfectly nice looking middle aged woman sitting with her son in the last row had looked them both over and cocked a manicured eyebrow at Raven, letting her know she knew exactly why it took two people to use one tiny toilet. *Oh, like you wouldn't change places with me in a New York minute.* And she'd bet the woman wouldn't even bother to exchange names. No doubt about it: women could tell just by looking at him that Colby could get the job done.

He closed the door behind them, throwing the latch as he took her face in his hands, kissing her deeply. The plane took a dip and she quickly gripped Colby's waist, trying to widen her stance for better balance. But Colby's legs were outside hers and his were already braced as widely as the telephone booth-sized stall would allow. All she could do was hang on tight to him and hope for the best. "Oh, Raven, you feel so good. I'm just getting used to having you here every day. I'm not even close to ready to leave."

"Tell me about it. At least you're doing what you're used to doing. You're leaving with your team just like you always do. I have no idea what I'm doing." But he reversed the angle of their kiss, taking it even deeper. He wrapped his arms around her, squeezing her so tightly she wondered if it was possible to be completely absorbed into him. He kissed her again, drawing her tongue into his mouth, only to slowly pull his head back, drawing slowly away from her and letting her tongue retreat. She opened her eyes at the extended lack of contact and saw him staring softly--tenderly almost--down at her upturned face. "What?" she asked softly.

"Nothing. Just looking. You are so beautiful." A half-smile curved his mouth and she saw the instant the idea came into his head. He picked her up, flipping the seat down with his knee, reversing their positions. He sat down, drawing her between his legs, now spread as widely as they could go. The plane took another small lurch, so he hung on to her waist with one hand, while he used the other to unbutton her shirt. The new land-speed record she'd set getting out of the apartment this morning hadn't given her time to hunt down a bra, but Colby didn't seem to mind. She saw his breath catch briefly, before his smile grew broader. "So beautiful," he repeated quietly, glancing up at her eyes.

He made a circle with his legs so that she could maintain a little stability as he took his hand from her waist. He used both hands to spread her shirt wide, before circling them behind her to draw her close to his mouth. She saw him take the first two fingers of his hand to gently brush the tip of one nipple, only to watch it bead up tightly before he drew it into his waiting mouth. Using the

same lovely suction he'd used so devastatingly on her neck earlier, he drew her breast into his mouth. Her head fell back on her limp neck and her eyes drifted lazily shut at the sheer, voluptuous pleasure of it. His mouth was warm and his tongue was a sleek rasp, grating gently over her sensitive nipple.

She groped with her hands for something to hang onto. The pleasure of what his mouth was doing to her breast, combined with the slight lurches and bumps of the plane, created a disorienting effect. She found the walls and braced her arms out straight as she locked her knees and did her best to remain upright. But the result was a form of self-imposed bondage: she couldn't use her hands for anything else and she felt totally open and vulnerable.

He moved to her other breast, replacing his mouth with the fingers of one hand on the first. He had large hands and her breast fit into it easily, it's weight gently cradled while his fingers continued to tease the tip. Meanwhile his mouth was drawing her other breast into his mouth, where it was alternately licked and suckled. He drew slowly back, allowing his teeth to graze her skin, only to bite down lightly when he reached the peak. He squeezed the tip of her other nipple between his thumb and forefinger at the same time and she felt the jolt as the nerves leading directly to her womb felt electrified.

She nearly cried at the intensity of it all, but he was moving his hand now and beginning to unbutton her pants. She couldn't bear to lose the contact, and she leaned forward as much as the restricted space would allow. He was loosening her pants now and pushing them down, giving himself total access to her. She pried her eyelids open to watch his long fingers as they parted her folds and entered her; first with one, and then a second finger. He used his thumb to caress her clitoris, while his fingers pressed firmly back from inside her, for all the world as though he was testing the texture of fine silk. Her body strained toward him, wavering on the brink of release, when he looked up into her eyes. It was as though she was looking directly into his soul, the depth of everything he was feeling right there for her to see. He increased the pressure between his thumb and fingers and she came with the most intense orgasm of her life.

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She was leaning on Colby's shoulder, drifting close to sleep. Between the total relaxation she felt in the wake of having tender love made to her in the bathroom stall of Alaska Airlines Flight 504, and the lack of sleep from the night before, she was surprised she wasn't comatose. Instead, she was floating lazily between waking and dream states. This was definitely one to tell the kiddies. But who would ever believe her? She knew that she would definitely never think of airline travel the same way again. But it wasn't just about the intensity of the



physical sensations. It was the love and tenderness she'd seen when she'd looked deeply into his eyes. What they'd just experienced hadn't been about getting off—it had been about expressing the purest and deepest emotion she'd ever felt. And she'd felt it in his every touch and read it on his face.

It hadn't been all about her, either. After he'd stroked her and watched her descend from her climax, he'd unzipped his own pants and covered himself with the condom he'd pulled from a back pocket. And then he'd entered her and made love to her all over again.

She had no idea how long they'd been in there together or if anyone had noticed when they'd finally opened the door and returned to their seats. She was off in her own little world—and a pretty damn fine world it was. He led her back to their seats and dropped a protective arm around her shoulder. Her head dropped naturally to his shoulder and her eyes drifted shut.

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They didn't have to wait for luggage, because she didn't have any and he had only his small duffel that he'd carried on with them. They were making their way through the terminal toward the exit, and the taxis waiting outside. She must still be doopey with sleep and exhaustion, because she hadn't noticed until now that the man who had pushed away from the wall and was heading toward them was very probably the most beautiful human being she'd ever seen. He was absolutely stunning--but none of that physical perfection moved her at all. As he stopped in front of them, Colby drew his arm tighter around her and she settled comfortably close against his side.

The man, whoever he was, took them both in but eventually settled his gaze on Colby's face. "You're welcome, dickhead."

"I don't remember calling for a ride, Will. And could you try to at least pretend you have some manners? I'd appreciate you watching the mouth."

"Oh. I see." He looked back from Colby to her. "I didn't realize I'd be interrupting anything. "

"I think I can make it to the first day of Kindergarten without anyone holding my hand. You got any details yet on where they're holding it?"

"Yeah, and you're gonna just fuckin' love this."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Give me five minutes, Will.”

He’d left his duffel in the car and pulled his key ring from the pocket of his jeans. Will had found a shady spot in the driveway and turned off his old BMW to wait for him. They were short on time, but he needed to do more than slow the car down and shove Raven out in front of his house.

“No problem, bro. We’re okay on time. Take all the time you need—take ten if you want.”

Raven was standing in the middle of the tiny front lawn of the one-bedroom house he’d bought when he’d first moved to California. She was looking around, no doubt noticing the detached garage, the two skinny strips of cement leading up to it, and the million other details that dated it as having been built in the ‘twenties. The realtor had called it ‘vintage’, but he figured until the windows didn’t whistle whenever the Santa Ana’s blew and the wiring would support running the microwave and the washing machine at the same time, he’d just call it ‘old.’

He didn’t plan on living here forever, but it was a good investment and he’d been able to afford it because it wasn’t anywhere near Old Towne, there was no ocean view, and a seven-hundred square foot one-bedroom, one-bath house was a tough sell in this neighborhood. ‘Transitioning’ was another word his realtor had used to gloss over the fact that not all the houses were kept up all that well. His was one of the ones that was a little run down, but he enjoyed fixing it up on some of his longer stretches home. He wouldn’t put Bob Vila out of work any time soon, but he knew his way around tools and he figured anything he did would only add to the value of the house when he eventually sold and moved back to Oregon.

He hadn’t been bullshitting when he’d told Raven he had a business plan. His baseball scholarship had paid for a pretty decent education courtesy of USC. He’d been a better-than-average outfielder and hitter and had even been scouted by some of the big-league teams. But he’d known since high school that the Navy was what he wanted to do for the next part of his life. He figured he had about five more good years of serving his country before he went home to Oregon and put his business degree to use.

“Raven, I’m sorry this is so rushed. I don’t have time for much more than a quick-and-dirty tour, show you where everything is, and then I’m out of here.”

“Quick-and-dirty, huh? If you still have energy for that, you’re a better man than I am.”

God, she was amazing. She was dead on her feet, a thousand miles from home and about to be abandoned by her only reason for being here, and she could still make a joke. And a spicy one, at that.

“Hey, don’t sell yourself short—you’re a fine man.”

It was a measure of how wiped out she was that it took a couple of extra seconds for the needle to register. When it did her eyes sparked and she threw a punch that a weedy ten-year-old could have blocked.

“Pretty pathetic, McKnight. Come on. I’ll show you the house. Then you can sleep for a week and we can try that again when I get back.”

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Seven-hundred-square feet didn’t take much time to tour. The front door opened into the living room, with a small bedroom and even smaller bathroom off to the right, while the kitchen and eating area ran along the back of the house. The crystal door knobs and ceiling molding almost made up for the complete lack of insulation and the inadequate heating, but no need to go into that right now. He’d slept in a lot worse in the field, and as a single guy it just hadn’t been much of an issue. Thinking about Raven having to deal with it while he was off on some op, though, didn’t sit too well. He’d have to move that higher up the priority list now that the picture had changed.

“I made a list of phone numbers for you, starting with my cell phone. Try it first, because if this is only a training op I’ll be able to keep it with me. I’ve got a couple of the guys with wives’ numbers, Senior Chief and--as a last resort--LT’s office. This last one is the cleaning lady I use sometimes, if you feel like the place needs it. Call her if you want; her name’s Elena.”

He couldn’t tell how much of this she was getting. She had looked a little better after the nap on the plane, but now looked to be fading fast. She would probably need at least one really good night’s sleep to come back to anything close to normal energy levels. She’d been through the wringer and it was only sheer determination keeping her upright right now.

“Here are the keys: the big one is to the truck out in the garage, the key to the garage door is the little brass one next to it. This one is the house key—it fits both front and back doors. What else? Oh, yeah: you’ll need money. This is my bank card, but you can use it like a credit card. There’s about a grand in the checking right now, so buy food—I’m sure there’s nothing in the house to eat—buy clothes, buy whatever you need. I’ll just write the PIN number on the bottom of the phone list. If you want to really make points you can memorize it—it’s my mom’s birthday.” He couldn’t resist smiling at the look that brought to her face.

“What, no power of attorney? You’re only going for like a week, aren’t you? Or do we even know? This is way, way too much, Colby.”

“You may not. It probably is just a short trip so there’s not much likelihood that you’d need all this. But it never hurts to be prepared. “

“Colby, are you nuts? This is, like, your whole life you’re handing me here.”

“No it’s not, Raves. These are just details. But you wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for me—damn right I’m going to make sure you have food and clothes and anything else you need. So just take the stuff, make yourself at home and get lots of rest. Because when I get back, you won’t be getting much sleep for a while again.”

He gave her a second to let that sink in and wondered if she’d spend as much of their forced separation thinking about how good they were together as he would. “Come here, you. Give me a kiss and then I’ve really got to go.”

Her eyes met his and he saw the realization that their time was finally up. He was about to leave. The kiss was quick and hungry, as though they each wanted to pack a lifetime’s worth of feeling into one moment.

She pulled her mouth away suddenly, taking his chin in her hand and looking him straight in the eye. “You be careful, you got it? I love you, goddammit—you better come back to me.”

He felt the words like a lightning bolt to his chest. She looked a little startled, too, as though she had let something slip she hadn’t meant to. “Oh, baby—you know I’ll be back.”

One more quick kiss—one last taste of her—and then he pressed the ring of keys into her hand and walked out the door.

Will had the car running by the time his left foot was hitting the second porch step. Two strides was all it took to cross the little lawn, and he checked to see if Raven was watching from the door as Will backed the car out of the driveway; but all he could see was the screen door and nothing in the darkness beyond.

“Damn , Wiz—you’re the man. You could give lessons to jack rabbits.”

Will was arguably his best friend in the teams, but there were times when he was all but begging for a good ass-kicking. No question, but that this was one of those times--and he was about one smart remark away from getting one.

“Will, shut the fuck up and drive.”

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

She could tell by the angle of the sun that she'd slept later than she ever did at home. The sun was coming in through the East-facing bedroom window and she could see a chunk of cloudless blue Southern California sky from where she lay. It had been late afternoon when she'd laid down, intending to take a short nap before researching dinner. Airline peanuts and a can of V-8 did not a meal make, but apparently her body had decided a lack of sleep took priority over the need to eat. Bathroom first—breakfast next.

The bathroom was tiny but charming; consisting of what looked like the original tub and pedestal sink, and a slightly newer-looking toilet. Just seeing the toilet brought back details of yesterday's plane trip and what was, without a doubt, the most memorable trip to the restroom of her life. If more women could experience what she had yesterday, that whole 'chicks going to the bathroom in herds' cliché could be laid to rest once and for all.

She realized she was standing and staring at the toilet with a goofy smile on her face. Well, wasn't that what love did to otherwise sensible people? Which brought to mind another memory of yesterday: she hadn't really used the 'L' word, had she? She wanted to bury her head in her hands and contemplate what an incredible moron she was. What the hell had she been thinking, to let that little gem drop? Oh, she was so screwed here. She had left herself absolutely no maneuvering room, when it came time to make a dignified retreat.

She wasn't being a pessimist, was she, so much as looking life square in the eye? Didn't most intelligent creatures base today's behavior on yesterday's experiences? And life had taught her nothing if not that she truly stunk at relationships. She had never been much for the whole dating thing and once she'd hit about twenty-five or so she'd felt just plain silly calling someone her 'boyfriend'. Not that there'd been a whole raft-load of opportunities to do so. She didn't enjoy clubs or bars--except for the occasional night out with John and Chuck--and she never seemed to meet anyone through work that wasn't better with keyboards and routers than he was with people.

Thank God she and Vince had both had enough sense to realize that their engagement had had more to do with what they thought was supposed to come next than it had with enduring love and passion, and ended it before anyone got really hurt. It had honestly been something of a relief, once she'd realized that the thought of looking at Vince every morning over breakfast for the rest of her life filled her with about as much excitement as the thought of a three-day seminar on the new tax laws.

She made her way to Colby's kitchen and found it was small, but tidy—just like the rest of the house. The refrigerator was completely empty except for a box of baking soda and four remaining bottles from a six-pack of Sam Adams beer. She realized he must not have spent much time here at all between coming back from his mission and heading up to Oregon. The cabinets revealed a few canned goods and, praise Jesus, an unopened can of Maxwell House. Five minutes' diligent searching failed to reveal a can opener, however. She was thinking seriously about using her teeth to open it when she heard a knock at the back door--startling her into dropping the can on her bare foot.

Both doors in the old house were the old-fashioned kind no sane builder used any more, made up of multiple miniature panes that gave whoever was knocking a full view of the inside of the house. She'd had the foresight to pull the blind down over the front door, but the two women knocking at the side door had a perfect view of the glorious picture that she was before coffee. She'd removed her jeans for what was meant to be only a nap and was wearing the same red polo she'd pulled on for work yesterday. She knew from her trip to the bathroom that the picture she made was less than stellar but, thankfully, her butt was more or less covered.

"Raven? Colby sent us. I'm Ana, this is Gabrielle."

"Just a minute, okay?" She held up her index finger in the universal sign for 'give me a second' and ran for the bedroom and her pants. Sure, she'd still look like shit, but at least she'd be shit with some pants on.

They'd known the secret password, so she opened the door. "Hi. I'm sorry, but I just woke up. Yesterday was a really long day and I'm afraid I overslept."

Both women appeared to be about her own age—thirty. Ana was shortish and dark, while Gabrielle was blond, closer to her own height and looked as though she should have been named 'Gwyneth' or 'Cameron'.

"Oh, honey, don't even worry about it." Both women offered sympathetic smiles, but the one who'd announced she was Ana went on, "Colby called my husband Tommy and asked us to come by and make sure you were okay. Tommy and Brie's husband Brian are both on Team Five with Colby. Brian and Tommy got to say home, though, thank God. So what can we do to help? I'm sure you'll need a trip to the grocery store. There's probably nothing in the house to eat. Did Colby even stop here before he took off again? Brie, did didn't Brian say the Wiz went straight up to Oregon?"

As Gabrielle turned to close the door behind her, Raven saw for the first time that she had a baby hiked on her hip. The child was dressed in green and yellow, giving her no clue as to the baby's gender. It was blond like its mother, grinning toothlessly, and of indeterminate age. Not having much experience with babies, she guessed it was somewhere between the ages of newborn and old enough to ask for the car keys.

"Ana, give Raven a chance to answer, would you? Take a breath, even." She rolled her eyes a bit at her friend before asking, "How can we help, Raven?"

"Honestly? I'd give a kidney for some coffee right now. Does either of you happen to know where Colby hides the can opener?" She gestured with the still unopened can.

The two women took a half-second to confer, presumably by telepathy, and it was Ana who offered, "How about this: why don't we take you out for a real meal? We can swing by the grocery store and maybe even a department store on the way back, so you can pick up a few things. I didn't talk to him, but I guess Wiz told Tommy you might need to buy some clothes? Gotta love a man who thinks like that."

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"So why do you call him 'Wiz'? I've never heard him mention it."

Ana was helping her put away the groceries they'd bought after dropping Gabrielle and the baby--whose name was Benjamin, she'd learned at breakfast--off at home. The baby had gotten increasingly fussy throughout the meal until Gabrielle had begged off the trip to the grocery store. ("Trust me, here, ladies. If we don't spend some up-close-and-personal time with our nap blankie, it's going to get really ugly.")

"I've never asked, but I'm sure it's his BUD/S name. And you can bet the mortgage it's probably something embarrassing that he won't want to explain. What I want to hear, though, is your story. How did you and my favorite bachelor meet? And especially how did you end up two states away from home with nothing but the clothes you stand up in? That has got to be some story, girlfriend."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“So are you going to wait for the plane, or just jump in and start swimming back, Superman?”

He’d been lost in his thoughts of how things seemed to be winding down at the Pearl, and calculating different scenarios relating to how soon he might possibly get home to Raven when Will’s words intruded.

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about you staring off at the mainland for the last fifteen minutes or so, so wired up you’re practically vibrating. You look like you’re thinking about swimming for it.”

“No, man, I was just . . . thinking. “ He didn’t care to repeat what he’d been thinking. He’d had reunion scenes with Raven running through his head. He told himself it would have been different if this had been a real op, with lives at stake, instead of somebody’s idea of rewarding the troops disguised as helping test a new submersible. Any other time a week in Pearl Harbor wouldn’t be considered hardship duty, but he’d had a tough time keeping his head in the game. Hard to believe for the guy who was usually the first hand raised when it came to playing with the new toys.

Un-fucking-believable what a difference a week could make, though; or, make that two weeks. Two weeks ago he’d gone home to visit his folks and, hopefully, lay some ghosts to rest. The entire five months he’d spent in A-stan he’d fought recurring thoughts of Raven by telling himself she couldn’t possibly be as all-that as he remembered. But the thoughts, and accompanying dreams, had persisted – so he’d jumped the first plane back to Oregon for some quiet family time and a little reality-check. And, boy, had his reality been checked. It had been turned on its tiny little head.

He’d spent the most amazing seven days of his life with someone he’d barely known until then. And now he didn’t want to imagine a future that didn’t have her in it. They’d have to do some scrambling to rearrange their schedules, though. Schedules, hell – how about lives? He’d just have to find a way to convince Raven that it wasn’t that big a deal to relocate to San Diego. But she was brilliant. She’d have no trouble finding something interesting to do, job-wise, as talented as she was. He wasn’t ready to quit the teams and move on to the next phase yet; and no way were they going to try to maintain things long-distance. He’d had a taste of that this past week and it hadn’t been fun.

He'd been able to keep his phone with him and call her, usually once every other day or so. They never talked long, but she'd enjoyed torturing him by talking dirty and telling him all the things she wanted to do to him when he got back. Her imagination was tying him in knots and if they only did half the things she thought of he'd die happy--and exhausted.

"Thinking with the wrong head though, looks like, bro."

"Much as I appreciate the support, Will, you don't know what you're talking about."

The thoughts he'd been thinking about Raves had been anything but chaste and his body's reaction had been swift and one hundred percent predictable. And, while Will knew him as well as anyone on the planet did, it didn't take advanced surveillance technique to spot this particular problem.

"I'm just saying, I hope you know what you're doing. You are fucking trouble waiting to happen, man. What're you doing messing with a good thing, anyway? You're set. What are you doing? You're not just looking for trouble; you're putting a big-ass sign in your yard advertising 'space available here.' "

"Will, I say this from all love, man, but you don't know shit about shit. Look, I'm sorry you got fucked over, but that doesn't mean the rest of us have to live our lives accordingly. Besides, you give crappy advice. If I'd listened to you I'd still be seeing Maureen."

"Maureen was hot. I don't know why you ditched her in the first place."

"Maureen was fucking psychotic, that's why. She had a piranha tattooed on her- . . .whatever. The restraining order from her last boyfriend shoulda been a big fucking clue."

"Yeah, she seemed like she was wrapped a little tight. Still, she was extremely *hot*."

"She was-- Why am I having this conversation again? Don't bring up Maureen and I won't bring up the time you tried to build your own headers for that piece of German crap you drive. Will they even sell you fire insurance anymore?"

"Yeah? Blow me, Chevy boy."

"No thanks. But thanks for offering."

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"Hey, Will—checkout Lockhart."

"Whoa. What do you say we sit here for a couple of minutes and let him get a good lead on us? I don't want to be between him and wherever he's going."

"No. You don't want to be between *me* and wherever *I'm* going. Put the car in gear and fucking go."

"You know, it's really a toss up who's the more pathetic loser between you and Lockhart. On the one hand, you're clearly the more whipped of the two, but at least you're getting some. Lockhart, on the other hand: poor bastard . . . I don't think his little jailbait's even coming across for him. But even Jimmy's still got enough of a pair left to be pissed about it."

"Look at it this way, Bruschetti: those of us dating actual women mean more copies of 'Red Shoe Diaries' on the shelf at Blockbuster for you. Knock yourself out. Or should I say, rub one out?"

"Ooh, good one, Wiz. Nice to see you've still got a little fight left in ya. Nut it up--we'll be there in five minutes. Ten if I stop for all the lights."

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"Honey, I'm home."

It took him a minute to identify the sound of country music coming from his stereo. It apparently wasn't enough that Will tortured him regularly by playing it whenever circumstances forced the two of them into close proximity for any length of time--they'd somehow gotten to Raven too. Just like 'Invasion of the Body Snatchers': one day you went to sleep with a pod next to your bed and the next you woke up with an unexplainable craving for music that sounded like large numbers of people doing unspeakable things to really, really pissed off cats. His vision of world peace was something like the old Coke commercial, only his hilltop was populated by hundreds of people all singing anything by the Stones.

He'd listened to a lot of C & W since working with Will and this was one of the less offensive ones he'd been forced to endure. It was a strong female voice singing about going down on her knees. *Oh, yeah!* And Raven was singing along at the top of her lungs—really belting it out. Only there was very little chance his girl would ever be mistaken for Tricia Yearwood. He was a little surprised there were no neighborhood dogs gathered outside, howling along in sympathy.

Jesus, she really was awful. And the thought occurred to him that this must be love, because he had no urge to turn around and see if there was still time to flag down Will before he took off.

She dropped the candles she'd been placing along the top of the narrow fireplace mantle and jumped when she realized he was standing behind her. The volume on the music must have blocked the sounds of Will's car and the screen door banging behind him. "Holy . . . You scared the shit out me! Doesn't anybody ever knock in this neighborhood?"

All he could think was that he had better uses for that mouth than that. He dropped his duffel and reached for her in one continuous movement. He couldn't stand to be two separate entities for another single second. He wrapped her in his arms and held her head in place while his tongue plunged into her mouth. She was only startled for a second; because in another second she was sliding her arms around his neck and two more had her wrapping her legs around his waist.

She pulled her head back long enough to scan his face, "Oh, baby, I've *missed* you." And then she was kissing him with all the passion that was in her. He couldn't get close enough and the bedroom was too far away. But it was only two steps to the wall next to the fireplace.

Everything he'd been feeling for the last week but had been forced to suppress burst to the surface. He had to be inside her, had to show her how he felt, had to prove to her the absolute necessity of their being together. Clothes became a Byzantine maze to be fought through at maximum speed. It was a cruel necessity that he had to unwrap her legs from his waist and lose the sweet pressure of her crotch grinding on his erection long enough to remove her shorts, but sometimes victory required small sacrifices.

He could only grunt and go faster when she leaned her head back against the wall, looked at him through eyes dazed with passion and urged him, "Quick, baby, quick. I need you." A condom was another of necessity's cruelties, but maybe not for much longer. He covered himself, gathered her sweet ass in both hands and slid home.

Chapter Thirty

"Oh, no. It's Friday night, isn't it?"

She'd been lying next to Colby, their arms and legs entwined; but the random firing of neurons that had led to the sudden realization of the day and time had her struggling to get free and sit up.

"To be followed almost immediately by Saturday morning. Why?" He shoved a pillow behind his back and sat up. His hair was falling in his eyes and he needed a shave – and he looked . . . absolutely wonderful.

"I just remembered: tonight is Tommy's birthday and Ana is throwing him a surprise party at Buster's. I told her I'd be there. But that was before I knew you'd be home. Gabrielle and Ana – especially Ana – were so nice while you were gone. I hate to let her down."

"Raven, trust me on this – no one will expect to see you there. They'll all know I just got back, and even the married guys who just got back won't be showing up. Under the circumstances I'd say about two weeks would be a reasonable amount of time before anyone would expect to see either of us."

They had moved to the bed from the living room a couple of hours earlier. Since they had taken the edge off their mutual need with that first explosive joining against the living room wall, they had used the intervening time for a more leisurely reacquaintance. Colby had removed each of her remaining bits of clothing one piece at a time; using his hands, mouth and body to express his need and desire. And affection, too, she thought.

She might not be widely experienced with men, but she was willing to swear a man didn't take his time the way Colby had, exploring and tasting a woman inch by inch, unless his feelings were involved. Unless he was abnormally fond of melon-scented body wash, that is. But he'd made slow, delicious love to her, twice bringing her to the edge of release--only to back off, leaving her panting in frustration. She'd finally resorted to threats of violence and retribution; which had only made him laugh and go even slower. She'd cut out her own tongue before she'd admit it, but the pay off had been worth it.

"Two weeks? No way. I don't think I could take more than. . ." He was drawing her back down on the bed, shifting his weight to move over her.

"You were saying?" he asked silkily.

“Hmm? Oh, right. Absolutely no more than another five or six days of this – and then I’ll absolutely need a breather.”

He settled himself between her legs and let his erection begin to slowly stroke her already sensitive cleft. He took teasing bites along her collarbone, working his way up to her neck.

“Five or six days? I guess that’s okay as a starting point, but I can see we’re going to need to address some serious PT here and see if we can get you into some kind of real shape.”

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“Denbow, what the hell are you doin’ here, man? You’re killing me.”

She concluded that the disgusted man giving Colby a hard time must be Gabrielle’s husband Brian. He fit the general description Brie had given – medium height and red hair – but the baby on his shoulder was the clincher when she recognized her little buddy Benjamin. She saw Brian reach into his pocket, pull out some bills and slap five dollars into the waiting hand of the birthday boy, Tommy.

“Don’t listen to him, Wiz. I had faith. I knew Raven wouldn’t let you weasel out. Did she tell you she had dinner with Ana, the girls and I one night? She’s too good for you, C.”

“Shut up, would ya? There’s a chance she hasn’t figured that out yet.” Colby smiled at her and squeezed the hand he’d been holding.

“What the hell are you smoking? Five minutes around you and she had that much figured out. I just can’t figure out why she’s hanging around. Must be a mercy f--.”

The last word was cut off when Ana slapped his shoulder. “Excuse me, Mr. Father-of-Two-Girls, but your daughter,” she gestured to the four-year-old holding her hand, “would like her daddy to take her to play the crane game and win her a stuffed animal.”

He looked at them, chagrined, but immediately scooped up his daughter, saying, “Oops – got to go. Come on, Sweet Pea. Let’s go clean ‘em out, what do you say?”

“She’ll be swearing like a sailor by the time she’s five. I can only imagine what the teen years will be like,” Ana said, shaking her head and laughing.

Raven watched the two of them walking toward the stuffed animal-dispensing game of chance near the front door and stifled a sigh. “He’s a great dad, Ana. They’re darling together,” and nearly slapped her hand over her own mouth, hoping Colby hadn’t been paying attention. She realized after she’d spoken them how her words must sound to him. This was very weird ground to be on, indeed; she had no idea how he felt about kids. The last thing she wanted was for him to think she was hinting around at anything.

But he must have had his mind on other things because his only response was to slide an arm around her and tilt her head back for a quick kiss. “Hey, beautiful – you hungry? How do you feel about pasta? As your personal fitness trainer, I definitely recommend carbohydrates for long-lasting energy.”

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“So then Wiz tells the guy ‘Better make eleven of those To Go.’ “

Her sides hurt from laughing. Tommy and Brian had been telling stories about their mutual adventures. The stories had obviously had their language sanitized for the sake of the family members present and no mention was made of specific locations or even times; but most were told at the expense of Colby’s dignity and all were hilarious.

Ana’s husband Tommy was a born storyteller. He’d had them all laughing with stories pulled primarily from the team’s training exercises. Colby didn’t seem to have made a mistake or had a less-than-perfect judgement call at any point in his career that Tommy hadn’t been there to chronicle. He either had a photographic memory for detail or he flat-out made things up on the spot – she couldn’t decide which. Either way, he took the Devil’s own delight in trying to make Colby squirm, and he’d had them all laughing until the food was gone and the children began to fuss.

“Honey, are you ready to go? I think we’ve more than done our duty.”

She’d had a glass of wine with her dinner and she was feeling mellow and relaxed, tucked against Colby’s side in the corner booth they’d all squeezed into. It took her a few extra seconds to realize the ‘honey’ was addressed to her. She gave him a side-long glance and let a slow smile spread over her mouth.

“Oh, yeah – I’m ready.”

Chapter Thirty-One

“What are you doing?”

He’d been outside washing his truck, enjoying the first hint of fall in the air. He had the ballgame on, a few more days of scheduled leave and he knew Raven was just a few feet away in the house. Life was good. The truck was done and he’d been thinking about taking her bicycle shopping. Cycling had become his favorite winter activity during downtime from the team and it would be great if Raven could share it with him, so he’d wandered inside to see what she was up to.

“Back home we call this ‘cooking dinner.’ “

“You cook? Excellent.” She shot him a look, but said nothing – only pressing her lips together in a thin line. Interesting. Best try another approach, then.

“What are we eating?” It was an honest question. He could see vegetables already cut up and she was busy chopping something that looked like oddly shaped red meat with the bone still in, into medium-sized chunks.

“Oxtail stew.” Another look, but no additional comment.

“So what’s that you’re chopping there?”

“That would be the ox tails.”

“Shut up. I always thought that was just a colorful name for beef stew. But we’re eating actual tails of actual cows?”

“It’s pretty good. Give it a chance, okay?”

He might not always be the most sensitive guy on the block, but it was obvious that there was something else going on here. But damned if he knew what it was. As far as he could tell, things had been going great. Excellent. Could hardly be improved on, really. The days since he’d been home had been spent together eating, playing, occasionally sleeping, and making love as often as humanly possible. She could even watch baseball with him without asking after every inning if it would be over soon. He’d finally found his perfect woman.

But he was beginning to appreciate the truth in the sweatshirt he’d seen Tommy’s wife Ana wear that read, “If Mama ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy.” Unlike most of the time, Raven was having trouble meeting his eyes, and her

lower lip pressed in at an odd angle. It almost looked as though it might be trembling a little. What was that all about?

He could never stay away from her for very long, and if she was within reach it always felt better to be touching her than not. So he moved closer and began stroking her back.

"You seem upset. What's the matter — did Cisco stock take a dump today?"

"No. I don't know — I have no idea."

That was definitely a catch he'd heard in her voice. He wasn't imagining things. He took the knife out of her hand and drew her into his arms, saying softly, "What's up, baby?"

"Look, it's nothing. I'm just being stupid. I was looking at airline schedules on the computer while you were outside. I was thinking about going home." Now she looked up at him, saying, "I have to be back at work on Monday or I don't have a job to go home to."

He saw the stark look in her eyes, a devastating mix of pain and sadness, and it hit him like a blow to the gut.

"What the f-- ? Sorry, I'm just. . . I guess *I'm* being stupid, because I hadn't been thinking about you going home at all. You've been here and it's been so perfect. I guess I just figured you were staying."

He saw her eyes close over the pain before she buried her face in his chest, using her arms to squeeze closer to him until there wasn't so much as a cubic millimeter of air between them.

"I can't stay, Colby. You knew that. I told you up front this was just going to be a vacation for me. My life, my job, all my stuff: it's all back in Pendleton." She disengaged one arm long enough to hook it around his neck and pull his head down for a quick, desperate kiss. "This has been the most amazing, wonderful time of my life. But I've got to go back."

He shook his head, trying to clear it and make sense of what he was hearing. He hadn't taken any blows to the head lately; the sun wasn't hot enough to cause hallucinations; and he'd never done acid, so he couldn't be having a flashback. He was out of explanations. But what she was saying made absolutely no sense.

"Why? Why do you have to go? Why can't you stay here? With me."

"And do what? Hang out with Ana and Gabrielle? Play house with you? Because as tempting as that is – and I'm embarrassed to admit how tempting that is – I can't." She pulled herself from his arms and moved to the other side of the little kitchen. She braced her arms behind her on the kitchen table they'd eaten breakfast at all week; when they'd gotten out of bed to eat, that is. But at least her arms weren't crossed and her body closed in on itself. The body language was bad, but not hopeless.

He ran a hand through his hair and debated the pros and cons of letting sex do the talking. The chemistry between them was so hot, neither of them could ever hold out for long. But his head won out reasoning that if they were going to stay together, this hurdle – whatever it was – needed to be dealt with and overcome; not just masked by the power of their physical relationship.

"What am I missing here? Why can't you get a job in San Diego? You're brilliant and good MCSE's aren't exactly a dime a dozen."

"How did you . . .? Oh, you saw. . ." She seemed embarrassed that he knew about her training.

"Yeah. The next time you want to hide information, don't hang the damn certification on the wall. Something else I didn't learn in SEAL school. But you were about to tell me why you can't find a job in San Diego."

He tried to keep the edge out of his voice but he was starting to get pissed. She was ready to throw away something totally amazing and he had yet to hear one good reason why. Didn't she realize how rare what they had together was? He'd seen enough relationships crash and burn to appreciate how they'd beaten the odds.

"You're determined not to leave me a shred of dignity, aren't you? You won't be happy until you hear me say it again, will you?"

So she was starting to get fired up, too. Good. He wasn't about to let this go without a fight. "Say what?"

"You son-of-a-bitch. Okay, fine. Here you go: I can't stay because I love you-- but you don't love me. I wish I could be casual about this, Colby, but I can't."

Things had become surreal. He heard the words and admired her perfect diction while, even now, the shape of her lips and the way her mouth moved entranced him. But he had to run her words through his mind over and over, the way he

did sometimes when he was tired and the Farsi wasn't registering with his American-English-wired brain. And then finally it all clicked. What the . . .?

"What do you mean I don't love you?" he bellowed.

Chapter Thirty-Two

“Huh? Where’d you get an idea like that?” He’d lowered the volume a little so he wasn’t shouting any more. “You’re a smart cookie. How could you possibly think I’m anything besides crazy in love with you?”

“You’re. . .” Anyone who knew her would have sworn on a stack of bibles and bet their mortgage double-or-nothing that it couldn’t be done – but he’d left her speechless.

He looked absolutely sincere. Those neon-blue eyes that had first captured her attention were locked on her. There was no wise-ass twinkle in them, no betraying quirk of the mouth to suggest that he was anything but dead honest sincere. And he said he was in love with her? So what if it was her most closely held, most deeply buried fantasy? To even try to get her head around the idea that it might--just possibly--be true, overloaded her system. Common sense and a lifetime’s experience told her that guys like Colby didn’t end up with women like her. She was so far from being his usual type it was like one of those high school science projects that tried to show the relative distance of the Earth to the Sun. They weren’t even in the same parking lot.

At least, that’s what the old Raven would have said. But she’d had three weeks to get used to the idea of having him around. He’d had time to sneak in under her radar. Or maybe her subconscious mind had been working on her. Because the idea that he might be serious didn’t have her snorting ‘yeah, right’ like it should have. The idea that maybe, just maybe, he might possibly mean it--was . . . almost believable. And irresistibly seductive, in its own quiet way. Wasn’t it was just barely imaginable that she could keep this beautiful, honorable man for her very own?

‘It could happen’, some tiny, rarely used part of her protested; because he *was* honorable. It was something she knew down to her bones – the way she knew her name or how to configure a router – that he was a straight-arrow kind of guy. And, while she was still having a little trouble with some parts of the equation, she did know he wasn’t a liar. She could imagine him omitting certain pieces of information: like how dangerous a particular part of his job might be, or how much his high tech bicycle had cost. But she couldn’t imagine him looking her in the eye and saying ‘yes’ when he really meant ‘no.’

“I’m what--crazy about you? Head over heels? Totally in love with you? Yeah. I am.” His voice was soft now – smooth like the water of Mirror Lake, her favorite place on Earth. His hand reached out to touch her face. He trailed his index finger slowly down her forehead, to the bridge of her nose, coming to rest

on her lips; as though he could sense her doubts and wanted to prevent anything negative from slipping out.

"How long?" she heard a voice ask and realized, to her surprise, that she had spoken them herself.

"All my life. It just took me a little while to find you."

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"Could you give me a couple minutes here, Colby? Please?" It was too much to take in. She needed a second to regroup and think.

"We're not done here, Raven. Not by a long shot."

"Just give me a minute to get this food in the oven, would you? It'll only take me a minute—I don't want it ruined."

"I don't want to hurt your feelings, honey, 'cause I can tell you fussed over it. But I don't give a good goddamn about dinner. I didn't realize we were on two totally different pages about what's going on here; and I want to get it straightened out. Like, right now."

She was grateful to have something to do with her hands as she gave up on cutting the food into bite size and just threw everything into the pan. It was anybody's guess as to whether or not it would be worth eating, since Colby didn't have the same kinds of cooking pans she was used to and she was already experimenting by using the oven versus the stove. Thankfully, though, it was a dish she could make in her sleep because God knew her mind was on other things besides cooking right now.

"Just open the oven door for me, would you? I'm almost done here—see?"

She slammed the oven door closed with a little more force than was strictly necessary, but it was taking everything she had to just hold it all together. Her brain was racing to try to process everything he'd said. One more bit of stimulus and she was afraid she'd totally lose it, whatever that meant. It had never happened--testimony to a lifetime spent controlling every possible aspect of her environment.

"Let me just wash my—oof!" The next thing she knew she was being picked up bodily and carted through the house, fireman style.

“Fuck washing. Fuck dinner. This is important. I want your attention.”

“Put me down, godammit! You don’t win just because you’re bigger than me. We were having a discussion.” The last word didn’t carry as much force as it should have because they’d reached the bedroom. And the bed. He’d tossed her off his shoulder onto her back and followed her down, using the weight of his own big body to pin her in place.

“No, I’ll win because I love you. And you love me. And it’s time to quit dicking around like a couple of stupid kids. I’m serious here. And I want to know if you’re serious, too. So are you going to marry me? Or what?”

Well this was entry number two for Dear Diary today, because she never would have pegged herself as one who’d go for the caveman treatment. But he was something else. The way his eyes blazed from behind the hair that had fallen in his face and the feel of his body pressing her into the mattress, lungs working hard, was powerful stuff. And coming from any other man on the planet it wouldn’t have worked. But coming from this man she loved with everything in her – it was definitely working.

“Dicking around, huh? Gee, I kinda like the sound of that.” The angle Colby was using to keep her pinned only let her get one leg free, but she squirmed until she got it free and wrapped it around him. She really needed both legs for what she had in mind, but sometimes a girl just had to make the best of a bad situation. So she arched her back and tried to rub herself against the tantalizing bulge she could feel developing behind Colby’s jeans. He was just too big and heavy for her to move, though, and a tiny groan of frustration slipped past her lips.

“Uh-uh, McKnight. That dog won’t hunt. Effective immediately: I’m cutting you off until I get the answer I want.”

He must have been just a little distracted, because she was finally able to wiggle the other leg free. She wrapped both legs around his waist now and rocked her hips against his crotch. She had to admire his self-control, though, because if what they were doing felt half as good to him as it did to her, he was a strong man to ignore the temptation.

“Oh, I don’t know, Denbow. I may not know much about dogs, but I’d say this one feels like it could hunt. Why don’t you let him loose and let him decide for himself?”

Now he was the one groaning and letting his hips grind into hers. But he stuck to his resolve. "No way. I don't mind fighting dirty if it's important enough. And this one definitely qualifies. Besides, I know you and you can't hold out much longer. We've already established you have no self-control."

And the sad thing was, he was right, damn him. When it came to loving Colby, she had no self-control. He was everything she wanted and if he thought he was serious, then she was going to take him at his word. Part of her wanted to call for a drug test, because he must be under the influence of something if he was proposing to her. Dilated pupils, heavy breathing, sweat—yes, a definite possibility. But the other, larger part of her, wanted to grab him and hold on for all she was worth.

"So supposing I was trying to hold out. I mean, I wouldn't want you to think I was *easy* or anything. What would you do then?"

"Hah. Who do you think you're dealing with—some amateur? Don't make me make you beg here, Raves. Nobody wants that."

The truth was, she was close to cracking. But she was going to make him work hard for it. "As if. . ."

She could tell from the sweat beading his brow that he wasn't as ice as was pretending to be. But he obviously recognized a challenge when he heard one and only cocked an eyebrow at her. He had the look of a man who'd been pushed as far as he was willing to be pushed. He transferred possession of both her wrists to one hand and made sure he maintained eye contact for emphasis, while he used his other hand to begin to slowly unbutton his jeans.

And suddenly she was the one sweating, because it was his turn to surprise her with the fact that under his jeans he was magnificently naked. Once his jeans were unfastened there was nothing to prevent his arousal from springing free. He was beautifully made and generously proportioned; she eyed his erection and considered her options. Well if the Mohammed couldn't go to the mountain, she'd just have to get the mountain to go to her.

She licked her lips a little. "For me?"

"It could be. But you know what you have to do to get it."

He unwrapped her legs from his waist and used his free hand to pull her shorts down to her knees, taking her panties with them. She thought he would strip them all the way off her, but he appeared to have something different in mind

and left them around her knees. He resettled himself between her legs and she could feel the blunt tip of his penis nudging the notch of her legs. He held her wrists with both of his hands and let himself thrust gently against her opening. He was too big to get in, given the fact that she couldn't open her legs for him. But the fleeting contact he did make was driving her crazy and suddenly she was all done playing. Her eyes rolled back in her head and having him inside her was now her number one – her only – priority.

"Raven." She couldn't focus on the words. She was too busy trying to find a way to the center of the maze she was in. "Raven," he repeated.

"What?" Dammit, he was too heavy to dislodge. Why was he torturing her this way?

"Say 'yes'."

She looked up at him. What *was* he talking about? "What?"

"Say 'yes'."

"Huh? Yes?"

"Say. Yes. Now."

"Yes. *Now*."

A smile broke over his face – his whole body, really – before his head dropped down and his forehead rested on hers. "Yes."

"Yes, *now*." He had relaxed his hold on her hands and she pulled one free to help get rid of her shorts.

"Where's the fire, sweet thing? I was getting there. You know, we really need to work on your delayed-gratification issues."

If he didn't wipe that smirk off his face and get busy getting busy, she *show* him some delayed-gratification issues. She decided to let him live to see another day, though, when he got her shorts off in under five seconds and immediately thrust himself into her up to the hilt.

Apparently he wasn't done torturing her, because the pace he set was slow — voluptuous, even — as though everything felt better somehow this time. And it did feel better. He felt bigger, hotter—if such a thing were possible. The physical act was the perfect, pure expression of their feelings; she was totally in sync with him, grinding her hips up to meet him with every well-timed thrust. She was drowning in the depth of sensation when what made the difference hit her: he wasn't wearing a condom.

“Colby. We forgot the condom.”

“Nah, I didn't forget. Isn't it amazing? Jesus, I didn't think it could get any better. You are incredible.”

“Feeling lucky, are we?”

“I am feeling incredibly, amazingly lucky. Do we really have to talk right now? Because, I don't know if you've noticed, but we are in a zone.”

“No, later's fine. As long as you've got names picked out

“You mean kids? Don't worry, it'll never happen the first time. And besides, you're not getting any younger. If we're going to have any, we need to get on it.”

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“So here's my plan and you tell me what parts don't work for you, okay? First, you move to California. I know: technically you're not moving, because you're already here. But we go get whatever stuff you want and bring it down.”

She was only listening with half an ear. She was still glowing from her orgasm and was mentally counting all the little swimmers as they fought valiantly upstream toward her ovaries. She'd never looked at it in quite that light before, but maybe that was why men got so emotional about saving the salmon; something about it must call to them on a primal level. She only knew there was definitely something primal about his naked flesh on hers and thinking about what they'd just done.

“Okay, sounds fair so far.”

“Hey. If you don't have anything positive to contribute, just keep it zipped and listen to the rest of the plan.”

“Keeping it zipped or, rather, our inability to do so is what got us here in the first place, if you recall.”

“To continue,” he pointedly ignored her comment, “we stay in California for no more than five years. In somewhere between three and five years, I quit the teams and we move back to Oregon. I use my business degree, and you continue to build your increasingly successful computer-consulting business in Oregon. Or you stay home with the kiddies – it’s pretty much up to you.”

She wanted to put up more of a fight but she was realistic enough to realize that, if they were going to be together, there were going to have to be some compromises made. She’d had time to look around San Diego while Colby had been gone and it wasn’t so bad. A lot busier than her quiet little ‘burg and not nearly so green. But a surprising number of cowboy hats – enough to help make her feel at home. And the glimpses she’d seen of life as a Navy wife from Ana and Brie hadn’t been awful. *Navy wife*. Could she really go through with it?

Oh, yeah. One look at Colby and she knew she would. She truly believed that life was about making choices. But sometimes. . . sometimes you had to realize that something bigger than you had taken control.

“Sounds like a plan.”

Epilogue

About four months later. . .

"Hey, baby," he called out. Man, he still hadn't gotten used to how great it was coming home to Raven every night. Every night he got to come, that is. He'd kicked himself mentally for not going home to see the folks more often. He could have had all this a hell of a lot earlier. Walking through the kitchen, he could see an assortment of computer parts lying on the kitchen table—no doubt left over from whatever job she'd been working on today.

Raven had done a basic install job for some nutty old broad she'd met in the grocery store not long after they'd moved her stuff down from Pendleton. Only the nutty old broad had turned out to be the heir to one of San Diego's wealthiest old families and a real believer in going with her hunches. The woman had taken a shine to Raven and not only recommended her to friends, but had her do the installation and networking for her business office. Getting the blessing of Joan Kettner Walters had turned out to be all it had taken to launch Raven's computer consulting business. It was building slowly, but it was building. She was doing so well, in fact, that she had begun to look around for the right person to go into partnership with.

He turned the corner from the kitchen into the living room. He started to call his usual "Where's my wife?" that he loved so much because of the face she always made when she heard it, when he spotted her asleep on the couch. He could tell from the angle of her neck on the armrest that he'd be called in for neck-rub duty shortly and decided on the spot to wake her up. But she looked so damned sweet with her hands folded under her cheek for a pillow, that he checked that thought for a minute. Besides, poor kid, the early months of the pregnancy were really beating her up and he knew she could use the rest. If she wasn't asleep, sleeping off the fatigue, she was puking up whatever she'd just eaten. But she was into her fourth month already and everyone predicted that things would begin to ease up any day now.

If she hadn't been as excited as he was about the baby, he could have done a real number on himself with the guilt for making the decision not to use a condom for the both of them. But she'd taken half the responsibility in no uncertain terms when he'd tried early on to voice that thought. "Colby, I was there too, you know. I could have said something. But I can't help it if the thought of making a baby with you turns me on." And the look in her eyes as she'd blown his prenatal guilt to smithereens had ended the conversation pretty effectively.

If she hadn't already been pregnant, the little session that followed would have taken care of it, he was sure.

He didn't regret a single minute of the way things had gone since he'd met Raven. Some things were just meant to be and he, Raven and now their baby were some of them. He had blithely declared that 'nothing would happen the first time' and damned if Fate hadn't seen fit to smack him upside the head for that little bit of hubris. And--contrary to what some had tried to suggest--he hadn't knocked her up on purpose. Or at least, if he had, he hadn't been conscious of it at the time. He had to admit, though, that a series of three plastic sticks that turned blue had done what he hadn't been able to: namely, get Raven to pick a day and marry him.

He'd wanted to get things taken care of right away in case he got sent out again with no notice. It was always a possibility in the teams, but with things heating up again in the Middle East, it had now moved into the realm of extreme likelihood. He'd been dogged by an anxiety he couldn't calm and he hadn't been able to convince Raven that there was no time to lose. That is, until she'd called to him from the bathroom one morning, an odd note to her voice.

"Colby?"

"Yeah?"

"When's eight months from about four weeks ago?"

"Oh, man--I hate word problems. Can I choose fractions instead?"

"How are you at odds and probability, smart ass?"

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"Hey, you. How're you feeling?"

She felt a hand in her hair, then a touch on her cheek and knew Colby must be home. She opened her eyes to see him crouched next to where she lay, a concerned look on his face. It was still a thrill, every time she woke to another day with Colby and realized she hadn't been expelled from whatever incredible dream she was having. He was so much more than she'd ever imagined she could have, and part of her kept waiting for the other shoe to drop; the kind where you notice that the old lottery ticket you have stuck to the fridge with the pizza place that delivers magnet was actually the big winner, but the date to claim the prize expired the day before.

“Hey, yourself. I feel pretty good, actually – even better now that you’re home. I haven’t puked in over twenty-four hours. Alert the media.”

That made him smile, chasing the worried look with something warmer in those electric-blue eyes that had grabbed her from the beginning.

**END**

If you enjoyed this story, please visit the author's website at <http://www.stephanievaughan.com> .