
Chloe's Donor
by Sabine Ferruci

Erotica/Romance

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Chloe's Donor

By

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Chapter One

“Sending me the wrong sperm sample is not a minor customer satisfaction problem, Dr. Ashtar.” Clasping her palms across her pregnant belly, Chloe Simon willed her stomach to stay calm.

“I'm not minimizing the complexity of the situation, Miss Simon.” The physician looked down at the open chart on the conference table in front of him, then hit her with a high wattage surely-we-can-solve-this smile. “I'm merely trying to assure you that your *actual* donor, Sergeant, uh...”

“Gallagher. B.D.” Those were the first words that Chloe's donor had uttered since his arrival in the clinic's conference room. “Broderick Devlin,” he added, his clear green eyes giving nothing away as they observed her. By his unconcerned demeanor, he could have been sitting in a clubhouse waiting for his tee time.

“I assure you,” Ashtar continued, “Sgt. Gallagher provided a specimen of the highest quality. He's in excellent health.” Dr. Ashtar beamed with pride as he gestured to Gallagher. “No family history of inherited disease. Meets—in fact, exceeds—our extremely rigid donor standards. Had he appeared in our catalogue, he would have been very popular with our clients.”

Chloe conceded that the hunk sitting across the table was as perfect a physical specimen as a man in his mid-thirties could be. A moss green sport shirt accentuated his tanned forearms, well-muscled arms, and wide shoulders. The short cut of his light brown hair emphasized the square jaw and the shadow from his clean shave. His nose was a little big for his face and his eyebrows a little too heavy, but B.D. Gallagher would never be voted off the island, at least by any of the women.

“I’m sure the *Essence of Sgt. Gallagher* would have been a sell-out, Doc.” Chloe was satisfied to see a flash in Gallagher’s suspiciously bland eyes, but her satisfaction was short lived. Nausea that had been simmering just below the surface since this morning’s phone call was beginning to churn in earnest. *Breathe in. Breathe out.*

“Another positive attribute you should not discount, Miss Simon, is the superior strength and quality of the sperm you received.”

Trailing her fingertips lightly over the swell of her belly, Chloe took a deep breath and tried not to hyperventilate.

“In order to achieve success, our average client inseminates over a period of at least three cycles, using as many as six vials at each setting.” The little man in the starched white coat could hardly contain his excitement as he leaned forward on the table to touch her arm. “You merely used one vial and became pregnant on your first try. Superb results, really.”

Chloe swiveled her chair away from the contact and watched Gallagher closely. If he moved so much as an eyelash to display macho pride, she would purposely lose her breakfast all over his crisp khaki slacks. She was almost disappointed when not so much as a facial twitch occurred. It was smooth sailing in the ocean of those green eyes, no victory flags flapping in the breeze.

“Dr. Ashtar.” Chloe was tired of hearing about the upside of this little glitch. “I selected donor attributes that were of more importance than Olympic caliber sperm.”

“Such as what, Ms. Simon?” asked Gallagher. Of course, his voice would be radio announcer deep. It made the hair on her arms vibrate to attention.

“Certain talents and interests.” She was not about to explain her desire to insure the family artistic gene, the one that had managed to skip over Chloe.

Gallagher leaned back in his chair. “I would have thought the goal would be a healthy baby.” Before she could answer, he placed his folded hands on the table. Those fingers were long and sure and capable of palming a basketball. “Never mind,” he muttered. “There’s another issue you’re overlooking.”

Ashtar cleared his throat. “I really think we ought to give Miss Simon time to digest this news before we explore further ramifications.”

Chloe stared straight at Gallagher with icy dread. “What ramifications?”

“I banked my sperm here. I never gave permission for its use as an anonymous donation.”

Chloe smoothed back the damp hair that had escaped the heavy braid down her back. The air conditioning in the building seemed to suddenly lose its battle with the outside Atlanta heat. “Well I didn’t give permission for the clinic to overnight

your sperm instead of the donor's I selected. So we're even.”

“The only way things will be even, Miss Simon, is if you agree that the child you're carrying is just as much mine as yours.”

Chloe put both hands on her womb and felt the blood drain from her face. “No.”

“And while we're at it,” he continued, unclasping his hands, leaning back in his chair with almost certain feigned relaxation, “I'm not delighted *at all*—as in, no fucking way—with the prospect of my child being born a bastard without the Gallagher name.”

That did it. The churning in her belly percolated to the surface. She covered her mouth and scrambled from her chair, knowing she wasn't going to make it as far as the door, much less the hallway restroom.

Like magic, an empty wastebasket appeared before her and a strong arm supported her chest. Chloe knelt down and emptied her stomach. Gut wrenching heaves that were far too loud racked Chloe's body for what seemed like hours. When she started to calm and begin to hope that it was over, she vaguely became aware of her hair being lifted off her neck and soothing murmurs.

It was unbelievable that anyone had stayed in the room, much less right next to her. And it was, of course, inevitable that the someone was unquestionably the Sergeant. Gallagher sat down on the floor and eased her back until her head rested against his chest. “Doc. Do you think you could help me out here?” He pushed the wastebasket into Ashtar's hands. “Get me an ice cold towel, some mouthwash and a glass of water.”

Chloe just kept her eyes closed, not wanting to move. She heard furious scrambling out the door and quick orders being issued.

“Useless asshole,” Gallagher muttered.

“There goes my hope for a child with eloquent verbal skills.”

He stroked back the hair from her face. “You'll have to settle for concise. And effective.”

Chloe heard the nurse bustle in. “I'll take over, sir.”

“No,” he answered. “Just give me the stuff and leave us.”

“Miss Simon?” the nurse asked.

Chloe didn't want to move a muscle from where she was sprawled. It felt cooler down here on the floor and nice to be taken care of for a change. His chest was solid and reassuring against her back. She didn't open her eyes or even think twice. “I'll be fine.” *Any year now.*

The wet cloth on her forehead and neck felt like heaven, as did the mouthwash and sips of water. She gradually felt her

strength returning and sighed. This unpleasant interlude had not erased the problems she faced. "I need to get up."

"Wait a second." He looked down at her. "It may have slipped by you. Or maybe the urge to vomit was your reaction. But bringing up the Gallagher name for our baby was kind of a marriage proposal."

"Nooooooo." She wanted to scream. "Anonymous was supposed to be just that. It was supposed to be just me and my baby." She scowled at him. "No overbearing father. No in-laws. No custody battles."

His green eyes narrowed. "I have two questions for you. Are you married?"

"No."

"Are you a lesbian?"

"NO!"

"Then anything else can be dealt with. I have a plan." He lifted her easily to her feet as if she was some elfin sprite instead of a pregnant woman who hadn't been called petite since, well, ever. He was still supporting her forearms, standing right in front of her when he showed perfect white teeth in a traffic-stopping smile. "You'll find that I'm very good at planning."

* * * *

All in all, Dev Gallagher thought that Chloe had taken the news rather well. She was still a bit shaky, but that was to be expected, and her unsettled state provided a benefit he was quick to exploit. She'd agreed to let him drive her home.

Fingers tapping on the steering wheel, Dev drifted forward in the slow line exiting the clinic complex. He glanced at her from time to time as he drove. Her face wasn't three shades of green anymore. Her warm olive skin peeked through strands of glossy black hair that had escaped the thick braid over her shoulder.

He pegged her at five ten, which was a nice fit for his six foot and a quarter. While she was by no means too heavy for her height, she was solid, healthy, and very much all woman. Even while Chloe retched her guts out, Dev had enjoyed the feel of her generous breasts pillowed above his arm as he supported her. He'd felt the unbelievable softness of her skin as he soothed her hair back from her face and couldn't resist nuzzling her hair and kissing the back of her neck. He'd even gotten half hard.

So sue him for being a crass bastard. He was just a guy, damn lucky to be alive. Not to mention currently driving down an American avenue that had only one in a million chance of hiding a roadside bomb. Yes-siree-bob. This was IED-less paradise.

When he hit the interstate, it was mercifully empty by Atlanta standards, so Dev was able to enjoy the scenery inside the car. A gauzy black skirt covered most of Chloe's long legs. A sleeveless top of the same material hugged her breasts and stretched across the bulge on her lower belly. Instead of detracting from her figure, her pregnancy only served to make her look like some kind of fertility goddess.

The clunky sandals on her narrow feet drew his eyes to toes painted the color of ripe mangoes. And then there were the

earrings, lots and lots of jingling earrings. Those intricate strands of silver would make an enchanting jingle of a Siren's song every time she sank down on his cock, head thrown back in exquisite, desperate passion, striving for release that was just out of....

“Broderick Devlin, don't you think you should keep your eyes on the road?” she asked.

“Busted.” He had exited the freeway and was headed down a small thoroughfare toward her neighborhood. “I thought you were asleep. And....”

“What?”

He'd been visualizing the look on her face as she screamed out her climax above him. He grinned. “I was thinking about how much I like your earrings.”

“Oh. Thanks. They're one of my weaknesses.” Chloe pulled her braid up on top of her head and did some kind of magical woman-thing with her fingers to make it stay put. “I dozed off for a few minutes.” She pushed the seat back up and looked around. “Turn left here and then a right three blocks down.”

“Yes, ma'am.” He followed the rest of her directions and pulled his battered Land Cruiser into a parking space on the street. Tall oaks and pines shaded the entire block. “By the way, most people call me Dev.”

“Well. Okay.” Without looking at him, she gathered her carpetbag purse and unbuckled her seatbelt. “Um, Dev. Yeah. Thanks for the ride.”

Dev turned off the engine and stepped out of the car, uncurling his right knee, which was always a treat. He marveled at her notion that he was just going to roll her onto the curb and burn rubber as he peeled off down the street. When he helped her out of the car seat, he touched her chin and made sure he had the attention of those golden brown eyes. “I'm not going to go away, Chloe. Not until we've talked.”

“I don't suppose you'd be amenable to coming back tomorrow?”

He supported her elbow as they made their way up the sidewalk to the small brick bungalow. “Only if I lock a GPS tracking device around your ankle before I go.”

“Stubborn.” She shook her head and sighed. “Not on my list of desirable qualities in a child.”

He snorted. “Think of it as goal-oriented.”

Her white-brick home looked like a gingerbread house. It had a narrow front yard that was mostly plants, trees, and wildflowers. The shutters were painted sky blue and there was a colorful striped awning over a large picture window.

When they stepped inside, refinished hardwood floors and white walls were the only neutral colors. The sofa was bright red, and the surrounding chairs and pillows were variations on the theme. Colorful artwork leaped off the walls, making the room come alive with dancing images of paint, woven cloth, and bent metal.

“Wow.”

“It's too much for most people.”

“Is this your work?”

“Unfortunately, no. But artistic talent does run through my family.”

He led her over to the couch. “Sit down, put your feet up and let me get you something to drink.” Before she could object, he propped a pillow under her legs and wandered into her kitchen. He rummaged for a couple of glasses and fixed some ice water. There was a packet of crackers on the counter that he snagged on the way back to the living room.

She eyed him warily, but accepted the drink and crackers. Dev pulled a chair close to her head and leaned his elbows on his knees. His folded hands could reach over and stroke her face if he wanted. More like if she'd let him. “I'm not going to insist on marriage right away....”

“What a relief.”

“—but I want you to consider it.”

She took a sip of her drink. “Okay. On the one hand, we have maintaining my balanced life and raising my child on my own, without interference. Hmmmmm.” She looked thoughtful while she took another drink of water, then rested the cold glass against her cheek for a moment and closed her eyes.

“On the other hand, we have marriage to a stranger, who admittedly exceeds the clinic's and most other people's physical standards. But he's stubbornly goal-oriented, especially when it's his goal that he's after.” She opened her eyes. “I've considered it. I'm not interested.”

“You forgot to mention my high-performance sperm.” He couldn't help the grin that slipped out. It was totally immature for a man of his years and experience to be proud of his mating prowess, but there you go. The surge of pride shot all the way to his cock. This was a first time deal for him and a saint he was not.

“I don't need any more of your sperm,” she said hotly, placing a hand on her belly.

Too true. This might not be as easy as he'd anticipated. “You'd rather have a drawn out legal battle for custody?”

“Why are you doing this?” she asked with obvious exasperation. “It's not as if you had any immediate plans for fatherhood. Why can't you just let it go?”

She knew jack-shit about his fatherhood plans and he was going to keep it that way. “Look, Chloe. My motto's always been, ‘leave no sperm behind.’ Now I find that a whole shit load of the suckers got shipped to you in a miracle vile. I'm damn sorry you think it's *in-con-ven-ient*, but no child of mine is going to wonder who the hell his father is and why the bastard couldn't be bothered to know him.”

“Great. I draw the one man in the universe who wants to assume responsibility for conception, when he didn't get *any*, much less *good* sex in the process. This has to be some sort of cosmic joke.”

He leaned forward so that he could whisper into her ear. “It would have been hot, no holds-barred, mind-blowing sex.” Satisfied with her quick little intake of breath, he backed away. “Look. I've got the next couple of weeks off. I'd like to spend it together and get to know each other.”

She stared down at her glass and absently stirred the ice with a tip of her fingernail. “All right. Why don't you come to dinner next week?”

In her dreams. “That wasn't exactly my plan.”

“I'm afraid to ask.”

He took her hand between both of his. “I've got a small cabin and some land about fifty miles north of here. Come stay with me for a few weeks.”

“Why should I?”

“We can work this out, Chloe. Marriage would be the easiest solution for the baby. It won't have to be forever.” No point setting himself up for another gut-wrenching disaster. “In fact, I'd want a divorce after the baby's born.”

She looked thoughtful. “I'm willing to discuss the merits of marriage on paper, but we can do that without a scenic road trip.”

A name-only marriage had been his plan until he'd met her. Now he didn't want to miss out on feeling the baby romp around inside of her, not to mention a lot of romping of his own beneath the sheets with Miss Chloe. In fact, tied up in the sheets would be even better. He wanted to tie her down and pleasure her until she didn't know her own name. Until she'd be willing to take his.

Instead, he took the reasoned approach. “If we're going to be raising this child together, then it will be easier if we get closer to each other.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Just how close did you have in mind?”

Somehow he didn't think ‘buried to the hilt’ was the answer she was looking for. “Husband-and-wife close.”

“You want to have sex with me.”

Oh, yeah. “The thought's crossed my mind.” He raised his hand and interrupted her before she could object. “I believe in vows, Chloe. While we're married, I have no intention of seeing other women.”

“I'm five months pregnant. It won't be that long until the baby is born. Surely you can...” A nice warm glow appeared on

her face. "...can handle things by yourself until then."

"That might have been acceptable until today, but once I saw you walk into that conference room, I jettisoned Plan A." When she looked confused, he elaborated. "The Jerking-Off-for-Four-Months Plan."

She swallowed visibly. "And Plan B?"

"That would be the Worship-a-Fertility-Goddess Plan."

Interestingly, the warm glow on her face and neck grew brighter, and she didn't meet his eyes. "What makes you so sure I want to be worshiped by you?"

The flush on her skin and the soft intake of breath when he drew close were just a few of the clues. Chloe wanted him, all right. Maybe not as much as he ached to lose himself in her hot mama body, but it was enough to take a gamble. His buddies didn't call him Big Dick Gallagher for nothing. "If you really give the relationship an honest shot while we're away, and it doesn't work out, I'll back off the sex issue and come to some kind of reasonable custody arrangement with you."

She studied him suspiciously. "You're making a major concession without me risking much of anything."

He brought her hand to his mouth and brushed his lips across the delicate skin of her wrist. Her pulse jumped a satisfying notch. "Your risk is that you'll decide that sex will be a good thing." He'd make sure of it.

He took the glass from her hand and set it on the end table. She didn't balk when he touched her cheek with his hand. In fact, as he eyed her wide mouth and leaned closer, her breath caught and her golden eyes widened. "I think if you're honest, you'll admit that we don't seem to be immune to each other."

He gave her a chance to object and felt a surge of satisfaction when she allowed him to brush his lips across hers. He cradled her face in his hands while he nibbled and sucked on her lower lip, gratified to hear a soft moan. When he felt her fingers touch his chest, he lowered one hand to explore her ear, delighted to hear the tinkle of her earrings before he stroked her neck over her rapid pulse.

Chloe's hand moved up his chest and around his neck. Dev had to rein himself in as he deepened the kiss, dueling with her tongue. What he really wanted to do was scoop her luscious body onto his lap and pull her onto his rock-hard cock.

He restrained himself from that primitive instinct, but he couldn't resist something else he'd craved from the moment he'd seen her walk into that conference room. He placed his hand softly over her lower abdomen. It was incredible that his baby—his flesh and blood—was growing inside this gorgeous woman.

Chloe sucked in a breath and leaned back from him, misty eyed and flushed. "Um, that's not the usual progression of a man's hand."

He kissed her lips again. "It makes you unbelievably sexy."

She wrinkled her nose. “I feel like a mobile home and I look like a blimp.”

“You are so, so wrong.” Dev lifted up her shirt to expose the soft skin of her belly. Her skin sparkled with some kind of faint glitter that was specially designed to suck the blood straight to a man's cock. He placed both hands on her abdomen before lowering his head to kiss and nuzzle her skin with his face. She smelled like lavender and lemon and sin. When her hand touched his hair, he growled his approval and slid his fingers beneath the elastic waistband of her skirt

His tongue followed his fingers as he pushed the elastic down to expose her entire lower belly, making himself stop at the first glossy curl he unveiled. His baby made a soft mound below her belly button that he could easily encase in two of his hands. He settled soft kisses over her lush, fertile belly while she ran both hands over his short hair. He could smell her arousal.

“God, I didn't know I could feel like this,” he murmured, a little shaken by the intensity of his need. Jesus H. Christ. His fingers were actually trembling. His erection was pounding with impatience. He had to keep it together if he hoped to bind this woman the only way he knew how—with passion.

And passionate she was. As he turned his head to look at her, he was dazzled by her responsiveness. Her head was thrown back with eyes closed, lips parted, a delicate flush traveling from her face to the exposed skin of her chest. He knew that if he brushed the swollen nipples pushing against the gauzy blouse, or if he slid his fingers a few inches further south, she would come apart.

He reached for her face with his hands. “You are so beautiful, Chloe.”

She opened her eyes and blushed as she realized how far he'd taken her. “You've made your point.”

He scooped her over onto his lap and pulled her to his chest, making sure she could feel his throbbing cock. “For both of us.”

After a few minutes, he pulled back and met her wary gaze. “Will you come stay with me? It's quiet and secluded—a good place for two people to just be.” *Please, God.*

“You take a lot of your pregnant women there?”

He tapped her nose. “You'll be the first female to cross the threshold.” He put his hand back on her warm belly. “Do you know if it's a girl or boy?”

“Not yet. Do you care?”

“Nope. Healthy is what I want.”

He lifted her back on to the couch and gave her a quick kiss. “I've got a few things I need to go take care of. Give me your keys so I can get your car back to you. I'll come by and get you around ten tomorrow morning.”

“I'm not going to travel with a perfect stranger into the hills of North Georgia without a mile-wide trail of breadcrumbs.” She bit her lip while she rummaged in her bag for her keys. “As much as I hate to tell anybody about this crazy situation,

I'm going to ask my brother to be here tomorrow to meet you. He'll need the address and phone number of your cabin.” She shook her head. “Knowing Jay, he's also going to want to see two forms of identification and take your fingerprints.”

“No problem.” He was going to be fucking busy for the next eighteen hours.

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Chapter Two

Later that evening, Chloe phoned her brother with some trepidation. “Jay. It's Chloe.”

“What's wrong? Are you sick?” He sucked in a breath. “Is it the baby?”

“The baby and I are fine.” She slid down the couch and propped her feet onto her coffee table. “But it turns out that my anonymous donor isn't anonymous anymore.”

There was a short pause. “I guess I don't see the problem.”

“He didn't give permission for his sperm to be used. And....”

“This gets worse?”

“He wants me to marry him because he doesn't want the baby to be illegitimate.”

“That son of a bitch.”

“Jay,” she groaned. “You of all people should understand why I don't want a father around.”

“Not everyone is like our *pater*.”

“That's easy for you to say. You're not the untalented kindergarten teacher. He let up on you once he found out how brilliant your art was.”

“Uh huh. After fifteen years of hell because his son was gay.”

“I'm sorry,” she sighed. “I forget sometimes.”

“It's all right. Look. Does this guy scare you?”

“Not in the way you mean.” Ever since the early days of pregnancy had subsided, her hormones had been surging through her body, tantalizing every nerve ending. This afternoon, those hormones had spiked off the chart. She was getting wet again just thinking about him. If she gave in to the attraction, he'd own her.

“When do I meet him?”

“Tomorrow, just before he drags me on a two week trek into the woods somewhere north of Atlanta.”

“Oooeee. A camper you're not. I almost admire him if he got you to agree to that.” She heard him rustle around for a pen. “But that doesn't mean he's taking you anywhere until I get a handle on him. Give me every thing you know about him.”

“Can Robert do his computer magic?”

“Unfortunately, Robert had the bad taste to fall for a jazz pianist about a week ago. But not to worry. He still wants to ‘be friends.’ So I'll give the ungrateful little shit the opportunity to make it up to me.”

When her brother arrived the next morning, Jay looked his usual dashing self in crisp tailored gray pants topped with a long sleeved pink dress shirt. His sleeves were casually pushed up to three quarter length and his polished Italian loafers were worn, as usual, without socks.

“It's a good thing you don't hang out with women,” said Chloe, “because you'd give them a major inferiority complex.”

He laughed as he gave her a hug, then stood back holding her hands. “You have the most interesting maternity clothes I've ever seen. Is this the abandoned waif look?”

“These aren't maternity clothes. My neighbors brought me their cast-offs.” Chloe's mostly lesbian neighbors looked after her like mother hens, a fact that Jay had probably anticipated when he'd bought this Candler Park house for her when he'd heard it was available. He claimed it was too good an investment to pass up.

“That outfit looks like your farmer neighbor across the street.”

Chloe looked down at the worn denim overalls that she had cut off into shorts. She liked them because they were loose around her waist, easy to take off during her frequent trips to the bathroom, and allowed her to skip a bra without attracting lots of attention. The men's sleeveless undershirt beneath the bib was cool and soft against her tender breasts. And the way her chest had ballooned out, way outpacing her belly, she rarely got to skip the bra. Nothing under her full breasts but baby powder. It was heaven.

Chloe poured Jay a cup of tea, then joined him at the kitchen table. “Okay. Spill it. What did Robert find out?”

“Gallagher does security work in the army. No arrests or convictions. No outstanding parking tickets.” He sampled her tea and closed his eyes in appreciation. “How do you always get it to taste so good?”

“Patience.” Something she didn't feel when it came to news on Dev Gallagher. She played with a strand of hair that had slipped from the clips holding it on top of her head in a pile. When Jay still didn't speak, she played with the bent metal ear rings she wore for courage, and was soothed by the soft jingle as they bumped against the Indian silver beads that hung

beside them.

She narrowed her eyes. “Jay. This is not the time to mess with your little sister. There has to be more.”

His brown eyes twinkled as they peeked over her china teacup. “Sorry. He was married once when he was twenty, it lasted two years.”

“That's it?”

“He's got a brother in the Atlanta area. Runs a small construction company. Good reputation.” He finished his tea. “Looks like Gallagher did a year at Georgia Tech before he quit to join the army. He blew out his SATs but apparently got bored with college.”

The fact that Dev was smart did not surprise her in the least. “Any artistic talent?”

“Nothing obvious, but I still don't get your obsession with that.”

“Well, it doesn't really matter anymore, does it?” She'd hoped that the family talent that had skipped her would somehow be passed on to her child with a little help from the donor's genes. That way her child might get more of her parents' attention than Chloe had ever managed. The folks drove her crazy but they were the only grandparents her baby would have—at least the only ones she knew about. Before she could dig for more details, the doorbell rang.

“Stay put,” said Jay. “I'm going to whisk him away to your back porch and have a little boys' chat. I'll bring him in when I'm satisfied.”

She had no idea how Dev Gallagher would react to Jay. “I'm not so sure that's a good....”

“Not to worry, Sis. I'll have him eating out of my hand.”

* * * *

Dev was surprised and not a little pissed when a GQ guy opened Chloe's door, but he relaxed when he saw the black hair and familiar brown eyes. “You must be Chloe's brother.” He put out his hand. “Dev Gallagher.”

“Jay Simon.” Jay dropped his hand and walked outside. “Let's mosey on out to the back porch for a little *tête a tête*.”

Dev squelched an unwelcome burst of nervousness. *Chloe is not your junior prom date, asshole.* When they sat in the bright yellow Adirondack chairs, Dev had to ask. “Is this where you threaten to beat the shit out of me if I hurt her?”

“Is this where you describe the ways you could whip my fairy ass if I try?”

Dev smiled and put his head back, staring at the hanging plants that surrounded the perimeter of the porch and the ceiling fan that created enough of a breeze to keep the area habitable. It felt great to prop his right foot up on the footstool and give

his knee a break. He had pushed it too hard this morning.

“The only thing that interested me when you opened the door was that you weren't competition,” said Dev, and then put in a quick addendum. “And that you weren't an asshole terrorist. I could care less about your private life.”

“So, tell me, Sergeant Gallagher, *are* you going to hurt her?”

“Call me Dev. Or B.D.”

“Actually, I guess I shouldn't call you Sergeant. I understand Operator is the preferred designation in Delta.”

Jesus. Dev slowly sat forward with his hands on the knees of his jeans. He removed his sunglasses and looked at Jay more closely. “You're an artist. Oils. Pastels. Mostly landscapes.”

Jay raised an eyebrow. “Are you interested in commissioning a piece of work?”

“No. I want to know if you developed this fantasy from inhaling paint fumes.” Dev's file was not available through routine army channels.

“First of all, you don't want to peel off even the first layer of my fantasies. But it's no secret that you and your men just left desert hills and hot canteen water.” He smirked. “For the record, though, the only sand in my fantasies involves balmy oceans and a *pina colada*.”

Before Dev could correct him, Jay continued on. “Secondly, the gay community is like a small town. And finding the best in certain professions....”

“...like hacking?”

“...is not that hard. Besides,” Jay continued, “you have excellent hacking resources of your own, *n'est pas?*”

Now that was a subject Dev was going to avoid big time. “Let's say for the sake of argument that your theories are in the ballpark.” He tapped his bum knee. “I may be looking at a career change.”

His knee would slow him down in Delta, which pissed him off to no end. But the real concern was whether he was too disillusioned and ... *face it, Devlin ... too damn scared of dying*. When the fear had struck about a year ago, he had ignored it. He'd thought he'd mastered it. Toughed it out. His arrogance had nearly cost him his leg on his last mission. He hated the thought of leaving Delta, but he didn't want to put himself or anyone else at risk.

Jay Simon stood up and pinched off a few spent blossoms on the red petunias exploding from a basket in front of Dev. “So tell me. Is Chloe—and your baby—a step along the path of this mid-life career crisis?” He picked up a spray bottle and spritzed the plants, then looked down at Dev. “Or are they the solution?”

Good fucking question. He blew out his breath. “All I can tell you is as long as she's with me, I'll take care of her. I'd never

hurt her. And I'll always provide for the baby.”

“Providing is a nice fatherly gesture, but from what I've seen, I'd say that being there is the number one key to success.”

“Yeah, well I haven't ever done long-term.” Not that he hadn't tried. When it came to inspiring extended devotion from a woman, Dev had clearly not acquired the proper skill set. He was fucking clueless.

Jay picked up a watering can with a big daisy on the front and moved to the corner of the porch to water a basket of impatiens. “I need to know how to get hold of Chloe while you're gone.”

He'd thought about that. “I don't hand out my address to too many people.”

“I imagine not. Perhaps a phone?”

“No cell towers nearby.”

“Would you suggest I contact your brother? Is his home or his construction business the best place to reach him?”

“My brother would be likely to give my GPS coordinates to Al Qaeda if I shared my location with him.”

“Ah. A close family. I knew we'd find something in common.”

“I'll get you a phone.” The communications and Intel groups were going to go apeshit anyway over Jay's ability to ferret out info. “A guy's going to probably drop by and have a little chat about these theories you have about my work. I'll have him bring a SAT-phone. He'll have a number where you can reach me.”

Jay smiled. “I'll have the welcome mat out.”

“Are we done here?” Dev hadn't been handled this well by anyone since the psych interview during Delta Selection.

“Yes. I believe Chloe has some excellent decaf chai waiting for us.” He shoed Dev ahead of him to Chloe's back door.

Dev reached for the door handle, then turned around and met Jay's eyes. “About the guy I send with the phone. Introduce him around your small community here.”

Jay's eyes narrowed. “Is this your idea of a sick joke or is he....”

“I don't ask,” interrupted Dev. “And he doesn't tell.”

* * * *

Chloe got five steps inside the one room cabin before reaching a decision. "There's no way I'm going to be able to stay here."

Dev froze behind her, midway through the door, holding a couple of green duffels and a cooler. "I guess I thought you'd stick it out a little longer before you decided you couldn't stand me."

"If you tell me you have air conditioning, I'll reconsider."

He looked relieved, then let the screen door slam as he carried his load over to a counter with a few overhead cabinets that she supposed was the kitchen corner of the room. "It's not that hot up here."

"Said the non-pregnant half of the couple," she muttered.

He started putting groceries away and threw his bags by the sole bed in the other corner of the room. "I'm going to get the rest of the stuff from the car."

He was gone before she could answer. "Our first quarrel." She trailed her fingers over her belly and took some deep breaths. "Your hunk of a daddy doesn't listen too well, does he, sugar?"

She peeked out a window and was encouraged to see a screened-in porch on the back side of the cabin, but there was no obvious way to get out there. She tried to open a window, but it wouldn't budge.

"*Freeze!*" Dev said harshly. She heard him hurry up behind her.

Holding her hands very still on the window frame, she tried to control her rapid heartbeat. He'd scared her half to death. "If this is your idea of sweet talking me into a favorite sexual position, your technique needs work."

"No, damn it. I forgot about the booby traps on the windows."

"Great." A trickle of sweat dripped between her breasts. "That puts the heat problem into perspective."

It only took him about thirty seconds to unhook some hidden wires, and then he moved her to the side and opened the window. Before she knew it, she was pressed against his chest. "Jesus, I'm sorry. I'm not used to having anyone here with me."

That was good news. Pressed up against his body, his warmth and strength felt good in spite of the heat. He also smelled like a man should. Just soap and a little sweat. "Anymore little surprises like that?"

He blew out his breath, lifted her through the window and deposited her in a rocker on the porch. "Stay out here. I'll make sure everything is safe." He squatted down in front of her, wincing as he did so. "One more thing. I lied. Taking you from behind is definitely one of my fantasies."

Chloe felt her nipples peak with interest, but shook her head. "Unless you can do something about this heat, soldier, you're

not going to get near me.”

He looked surprised. “You're serious, aren't you?”

“I'm pregnant. It's July. It's Georgia. There's not a woman around who wouldn't understand.”

“HmMMMM.” He reached beneath her overalls and lightly stroked her right nipple, which, in spite of the heat, immediately hardened to nearly painful proportions. She parted her lips and took a shallow breath.

Dev met her eyes. “I'm hard. You're hot. And I haven't been with a woman since *last* July. There's not a man around who's more inspired than me to find a solution to the heat problem.” He kissed her quickly and climbed back through the window.

Fifteen minutes later, Chloe found herself trailing behind Dev on what Daniel Boone might have called a path, but was more like the unclaimed rainforest. Admittedly she was occasionally distracted from the oppressive heat by the fit of the faded green cargo shorts he now wore, not to mention his well-muscled legs and large feet encased in webbed sandals.

She wondered about the scars on his right knee and leg and the occasional limp in his stride. But all those thoughts were not enough to sidetrack her very long. If he thought this little hike was going to cool her off, she was stranded with a glass-half-full kind of guy. Optimistic but crazy.

Finally he slowed down, lifted a low tree branch and helped her move beyond it. Chloe found herself in a beautiful glade situated beside a small, shallow stream. Clear water tumbled lazily over and around irregular stones. Miraculously, the temperature was a full ten degrees lower.

Dev put his large backpack down and began to rummage. Soon a small canvas seat was in about a foot of water. He promptly stripped Chloe out of her overalls and sat her on the seat in her sleeveless undershirt and panties. The icy water covered her legs and nearly took her breath away. But it felt good. Damn good.

Dev took off his t-shirt and dipped it into the water, then drizzled some over her shoulders and breasts before gently wiping her face. “How's that, Miss Chloe?”

“Heaven, Broderick Devlin. I just might survive more than a day up here.”

He gave her a quick, hard kiss, then waded back to the bank and started rustling in his sack. Chloe eventually heard hammering and turned to watch him work. The man did have a body. His tan shoulders were wide with back muscles rippling while he worked. The sight sent an annoyingly predictable shiver down Chloe's back.

Those shivers told her she was close to the moment of truth. During the whole drive up, she had felt the blood pool heavily in her groin, smoldering like a banked fire, just waiting for a gust of wind to fan it into hot flames. The merest warm breath or the lightest touch on her clit would make her explode.

Chloe considered the problem carefully. If Dev was going to insist on hanging around for a few months, she might as well submit to the inevitable. Chloe hadn't had sex in over two years. Why torture herself? If she was careful to not let it grow into anything besides sex, and knowing upfront he was going to leave, she'd be okay. It wouldn't be like the unexpected

desertions she'd experienced with her two serious relationships.

She could do this. No, she wanted to do this. She'd never been passive in the bedroom, but for some reason, in this situation, with this man, she felt like presenting herself to him on a platter. She might not think of herself as a fertility goddess, but she could handle a little worshipping. Oh, yeah.

Dev turned her way while he bent over to retrieve a tool. His chest was sprinkled with light brown hair with glimmers of gold in the sun. He was totally focused on his work.

She sighed with appreciation. His green eyes zeroed in on her at mach one speed, showing that perhaps he wasn't a hundred percent focused on his work after all. Hmmmmm. Chloe deliberately cupped some water and drizzled it over her breasts.

“We're going to both be a lot happier if I get this shelter finished before you make me come in there and get you,” he growled. There was nothing warm and fuzzy about the grim man who stood a few feet away, vibrating with tension.

Chloe looked away from his laser green gaze and noticed that there was some sort of a tent that he had created. The water was starting to feel too cold. And he looked very, very warm. In fact, one might even say hot. So she said the only sensible thing a woman in her position could suggest. “Hurry.”

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Chapter Three

Ever since Dev had tucked Chloe into his car this morning, he had driven on autopilot, exercising the rest of his brain to concoct a variety of plans for a rapid and failsafe entry into her ripe, delectable body. That of course had led to an uncomfortable and semi-aroused state for the entire trip.

He'd finally managed to cool things down on the walk to the creek. All it took was one word from Chloe—*hurry*—and zero to sixty, in five seconds flat, he felt the blood rush from his head straight into a sweetly painful erection.

He didn't know why her skittishness had suddenly disappeared, but he was not about to tempt the gods and give her time to change her mind. In record time, he finished hammering in the stakes for the lean-to, stretched and secured the mosquito netting, and then pillowed the ground with a couple of sleek poncho liners, topped by mounds of silk from an old parachute.

He took a deep breath and willed his pulse to slow down, then turned to look at Chloe. She was better than any wet dream he'd ever had. Her long hair was piled on top of her head with a couple of sticks begging to be removed. The generous neck and arm holes of the sleeveless undershirt left very little cover for the holy-mother-of God mouth watering breasts that bulged out the top and sides. In fact, the wet cloth was plastered to her erect nipples and barely covered the dark areolas. *Damn*. His kid was going to be one lucky rug rat.

The desire he saw in her golden brown eyes was a sucker-punch to the gut. As if she could sense his weakness, Chloe slowly stood and placed her hands over her belly, which was clearly outlined by the wet cloth. The dark curls visible inside

those wet, white panties drew his eyes.

Dev waded into the water and stroked her arms, then coaxed her against his chest while he devoured her mouth. He drew back with a harsh breath. “Now would be the time to tell me to stop.” He brushed her lower lip with his thumb. “Otherwise, you're mine for the foreseeable future.”

She leaned closer and whispered, “Go.”

Hooyah. Dev scooped up the chair with one hand and put his arm around her shoulders to double-time her to the towel he'd placed in front of the lean-to. He bent down to remove her sandals and couldn't help but bury his face between her legs and breathe in her scent of cool water and earthy musk. Then he peeled the wet panties down and helped her step out of them. After a brief kiss upon her mound, he stood and lifted the undershirt over her head.

Dev's mouth watered. Her breasts were spectacular. He leaned forward and licked a line between them while lifting them in each hand. Leaning back, he placed an index finger on each nipple. “You ready to come inside and play, baby?”

Her nipples hardened with the merest of touches and she sucked in her breath. “I'm all yours, big guy.” Surprising the hell out of him, she reached underneath the leg of his baggy cargo shorts and touched the tip of his cock. Since he was going commando, the touch of her finger on bare skin nearly made him whimper.

“You are a serious threat to my control.” He opened the mosquito netting and admired her sweet ass as she bent over to crawl inside. Dev stretched her wet clothing over the top of the lean-to, kicked off his sandals, and climbed in after her, securing the netting behind him. Sparing his knee for the moment, he sat in front of her with his right leg extended to her side.

She was kneeling, sitting back on her bent legs, a goddess awaiting attention from a devoted worshiper. He'd gladly give it, but not until she wanted him just as badly as he wanted her. He'd be damned if he was the only one to feel hog-tied with need. He'd never wanted to hear a woman beg before, but he suddenly wanted to tie her down and make her scream for him. She'd kick his ass if she knew.

Dev lifted one breast and was amazed that it overflowed his large hand. “Take your hair down.”

He half expected her to tell him to go to hell, but she didn't look offended at his commanding mood. Lifting her arms, she smiled at him as she slowly removed each clip. “Is this what you want?”

Holy shit. That and about eighty-seven other things he could think of.

Dev lifted her other breast and tried to read the thoughts behind those golden eyes. She seemed to want to play along. Her dark hair tumbled down her back and over his hands as they lifted her soft, succulent breasts. He wanted to feel that soft hair everywhere on his body. He shifted a thumb to one of her nipples and just held it still. “Kiss me.”

“Where?” she whispered.

His cock strained against his shorts. *Pick me. Pick me.* “Anywhere.”

She placed her hands on the ground on either side of his legs and licked his shoulder, then ran her lips up over his skin to his neck. The feel of her hair and nipples dragging across his chest was torture. She eased up and looked into his eyes, then lowered her soft lips to tease his mouth with breathless little nibbles. He rewarded her with a gentle flick of his thumbs on her hard nipples. She sucked in a breath.

He pulled back. “Does that hurt?”

“Yes.” When he withdrew his hands, she grabbed one and held it on her left breast. “And no. They're very tender,” she looked down at his hand in hers, “but very needy.”

Dev bent his head and apologetically licked each nipple using feather light strokes of his tongue.

“Oh, God,” she whispered, whimpering with soft little moans, “I need more.” Dev slipped his hands down to the cheeks of her ass, then moved his fingers forward toward her swollen pussy. He squeezed her ass as he pulled her lips apart, then flicked her nipple a little stronger with his tongue. To his amazement, she came.

“Aaaaahhhhh,” she groaned, lurching forward, pushing her breast into his mouth and throwing her arms around his neck. Even with his fingers outside on the lips of her pussy, he felt the contractions pulsing within her. “Please,” she moaned, pushing her pelvis down onto his hands.

“Shhhhh, baby,” Dev whispered, moving his hands to her back and lowering her down onto the silky floor of his shelter.

“It's not enough,” she moaned.

“I know. Daddy'll make it all better.” Dev kissed his way down her belly, nuzzling her womb, finally moving his face between her legs. The smell of her arousal was intoxicating. He concentrated on slowing his heart rate, willing the pulse in his tight cock to stand down.

Dev ran a finger down the silky skin of her inner thighs, exerting the tiniest bit of pressure outwards. He then reached back for each lovely foot and admired those ripe mango toenails before placing them on his shoulders.

“Dev,” she whispered, “this is killing me.”

He stroked her inner thighs again, pushing out with just a finger tip. “Open up, sweetheart.” Without hesitation, her knees drifted apart and he felt like a fucking king. He was humbled by her trust.

The view was mesmerizing. The lips of her pussy were swollen and red, her clit engorged and hard. He blew softly over her glistening slit, then barely stroked a finger through the moisture. Inserting the tip of his finger just inside her slit, he lapped up the creamy gush of arousal that seeped from her center. Her hips lifted, pushing herself further onto his finger.

“That's it, baby,” he whispered against her hot center. “You're so beautiful.” There was a rustle of silk as she squirmed and clutched the fabric with her fists.

Dev reached up and lightly pinched the hood of her clit. “Can Chloe come for Daddy?” He steadily advanced his finger to

his knuckle and flicked her clit with his tongue.

The contractions around his finger squeezed him like a vise, making it tough to deprive his rampant cock from its need to plunge inside and feel her milk him. But Chloe seemed desperate and he didn't want to shorten her climax. "That's my girl. So sweet." He cupped her with his hand and withdrew his finger with painstaking slowness, soothing her with murmurs and kisses on the silky skin of her inner thighs.

Her responsiveness was killing him and was like nothing he'd ever experienced. He wanted to bury himself and stay there forever. He wanted to own her.

Dev scooted up over her, ignoring the pain in his knee, and met her dazed eyes. "Hey, Miss Chloe. You all right?"

"I've never been like this," she said, shuddering with an aftershock. "I mean it still isn't enough." She moved her hands down his chest and landed at his waistband, before sliding her hand down to grasp him. "I need you."

He smiled. "And I thank the gods above that you do."

Dev slipped his shorts down, enjoying the relief now that his cock had some breathing room. He pulled a condom from the pocket before tossing his shorts aside, but she reached for the packet in his hand. "I have it on good authority that you're a perfectly healthy man. My OB doctor tells me I'm okay." Her other hand drifted down and she lightly ran a finger over his erection, tip to hilt. "And since contraception is clearly not a problem...."

He tossed the condom over his shoulder without a qualm. It had been fifteen years since he'd been inside a woman without protection and his cock grew another inch. But before he could lower himself onto her, she put a hand on his chest. "Um, with your knee, and with my belly, don't you think it would be better if, um...."

He laughed and kissed her. "You're awful bossy all of a sudden." He rolled onto his back and lifted her over him. "Put me inside you, sweet Chloe."

When her hand touched him, he sucked in a breath, then clenched his teeth as she fed the head of his cock into her hot, tight passage. "Put your hands on my chest."

When she complied, he used his hold on her waist to lower her slightly onto him. She was snug. He gritted his teeth, making himself stop. "You okay?"

She sucked in a breath. "You're, um, kind of big."

"Take your time, baby. I'm not going anywhere." Retreat was not an option. Dev didn't care if it took the next hour, but he was getting inside. He lifted his head and kissed her like she was the last woman on earth. He placed soft drugging kisses against her lips, sucking her tongue when she offered it, and pulling her lips softly with his teeth, all the while nudging her deeper and deeper onto his cock.

She smiled down at him. "It's okay now."

"Just okay?" He hissed between his teeth. He could feel her cream dripping down her legs, mixing with the hair of his

groin. He lowered her another inch.

“Aaahh,” she moaned, “it's, you're, oh, God, it's been so long.”

He lowered her more and flexed his hips to thrust home, gratified to hear her whimper of pleasure, trying with every breath not to whimper himself. Every primitive instinct in his brain screamed for him to conquer and claim, to plunder the wonder of this woman until his strength was gone.

Instead, he waited for her to mold herself around his length. Her eyes were wide, golden pools shimmering with promise and trust. “Ah, damn you feel good, sweetheart.” He lifted his trembling hands to her breasts, shifting them gently, brushing her nipples with his thumbs. “You gonna ride me, Miss Chloe?”

Keeping her hands on his chest, she began to lift herself up and down, slowly riding his cock. Her eyes closed. Her lips parted and her nipples thickened and pouted for attention. Dev watched the flush spread over her chest and breasts. He touched her hands and whispered, “Play with your breasts, baby. Show me what feels good.”

Leaning back, lost in her passion, Chloe lifted her breasts and stroked her fingers back and forth over her nipples. Dev could have watched her all day, but his cock had other ideas. She sheathed him tighter than a condom, sliding up and down, bouncing the head of his penis deep against her cervix. “Dev,” she cried, so close to the edge he could feel her starting to tighten around him.

Reaching down to her clit, he pressed, and at the same time thrust his hips hard, deep into her core. She screamed. She came. And came. Her climax toppled Dev over the edge with her. “Fuck!” He lifted her hips and plunged her up and down his throbbing cock, touching her center, emptying his balls, tipping his world off of its carefully balanced axis.

* * * *

Chloe lay in the hammock on the porch, idly pushing it with a leg that was thrown over the side. She was cool from her shower. The sleeveless sundress she wore was so old it was whisper thin.

A pleasant lethargy had seeped into her body this past week, enough so that she'd been surprised she'd been able to walk back to the cabin each day. They were down to a routine. When the heat built up by mid-morning, they'd go to the creek, alternating between playing in the water and making love in his shelter. She'd lost track of her orgasms.

She'd never felt so emotionally or physically needy before and it bothered her in a vague theoretic sense, but this seemed like a time out of ordinary life, a place where the usual rules and her usual behavior just didn't apply. Chloe didn't know if it was the raging hormones of her pregnancy or something about Dev Gallagher, but she just wanted to roll up into his arms, lay her head on his chest, and not think of anything but how it felt to be held by him.

“Hey, sweet cakes.” Dev stuck his head out the window. He had showered and changed into an old t-shirt and cammo pants. “You gonna come inside and eat?”

“What are you serving?” As if she cared. As always, she was starving.

“Steak. Potatoes. And salad. And if you don't like that, I'll fix you a PBJ.”

He wasn't kidding. Dev had waited on her hand and foot. He'd let her help with some of the meals, but mainly he'd shoo her out onto the porch, and more often than not, she'd doze off until it was time to eat.

They'd spent time sharing their interests. He liked to read as much as her, but he liked mysteries and thrillers and she liked fantasies and love stories. He liked to hike. They both liked to garden, although he admitted that it had been years since he had turned soil. Otherwise, they'd been busy eating and sleeping and loving. She knew nothing about his work.

When they were sitting at the table, and when most of her hunger had been satisfied, she delved into untested waters. “My brother said you do some kind of security work in the army.” Chloe stroked her finger down the beads of sweat on her glass of cold tea.

“Yeah. Nothing too exciting. I'd like to hear more about your kindergarten class.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I won't be bored by the details of your job.”

Dev sighed, then looked over toward an old roll-topped desk against the wall. “Okay. Here's the deal. I'm in a special unit in the army.”

“And?” That really came as no surprise considering his competent, fit body.

He twisted his lips, and she could practically see him calculating how much to tell her. “I just do a lot of small detail jobs. Communications. Computers. Some security work.” When she just stared at him, his lips tightened. “Projects here and there. Around the world.”

“You're gone a lot?”

“Well. Yeah. Sometimes.” He tapped his knee. “Except I screwed up my knee awhile back, so I'm having to figure out if I can still do that kind of work, or....”

“Not?”

“Right. Or not.” He sipped more tea and started to shred his napkin into small pieces.

“And you're on leave or something?”

“Yeah. Convalescent leave. For my knee.”

“For how long?”

“Maybe a few weeks. Until I decide—actually, until the Army decides what to do with a less than perfect physical specimen.”

“And if it was up to you, what would you do?”

He continued to tear the napkin into smaller and smaller pieces. “I don't know. Part of me wants to stay with the unit. Part of me wonders if it isn't time to move on. I could get into training. Or maybe be some kind of overseas liaison.”

“Either way, it won't be Atlanta.”

His green eyes met hers and they revealed exactly nothing. “No.”

“Well. That's all very,” she struggled for a response, “interesting.”

“Chloe. I'll be with you as much as I can until the baby's born.” He dropped the napkin from his fingers and reached for her hand. “After the divorce, I'll visit every time I'm in the states.”

“Okay. That won't be so different from my original plan, after all.” Except that everything was different now. She was going to be very lonely for those big arms and wide chest and sexy grin.

He went to the desk and picked up a few opened envelopes. “I've put you as my beneficiary on my life insurance. And my will.”

Her heart dropped. “Is this stuff that you do more dangerous than usual?”

The muscle at his jaw started to twitch. “There are no guarantees in life for anybody.”

“I'll take that as a yes. Have you been to Iraq?”

“A few times.” He shrugged. “The army's so short these days, there aren't too many guys that have missed out on that scenic part of the world.”

“Is your injured knee from there?”

“No.” He walked over to the bed, slipped off his sandals and began to put on his boots.

“But you didn't twist it playing racquetball? Or badminton?”

“No.” He blew out a breath and stood, his body humming with visible impatience.

“Did somebody *shoot* at you?” She was beginning to get scared for him.

He snorted. “You have a vivid imagination, sweetheart.” He stepped away from her and applied a small amount of insect repellent to his arms. “I'm going to go out and pick up some firewood. It's been dry for a couple of days, so it's a good time

to stock up.”

“Sure. You do that. You never know when we might need it.” *In July*. “There's a couple of books on the shelf over there I've been wanting to read, anyway.”

When Dev left, Chloe continued to sit at the table, staring out the window at the approaching sundown. The envelopes on the table made her sick, knowing that each would come into play only if something happened to him. The fact that he had them so readily available was not reassuring.

She opened the first one. It was a simple will, dated on the day she had met him. The gist of it was that he had left her all of his assets. The only thing she wanted from the man currently hiding from her in the woods, though, was for him to share his six foot body and keen mind with her for a very long time. Of course, if he also threw his heart into the deal, she'd scoop him up and keep him forever.

What was she thinking? If she got in any deeper with him, it would kill her when he left. But maybe, just maybe, argued her heart, he would stay. Wasn't that worth the risk?

Shuddering, she picked up the next envelope, which was a six month premium statement for a life insurance policy for \$500,000. Indeed, she was the only beneficiary. Looking more carefully, though, Chloe realized that this premium was for continuation of a policy that had been set up in January. The ‘current information’ section listed her as beneficiary.

Chloe had been listed as the beneficiary last January? It took her brain a few moments to assimilate the facts, but she began to seethe as she put it together. He had to have known of her existence six months ago, weeks before the clinic had finally sent her the sample for insemination.

And knowing him as she did, there was really only one conclusion. It was more than a simple mix-up that she ended up with Dev's sperm instead of the artist she had selected. She didn't know how or why he had done it, but he had overridden her selection of a donor. *He* was the one who had chosen *her* to be a surrogate mother for his child.

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Chapter Four

Of all the things Dev expected when he returned with his armload of firewood, an empty cabin was not on the list. Neither were the emptied duffels scattered all over the floor nor the open desk drawers. Someone had searched his cabin.

He thought he'd been scared six months ago on his mission in Indonesia. Now he knew what real fear was. If someone had harmed Chloe and the baby, he'd take them out without a second thought. He quickly pulled open the false floor of the foot locker near the bed, grabbed his Glock, night vision goggles, car keys, and phone, and ran out the front door.

When he looked at the tracks, though, the fear vanished. Now he was just pissed off. There was only one set of tracks. They weren't made in any kind of hurry or panic. And they belonged to a stubborn, black-haired witch who had no regard for her own or the baby's safety. What and the hell had made her leave the cabin and put herself in danger?

After no more than a mile at a slow trot, he saw her, scrambling down the road ahead of him, still in that thin dress of all things. “Chloe,” he called.

To his surprise, she started to run—further away from him. He didn't know what was going on, but he sure as hell was not going to let her wander down this dirt road in the dark.

He tucked his goggles away in his side pocket, picked up his pace and quickly caught up to her. He ran in front of her and grabbed her shoulders.

“Get away from me,” she whispered. Her face was pale, eyes wide and pupils dilated.

“What in the hell is going on? Did something scare you?”

“Yes. You.” He jerked back as if she'd kicked him. She closed her eyes, breathing rapidly, and clutched her hands in front of her womb. “I want to call my brother.”

“Okaaaaay.” Maybe this was some weird pregnancy mood swing. He glanced up at the sky, but there was no full moon to explain her behavior. “Okay. Relax. No problem. Can we do this back at the cabin?”

“No!” She hugged her arms and shivered.

Dev's neck was getting chewed up by mosquitoes and he hated that her bare arms were exposed in her dress, but he pulled the phone from his pocket and dialed her brother, grateful as all hell that he answered on the third ring. “Jay? Gallagher here. Chloe wants to talk to you.”

He handed the phone to her, and she quickly stepped away from him. While she was talking, he pulled off his t-shirt and ripped the back up the middle.

When he approached her to tie it around her bare arms, she glared at him, but he didn't give a shit. It wasn't much protection, but encephalitis from West Nile Virus he could do without.

“You knew and you didn't tell me?” she said hotly into the phone.

Dev was glad she had deflected her anger elsewhere, but he had a very bad feeling about the part of the conversation he could hear.

“There is nothing, do you hear me, nothing that could justify this.” She listened to her brother for a moment and sighed. “No. It's been all right until now.”

Dev's eyebrows rose. The most incredible couple of days of his life had been just all right for her? Man, he needed to back off big time if that was all he meant to her.

She glared at Dev again, then her eyes narrowed. Before he knew it, she slapped him with a hell of a hit on his bare chest. She looked at her hand and he was relieved to see a very dead mosquito, which she promptly wiped on his pants. Maybe

she cared after all.

She grasped the t-shirt closer around her bare arms and blew out her breath. “Okay, okay. Yes. I’ll listen. That’s all I promise. But why you’re sticking up for him is beyond me.”

Way to go, Jay. Thankfully she started to walk back toward the cabin, and he walked next to her, hands in his pockets, making sure to keep his distance.

“All right. I’ll call you back. But I still say I’m coming home tonight.” She snorted. “Un huh. Right. Well when I get back, I’m going to seriously consider letting my neighbors convince me to swing their way. All right. Bye.” She handed the phone to him and continued to walk in silence.

After a minute or two, he just had to know. “Who are these neighbors you want to swing with?”

A smirk crossed her face. “Card carrying lesbians.”

Fucking great. He’d had the best sex of his life with her, and he’d only succeeded in turning her off of men altogether. “Why are you so pissed at me?”

“Because you lied to me.”

He cleared his throat. “About what?” There were so many to choose from.

She stopped and glared at him, hands on her hips. “About the fact that you manipulated the clinic into sending your sperm to me.”

“Oh. That.”

“I merely banked my sperm here, Miss Simon,” she mimicked. *“I never gave permission for its use as an anonymous donation.”*

She slapped his upper arm, hard enough to kill a bat, much less a mosquito. Call him empathic, but he intuitively decided she wasn’t going to get over being pissed anytime soon. She charged ahead, not waiting to hear his response, and he followed behind her, trying to think how he was going to get out of this. Saying he was sorry would just be another lie because he knew he’d do it again. He’d chosen fucking well.

* * * *

Mad as she was, Chloe was pretty horrified at the massive welts on Dev’s chest where his t-shirt had been. His arms were spared from the killer mosquitoes by the bug repellent he’d used earlier. She insisted on smearing the same cream over them that he had just put on her few bites, making sure that there was nothing delicate or sensual about her touch. Then she sat down in the kitchen chair, looked at her watch, and folded her arms. “You’ve got fifteen minutes to explain why you did this to me.”

Dev walked to the window and stared out at the stars. Turning around, he leaned his hips and hands on the windowsill and looked at her. She ignored the hair on his chest and the way it tapered to his lean hips. That golden path had already distracted her plenty when she should have been more suspicious of his appearance in her life.

“A lot of the stuff I've done in the Army has been dangerous. And for years, it didn't bother me.” He folded his arms across his chest. “A year ago, suddenly I started having nightmares. I'd wake up in a cold sweat, shaking like a pathetic puppy.” His lips thinned and he looked away. “The dreams were always violent and bloody. I couldn't always remember the details, but the way they made me feel was always the same.” Dev returned his burning gaze to hers. “Heart pounding, nauseating, fear.” Her shook his head with obvious disgust. “I was convinced I was going to die the next time I went out.”

She couldn't begin to relate to what he had been through. But she wanted to know how this had led to his deception, so she folded her arms and nodded. “Go on.”

He shrugged. “So I banked some sperm and left instructions in my will that it could be used as a donor sample if anything happened to me.” Pushing away from the window, he put his hands in his pockets and began to pace. “It made me feel better that I could leave something behind. Something good.” He stopped and propped his hands on the back of the kitchen chair, and hung his head. “But after the next mission, the nightmares got worse, and I knew I had to do something more definite.”

She held her breath. “Tell me.”

“I knew that there were women who couldn't get pregnant from their partners or who wanted to be single parents. And I thought, what would be so terrible if I made sure that someone who would be a good mother would get my sperm? I mean, I'm healthy, and the woman just wants a healthy baby, so....”

“You hacked into the computer.”

His gaze became wary. “Yeah. And I looked at all of the women who had applied for the artificial insemination program.” He leaned a little closer. “And I chose the best one.”

“Me.” When he nodded, she had to ask. “Why didn't you just leave it at that? I would have never known.”

“That was my intention. But on the next mission, I nearly lost my leg. And while I was recovering, I had a lot of time to think.” He blew out his breath and put his hands in his back pockets. “About a month ago, I finally gave in to temptation and I found out that you had conceived. All I could think about was the baby.”

Chloe wanted to weep. This had never been about her.

“But when you walked into the clinic that day, I knew I wanted both of you.” His eyes zeroed in on her with defiance. “So, yeah. I'm a lying bastard. And I manipulated you into this relationship.”

He leaned forward with his arms on the table, the welts on his bare chest vivid reminders of what he would do to protect her. “And as much as I owe you an apology, if I had it to do all over again, I'd probably do the same damn thing. Because I've never felt this way. And my baby will be the luckiest kid in the world to have you for a mother.”

Chloe watched his blazing green eyes and didn't know what to believe. He pushed the phone toward her. “Call your brother

and tell him we'll leave in about ten minutes so that I can drive you home." He walked to the window, climbed through to the porch, and stood at the railing, a proud, defiant warrior, his bare back rigid, hating to admit he needed anybody.

Chloe sighed. She was such a sucker for a good man. And was she really all that upset that she carried the child of a man she admired, someone she cared for, rather than the child of a nameless phantom? The artist had probably not had much talent anyway.

She called Jay and spoke to him quietly for a few moments, then headed out to Dev. She settled into her chair and studied the night sky, which was lit by a half moon that was low over the horizon of trees. Frogs and cicada chirps drowned out the faint creak of Chloe's rocker.

"Shouldn't you be packing?" he asked, without turning around.

"There's plenty of time for that."

After a few more moments, he spoke again. "What time do you want to leave?"

"Morning will be soon enough."

He turned around and studied her. "Can I go to sleep tonight and be certain you're not going to drive a stake through my heart?"

She thought about it. "I've got something else in mind for you tonight."

His eyes narrowed. "Tar and feathers?" He walked over to her rocker. "Are you gonna ground me?" His eyes glowed. "Spank me?"

She grabbed the waistband of his cammo pants and enjoyed the feel of the hair on his bare belly as she jerked him toward her, not bothering to be gentle or subtle or tentative. "You owe me big time, soldier."

He looked at her with suspicion. "You're not over this, are you?"

She stood and cupped his shaft, which showed a definite interest in the events at hand. "Not by a long shot." She climbed through the window and walked to the bed, watching him as he followed her inside. Making sure she had his attention, she pulled her sundress over her head. She was naked beneath.

Chloe climbed up on the bed, lay back with her arms above her head and bent one knee. "Why don't you take off your boots?"

Dev studied her for a moment with a puzzled look on his face, then his lips twitched. "I know I'm in trouble, here, but I figure any punishment that starts with you being naked can't be all bad." Sitting on the bed next to her, he silently unlaced the boots, then removed his socks. He looked up at her. "Pants?"

“Nope. Leave those on.”

He stood. “I was afraid of that.”

“I believe Plan B was called Worship-the-Fertility Goddess?”

“And?”

“Let the ceremonies begin.”

His eyes gleamed as he climbed up on the bed next to her and lifted her legs. “Be gentle with me, sweetheart.”

An hour later, Chloe had lost track of her orgasms. She thought she'd just had number four, but whether it was four or five, she knew that Dev had to be more than ready for what she had in mind. After catching her breath, she reached for his head, pulling his short hair until he sat up and looked at her. It was dark in the cabin, but there was enough moonlight to see the gleam in his eyes and the way he clenched his teeth.

She patted the space next to her. “Come here.” He crawled up near her, rested his head on his elbow and lay down next to her on his side. The jerk licked his lips with a satisfied grin, which made Chloe feel no regret whatsoever for what she was about to do.

Chloe touched his nipple with her fingernail and grazed it back and forth. His grin evaporated. “There's one more thing I need from you.” Running her fingernail roughly down his chest, she continued along the front of his pants, making him suck in his breath and swear. “I want you to open those buttons and show yourself to me.”

He hesitated. She could tell he didn't much like being ordered around. It wasn't something that came all that natural to her, but the man needed to learn something about trust. She let out her breath when he finally complied.

He was beautiful, thick and long and corded with veins that pulsed with life. She felt a spasm in her heated vagina. It was difficult not to reach for him.

“Now what?” he asked with a husky note in his voice.

She met his eyes. “Now I want you to show me how much you want me. I want you to make yourself come.” She didn't look away from him as she put her fingertips to her nipples.

He closed his eyes with a look of pain upon his face, but his cock twitched and lifted high against his belly. When he looked at her, his eyes were blazing. “There's not another soul I would do this for.”

And she knew what he meant. She was asking him to be vulnerable. She wanted him to repair the trust that had been broken. Of course that didn't mean she couldn't help him through this.

It was frankly quite a power trip to know she could affect him so strongly. “I'm supposed to massage my nipples to get them ready for breast feeding.” She purposely pouted. “I've been a bad girl, neglecting them.” She could feel herself blush,

but she didn't let her eyes waver from him. "Usually I use hand crème to keep them from getting dry."

He looked at her breasts, which she held up for his pleasure. Then with a groan, his eyes returned to her face and his hand made a fist around his cock. He was much rougher than she had ever been, so it was a revelation to her to discover what he liked.

Her fingers drifted to her nipples, dusting them softly as she watched him pump. The head of his cock was thick and nearly purple and his balls lifted high in his scrotum. He moved his hand faster, breathing harder, staring at her breasts, which she moved closer to him by shifting in the bed and lifting for his use.

"God damn it!" he bellowed, while hot jets of semen spilled onto her breasts and nipples.

Chloe watched his face, tight with tension, his lips gasping for breath. When he finally opened his eyes, she used her hands to massage his warm semen into her nipples and around the skin of her breasts. There was only one problem. She was so aroused by watching him that the pooling and heaviness in her vagina was nearly painful. She was ready to tip over once again. "Dev?" she whispered.

Reaching for her with his hand, he smiled and whispered against her lips. "Allow me, goddess."

A few minutes later, he encompassed her with his arms and spooned her backside against his chest. Chloe pulled his lower arm up between her breasts and intertwined her fingers with his. "I'm still mad, you know."

"I know," he answered. His arms pulled her even closer. "Not as mad as before, though."

She could hear the satisfaction thrumming in his voice, but she was too tired and too satisfied to care. She snuggled into his chest, content and happy. Dev must have felt equally content because he lay relaxed against her back and trailed his hand absently over her hip, lulling her to sleep. Just before she dozed off, she thought she heard a whisper in her ear. "I figure that means you're going to marry me."

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Chapter Five

Chloe twisted the simple gold wedding band around her finger as she sat with Dev in her obstetrician's waiting room. She had been a married woman for five days.

Dev squeezed her hand then stood. "I need to give them the information for medical benefits."

As he leaned over the front desk to speak with the nurse, every pair of female eyes in the waiting room zeroed in on what the man could do for a baggy pair of cargo shorts. It was down right criminal that he had not tucked in his red polo shirt to improve the view. When he reached into his back pocket for his wallet, she was sure that she heard a collective little gasp of anticipation.

Dev completed the forms for the nurse. When he turned around to return to his seat, at least twenty heads dropped down to magazine pages to study the pros and cons of cotton versus disposable diapers and the evils befalling infants who were not breast fed.

He sat back down and leaned close. “Why's it suddenly so quiet in here?”

“Because everyone was staring at your butt,” she whispered.

He frowned. “Did I sit in something?”

She rolled her eyes. “Surely you know that you are major stud material.”

A slow grin appeared under his twinkling eyes. “If you say so, sweetheart. Just say the word and I'll find us a corner so you can check out my front side as well.”

The nurse called Chloe's name, so she ignored his suggestion and headed for the door with Dev on her heels. It was weird to be self-conscious in front of him, but Dev must have sensed her unease and stepped outside the exam room while she changed.

By the time the doctor arrived, Dev was back standing at her side as she sat on the exam table. “Chloe. You look well.” Dr. White looked at Dev expectantly.

He held out his hand. “Dev Gallagher. The father.”

The woman looked confused and met Chloe's eyes. “I thought you used—”

“I did,” Chloe answered. “Meet the non-anonymous donor.”

“Hmmm. I foresee a very interesting board meeting at the fertility clinic this month. You're okay with this?”

Chloe shrugged while Dev wrapped his large hand around her fingers. “Very okay,” he said. “We're married.”

“Well, as long as everyone's happy.” Dr. White motioned for Chloe to lie back while she felt her abdomen and listened to the baby's heartbeat. The rapid little patter of beats on the speaker always gave Chloe a thrill, and by the look on Dev's face, it was a mutual experience.

“Everything seems fine,” said the doctor. “Your blood pressure is normal. The baby appears to be growing at the expected rate.” She consulted a card in her pocket. “November fifteenth still looks good as a due date.” The doctor wheeled the ultrasound machine close and squeezed some gel onto the skin over her uterus. “Let's give dad a quick look.”

Dr. White moved the probe over her belly as if it were a computer mouse. She used arrows and lines to point out the baby's head, spine, arms and legs. Dev reached his hand up to the screen. “Is that what I think it is?”

There was a definite extra structure between the baby's legs that was clearly not an arm or a leg. The doctor laughed. "Ultrasound is not completely accurate for determining sex, but I'd say you spotted a pretty suspicious sign of a little boy, Mr. Gallagher."

Dev had taken her hand in both of his. He met her eyes and she could have sworn his green eyes looked misty. She squeezed his hand and asked for a print to take home, then handed it to Dev while she dressed.

It wasn't until they had walked all the way to the car that Dev spoke. He helped her in the car door and stood with his hands on the roof and open door. "It's as if every other thing I've ever done doesn't matter." He leaned down and softly kissed her. "Thank you. For everything." He handed the ultrasound photo back to her.

She pushed it back to him. "That one's yours." Chloe had to fight her own tears as he walked around the car. This was starting to feel way too comfortable and it was going to hurt way too much when he left.

As they drove silently down the highway, Chloe knew she needed to do something to protect herself. Over the years, she had become an expert at being left by men, and in her considered opinion, it sucked.

During the last half of college at Emory, she had had her first serious relationship. But then Barry had gotten a fellowship to study painting in Italy, and there was no invitation issued to tag along. To be fair, money had been tight for both of them, and something had kept her from pushing the issue. She had taken a teaching job and stayed put.

Barry's letters and emails had followed a pattern. They both became increasingly scarce. And then the inevitable message came—he was in l-u-v with a fellow painter he had met at the art institute. *Ciao, Ciao* Barry.

Then when she was twenty-five, she went back for her masters in education where she met Bobby Joe Johnson. He had just finished his music degree and was playing keyboard and horns for a couple of local jazz bands. Their hours conflicted, but they managed to stay together for four years and had a lot of fun. Then he'd gotten a gig in New York City.

To Bobby Joe's credit, he visited a few times, and she traveled to see him once. But on his last visit home, he told her he was moving to the Big Apple for good. No invitation came to join him. And once again, she didn't push it. Her subconscious mind must have been telling her that it wasn't meant to be, but that still didn't keep it from hurting.

So as a wiser thirty-year-old woman, Chloe looked at Dev as he pulled up in front of her house. Here was a man who had told her up front that he would leave. Here was a man she was afraid she could love more deeply than she'd ever known. She knew she needed to pull back.

The opportunity arose the next day, as Chloe sat on her back porch and watched Dev, dressed only in a pair of gym shorts, weeding her garden, looking for all the world as if he belonged in her back yard. A large pot of tomatoes he had picked for her sat at her feet.

When he plopped down in the chair beside her, sweat rolling down his bare chest, she had to look away so that she wouldn't weaken. "I need to go out for a while."

He took a long chug of ice water from a jug and watched her over the rim. "I can drive you if you want."

“No. I'll be going with my neighbor across the street.”

“That would be the lady that looks like a fire hydrant?”

“Yes. Liz. She's a psychologist.” *Don't be a chicken, Chloe.* “She's my Lamaze partner.”

“I've been meaning to ask you about that. I'd like to be there when the baby is born.”

Chloe blew out her breath. “I'm not sure that's a good idea.”

“I don't get sick at the sight of blood or anything. If this Liz person wants to be there too, that's okay. But this may be the only kid I ever have.” He sat down the jug of water and met her eyes. She hated the vulnerable look that he quickly hid behind his steely green gaze. “I want to be there.”

“It's not that I want to deprive you. I just need to prepare myself for when you leave.”

Dev sat silently for a few minutes, then went into her kitchen. He returned a few minutes later with a cold beer and stood at the railing surveying the garden. “Tell you what. Just let me watch from a distance. You won't even know that I'm there.” *Right.* As if he could be within fifty feet of her and she not feel his presence.

When she didn't answer him, he drank from his beer bottle and propped his bad leg on the lower rail. His shoulders looked as if he was carrying the weight of the world. His voice was quiet. “I want to be there. And then why don't we just wait and see how things go after the baby's born?”

She couldn't stand this uncertainty. “We're getting a divorce, right?”

He turned around and looked at her. “That's what I said.”

“It would help if I knew when you're going to leave.”

His eyes narrowed. “It can be tomorrow if you're in such a damn hurry.”

“I'm not trying to rush you.”

“Then what is this, Chloe?” This was the first time she'd seen him get angry over anything, but it was very controlled, very cold.

“This is me trying to protect myself.”

“I threaten you?” He asked with disbelief.

“I'm afraid that I'm falling in love with you, you big jerk.”

“Oh.” His subsequent moment of silence was eloquent. He sat down next to her in the chair, probably trying to figure out how to let her down easy. “I'm not good at long-term, Chloe. It's not a smart move to love me.”

What a newsflash that was. When he didn't say anymore, she stood up and walked to the back door. Trying not to cry, she turned back toward him. “I'll see you when I get back.” They both knew it was a question instead of a statement.

“Yeah. I'll be here.”

* * * *

The house was entirely too quiet with Chloe gone. It was a grim reminder of what Dev's life was going to be like when she was gone for good. In retrospect, getting through his divorce at twenty-two and being dumped by his fiancé at thirty-two seemed like teenage crushes. Learning to live without Chloe was going to be worse than his baddest, sickest nightmares, only he'd get to feel the panicked ache in his chest all day long in the light of day. Every day, until god knew when.

Of course, if he stayed, he knew that it would end one of two ways. She would either throw him out because she didn't want to live with a man who was always gone, or that same basic message would be delivered in the form of an affair during his absence. Chloe might think she loved him, but it would never last. Besides, if she loved him, why the hell was she so eager to push him out the door?

Dev figured he'd rather find out sooner rather than later, so he picked up the phone and made a few arrangements. And then he planned what might be his last night of loving the mother of his child. He ordered her favorite food—pizza—then made a salad and lit the candles on her table.

He'd just stepped out of the shower and into his jeans when he heard the front door open. He padded into the living room on bare feet and nearly ran into Chloe's brother, who was carrying a canvas bundled up in plastic wrap. “I finally finished your wedding present.”

“You have a key?” Not that anyone would need one if he really wanted to get inside. The house was a sieve. It didn't even have an alarm system, a fact that would be remedied later this week. Still, it pissed him off that she had never offered him a key.

Jay nodded. “We look after each other's homes.” He set down his package and noticed the table set table with candles. “Special occasion?”

“Nah. Just waiting for your sister to get home so we can eat.” Dev slipped his t-shirt over his head. “You want a beer?”

“What a novel idea. I believe I will.” He followed Dev into the kitchen. “This is her Lamaze night, isn't it?”

“So I hear.” Dev opened the fridge door. “Beer?”

“You're joking, right?” When Dev handed the beer to him, Jay shook his head and pulled out a frosted mug from Chloe's

freezer. "So why aren't you there with her?"

He shrugged. "Chloe started these classes with her neighbor. I don't think she wants to switch her coach mid-stream."

Jay stared at him. "She didn't ask you, did she?"

Bingo. "There's no guarantee that I'll be able to be in town when she goes into labor," he explained, trying to sound like a rational man who wasn't getting his heart ripped out of his chest.

Jay sat down at the kitchen table and poured his beer into the mug with a perfect cap of foam. "You're leaving? Back to North Carolina?"

Dev propped a hip up on her kitchen counter and nodded. "I'll drive out tomorrow so that I can check in from leave before the end of the day. I've got a doctor's appointment and a P.T. session on Thursday morning." All of which he'd arranged an hour ago.

"And then what?"

Then he got back to his life. "I'll probably get put on desk duty for a while. My knee isn't a hundred percent, but it'll get stronger."

"You staying with the Delta unit?"

It would be easier to leave Chloe if he was busy and out of the country. "I doubt I'll leave my current unit."

"So are you leaving her for good?"

"That's up to her." He took a swig of beer out of the bottle and eyed Jay Simon with exasperation. "Do you meddle in all of her relationships, or am I just lucky?"

"First of all, there haven't been that many relationships. Second of all, who do you think is going to pick up the pieces after you go? *C'est moi.*"

"I don't think she'll be all that unhappy to see my tail lights."

"And I thought you special ops guys never quit."

"If the mission's gone belly-up, you get the hell out of Dodge."

"God save me from macho men." He shook his head and sat his mug on a napkin. "You're too scared to stay."

"I don't stay where I'm not wanted." It was too fucking painful to know that someone who supposedly loved you really

preferred to be with, oh, for example, anybody but you.

“Idiot. She's pushing you out because she's afraid you won't stay.” He patted his mouth with a napkin. “And I thought gay relationships were complex.”

The doorbell rang and Dev gladly hopped off the counter to pay the pizza delivery guy. He carried the two boxes back into the kitchen. “I have extra cheese and a supreme. But you only get to share if you quit riding my ass.”

“Now there's a picture.” He crossed his legs and grinned.

Dev snorted. “In your dreams, pal.”

“Don't worry, Gallagher. You're not my type.” He stood to get plates from Chloe's cabinets and set aside the paper plates Dev had pulled out. “Now your friend who brought the phone is a different matter all together.”

“I so do not want to hear this.” Dev loaded up with supreme, then walked into the dining room table he'd set for his farewell romantic dinner. He flipped on her CD player and swapped the classical disk for something more in tune with his mood. Garth Brooks singing about lost love should do the trick.

* * * *

Chloe had gone out with Liz for ice cream after the Lamaze class. When they pulled up to the curb, she was surprised to see Jay's sedan parked outside her house. However, she was flabbergasted when she walked into the front door and found he and Dev sprawled over her living room furniture watching a Braves game.

The dining room table was littered with two pizza boxes and three beer bottles. “Looks like you two had a good time.”

Jay stood and walked to a package leaning against the dining room wall. “It's about time you got home. Baseball has to be the slowest game on the face of the earth. At least in football, the uniforms are hot.”

Dev muted the television. He came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, kissing her neck. “I like your brother, sugar, but he makes a man real glad to be back near his woman.” They both watched Jay unwrap the canvas and turn it around to face them. She felt Dev freeze behind her.

It was a watercolor painting of the two of them. Jay had drawn Dev standing behind Chloe with his arms around her and both of their hands sitting on her pregnant belly, kind of like they were right now, except they were dressed in the clothes that they'd worn to the courthouse. Dev had worn a gray suit and tie with a white shirt the day they were married. He looked perfectly comfortable draped around Chloe's back. Jay had captured a variety of emotions on his face. His eyes conveyed pride, protectiveness, and possession, all tempered by the merest hint of a satisfied grin.

Chloe had dressed in a deep rose sundress that hugged her pregnant belly. She had piled her hair on top of her head and let small curls dangle around her face. On the painting, Jay had portrayed her hair intertwined with her long earrings. As for her face, Chloe had never seen herself look so deliriously content and happy.

It made her throat ache. "It's beautiful, Jay."

Dev moved next to her and stared at the painting before looking at Jay. "Pretty damn amazing." His voice was gruff.

Chloe went to Jay and hugged him, fighting tears. "Hey now," he said, "This isn't the reaction I was aiming for."

She laughed, choking back her tears. "It's wonderful."

He leaned down and whispered in her ear. "I think you should hang on to this one, Chloe."

"I'm not sure that's possible," she murmured.

Jay shook his head. "It's a wonder human beings haven't gone extinct with the way you heterosexuals screw things up."

Dev walked Jay to the door and shook his hand. "The painting is amazing. You're not just a pretty face after all."

"Yes, well we all have our talents. Among others, yours seems to be that you make my sister happy. Don't screw it up."

When Dev closed the door, he looked at her, then walked close and hugged her. He leaned back and studied her face. "Have you eaten?"

"Just two scoops of ice cream. I'm ready for the next feeding."

He smiled and ushered her to the couch, lifting her legs onto the cushions. "Stay put."

Before she knew it, she was holding an empty plate that had been delivered to her with hot, gooey, cheese pizza. Her stomach was full, the baby had stopped kicking up a storm, and her feet were in Dev's lap, getting a thorough foot massage. "God, that feels good."

Dev had his head back on the couch with his eyes closed. He looked grim. "Chloe. We need to talk."

And she knew. "You're leaving, aren't you?"

He rolled his head on the couch back so he was looking at her. "In the morning. I've got a few things I need to take care of back at the base. I don't know when I'll be able to return to Atlanta."

She closed her eyes so that he wouldn't see her pain. "Okay."

When she opened them again, he was staring at the painting intently. "You know I would never hurt you, right?" She nodded when his burning green eyes met hers. "Can you surrender yourself to me tonight, Chloe?"

Chapter Six

She wasn't sure what he was asking for, but it didn't seem to matter. Chloe wasn't falling in love with him. She loved him. And he was leaving, probably because she had hurt his feelings when she wouldn't take him to Lamaze class or invite him to the birth of their baby.

Tonight, she knew that he was going to demonstrate just how much she was going to miss him, but she was greedy for every touch, every kiss that branded her as his, so she told him the simple truth. "I'm yours."

His face flashed with satisfaction. He continued to massage her feet, then slowly pulled her forward, more onto his thighs. Lifting the leg closest to him, he kissed her foot and then positioned it on the back of the couch. Her ankle length skirt drifted up high over her thighs and she knew he could see her pale pink underwear that were already soaked with desire. Dev folded her other leg at the knee and nudged her inner thigh. "Open up, sweetheart. Let me see you."

His finger traced the silk covered crevice of her lips. When her pelvis jerked up, his other hand held her hip still, preventing her from making further contact than the whisper soft caress of his fingertip up and down her slit. "Dev," she moaned, wanting so much more.

Eyes flashing with possession, he kissed her inner thigh. "We've got all night, sugar." He reached for the lace at the top of her underwear, but instead of slipping them down her hips as she expected, he pulled them up snugly against her, working the leg openings closer and closer to her center. She was left with a makeshift g-string, coursing snugly between her buttocks, pressing tightly along ever sensitized, swollen nerves in her vulva.

His nail ran over the tight silk, front to back, tantalizing her clit and each opening. When she lifted her hips frantically, he pushed her pelvis down. "No, sugar. I'm in charge tonight. I need you to hold real still for me."

She moaned with frustration. "I can't."

"I'll help you out, sweetheart." To her dismay, he caressed one of her knees while he lifted his hips and reached into his pocket for his keys. He flipped open a small contraption that gleamed and began to cut her cotton skirt straight up the front. Standing, he slipped it out from beneath her and tore several long strips that he attached to the legs of the couch near her head. He presented the two ends to her.

"Hold on to these, baby." She gripped each piece of cloth tightly. Dev kissed each wrist and then wound the slack cloth about her arms until there was just a small tail hanging near her elbow. "Every time you think you need to move, I want you to pull real hard on these bindings."

Chloe knew she could unwind her arms anytime she wanted, but she felt bound and staked out for his pleasure. A shudder ran through her. He leaned down and whispered in her ear. "Daddy will let you go when you've shown what a good girl you can be." The couch beneath her had to be drenched.

He sat at her side and traced his fingers over her breasts through her cotton blouse, while his other hand pulled her

underwear more tightly against her and traced his finger over the wet silk at her core. Chloe pulled hard on the makeshift rope, squeezed her eyes shut, forcing her hips to stay still. His hands left her panties. "Watch me."

She opened her eyes and met his smoldering gaze. Part of her wanted to kick him when she saw a hint of a satisfied grin twitch at his lips. But another part wanted to do what he asked and bring him to his knees. She licked her lips and let her legs drift further apart, never letting her eyes leave his. "Like this, Daddy?" she asked in her best little girl voice.

The muscle twitching in his suddenly stern face was answer enough. Very soon, his clever blade had divided the front of her blouse, but to her amazement, he merely carved out two tight openings in her bra for her nipples, which he carefully lifted through before tucking her shirt tightly behind her. "Beautiful." He returned his keychain to his pocket and reached for her nipples, plucking and pressing, nudging and gently pulling.

Chloe gasped and pulled again on her bindings, never letting her gaze drop from his. "That's my girl," he murmured, dropping his head to her nipples and rewarding her by cupping her mound as he mouthed her nipples with soft sucking kisses. He placed a thumb on her clit and pressed through the wet silk, allowing his other fingers to drift down over her swollen lips, now dissected by the tight cloth.

Pulling so tightly she could hear the material rip, Chloe froze her lower body and gasped. "Dev. Please."

He lifted his head. "What does my little girl want?"

She narrowed her eyes, trying to ignore the throbbing in her vagina. She was so close. "Your little girl wants to come. And it better be damn soon."

He laughed and stood up near her head. "Daddy wants to keep his little girl happy." Leaving the button of his jeans fastened, he carefully unzipped his fly and lifted his engorged penis and balls free, glaringly male against the dark cloth of his jeans. He tucked the bottom of his t-shirt into the top of his jeans so that her view would not be obscured. "Is this what my little girl wants?"

"Yes," she snapped. She wanted it more than her next breath.

His knife appeared again and he cut the bindings near the floor, leaving the ends trail off of her arms. He lifted her off the couch and had her stand at the end of the couch, leaning over the arm, making sure there was no pressure on her womb by putting couch cushions beneath her breasts and shoulders. The whole time, his hard cock bobbed around in front of her, tantalizing her with its nearness. She wanted to lathe and caress and suck him until his head would explode with the rest of him.

He kneeled on the couch in front of her. "You see something you like, baby?"

Oh, yes, and she'd show him just how much. Letting the ends of the black bindings drift over him, she slowly wrapped it under his sack and pulled him forward. Without warning, she engulfed him whole, taking as much as she could fit. The only time she stopped the suction was to murmur her approval against his shaft.

"Christ!" he hissed, holding her face and prying her lips off of him. "You play dirty, lady." She would have laughed if she wasn't in such need.

Dev quickly moved around behind her and tugged and pulled on her makeshift g-string. She heard his knife again as he cut holes in the crotch, but left the silk pulled tightly against her core. His fingers fluttered through her juices, skipping over her engorged lips, making her whimper with need.

Positioning his cock at her needy vagina, he slowly rocked against her, pulling her panties tight with one hand and smoothing his wet finger against her sensitized back opening. She sucked in a breath at the strange sensation, and felt his cock enter the lips of her vagina, tantalizing in its nearness. Each time he pressed deeper, his finger pressed more firmly against her rear opening. He reached around with his other hand and grabbed the bindings that were still draped around her arms, curling them up in his large fist.

With one final thrust, he buried himself to the hilt, his finger slipping inside her simultaneously, and draped his still clothed body over her back. The complete fullness, the sight of his hand around her bindings, lifting her arms in front of her, the rasp of the rough jeans against her backside and his t-shirt against her naked back were all too much for her. He reared back and thrust again, hissing in her ear, "Come for me now."

She clenched around him, throbbed around his thickness, each convulsion rippling throughout her body, pulsing to her nipples, stiffening her limbs, melting her heart, and fusing her forever to his soul. There was no doubt. She was his.

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Chapter Seven

For the eighty-first time since returning from his physical therapy session, Dev's eyes drifted to the painting on his apartment wall. With no qualms at all, he had procured it from Chloe's living room yesterday morning and hauled it back to North Carolina. He figured he deserved full custody of something, even if it was destined to drive him bat shit.

"B.D., this is Houston. Come in B.D." Rick Price, one of his oldest Delta buddies, was sprawled on Dev's worn out couch, looking comfortable in a wrinkled Hawaiian shirt, cut offs and a worn pair of flip flops. His dark hair was nearly grown out to his shoulders and his skin was tan from his recent assignment abroad. Best of all, he was conveniently off the deployment roster for the next thirty days.

"I've got a favor to ask."

"Does it have something to do with the luscious babe in the painting?"

Dev wanted to smash in Rick's face for just admiring Chloe's image, which was a real pisser since he was about to ask his friend to do oh so much more to the real woman. "I need for you to go to Atlanta for a week or so."

Rick took a swig of his water. "Not a problem. I'm always up for a road trip."

"My friend, Chloe...." Dev stopped to clear his throat and nodded toward the painting. "Actually, she's temporarily sort of my wife." When Rick did no more than lift an eyebrow, Dev continued on. "She needs an alarm system in her house."

Rick's eyes narrowed and he started to peel the label off of the water bottle. "And the reason you can't put in the alarm system is, what? Your scheduled tee time with the General?"

Dev hated the fucking game of golf. "Screw you. I'll ask someone else."

Rick snorted. "That I've got to see."

Dev rubbed his throbbing forehead. His empty apartment with its roomy, vacant bed had not inspired sleep last night and asking for a favor was harder than hiking twenty clicks with a full pack. Rick and he had that in common, along with a lot of other shared history, so one of them usually snagged the other when they were in any kind of bind.

"Look. The marriage is not really working out."

"Uh huh. You look real unhappy in that painting." Rick looked up at the portrait while he took another swig of water. "What's the problem? Is that someone else's bun in the oven?"

"Christ, how did you manage to stay alive until now, Price?" Dev snapped. "You never know when to back off."

Rick leaned forward and set the bottle down, flexed his hands, and subtly shifted his weight to the balls of his feet. *Smart man*. He knew Dev was one micron away from kicking his ass. Or trying to.

"I'm not jumping into a mission half-assed," said Rick, "without *some* idea of what the hell is going on. Especially since it's *your* wife we're talking about. I'd feel safer going back to Baghdad wearing a t-shirt with an American flag." When Dev remained silent, Rick continued, all humor gone from his eyes. "If you want my cooperation, cough up some Intel. Is it your kid or not?"

"Yes." It gave him fierce satisfaction to say it.

"And you don't want to hang around the pregnant mom." Rick stood up and walked closer to the painting, then whistled softly. "It's obviously not because she's butt ugly. Is she a nutcase?" He looked back over his shoulder. "A chatty Cathy in the sack?"

When Dev merely glared at him, he put his hands in his back pockets and forged ahead. "Did she turn off the nookie when she got the ring on her finger?" Rick wiggled his eyebrows with a smirk, obviously willing to keep it up until he got the truth. Or got Dev to go for his throat.

Since the latter was so tempting, Dev straightened out his sore knee and limped over to the window, which overlooked the not so scenic suburban Fayetteville. "Look. She's okay. Better than okay." He turned back to his friend. "But I need to back off before I..."

"Can't leave?"

"Get screwed by a woman again. It's only a matter of time before she finds someone else. I'd rather it be sooner than later."

Rick's eyes widened. "And you want *me* to be the sooner?" He wandered to the kitchen counter and leaned back on his elbows. The casual maneuver strategically positioned the couch between them. "As I recall, you nearly ripped your baby brother's head off three years ago for doing a similar favor for you with your fiancé."

"Yeah, well I didn't ask Connor to do me any favors with Susan. He plunged in all by himself."

"To show you what a two-timing bitch she was."

It was true, and he really needed to smooth things over with his brother, but that would wait until this was settled. "All I want you to do is show up, take a few days to put in the alarm system, and see how things go with her, see if she's interested. I left a note telling her you'd be coming to do the install and that you'd need a place to stay."

"That'll make it convenient for our hump-a-thon."

"Do *not* talk about her like that."

"Of course I'll have to bone up on positions. I've never done a pregnant woman before."

Dev's teeth were probably a millimeter shorter from all his grinding. "Just let me know whether she was interested or not, okay?" A flash of taking Chloe from behind against her couch threatened his sanity. "No details."

"You know that you're fucked up, right? This is *not* normal."

"What else is new?"

"One last item, Einstein. What if I fall for her? What if *I'm* not afraid of staying? You want me raising your kid?"

Dev ground his jaw even harder. He pulled the sheet with Chloe's info off of his printer and handed it to Rick. "Call me when you get back."

"Uh huh." Rick grabbed it with obvious disgust. "I'm sure you'll want to kick back and compare notes over a beer."

* * * *

Chloe leaned her head back on the rocker and inwardly groaned when the screen door onto the back porch opened and swished closed. Dev's 'buddy' Rick had arrived two days ago. He'd started work on the alarm system and was popping up unexpectedly in every room in the house. Unfortunately, her sexual-overture-pop-up blocker was seriously outdated for her current environment.

Her heart wasn't consumed with Rick, but he was sexy in his own right and her body was definitely on low simmer. It was downright embarrassing.

“Hey Chloe. Can you come in and hold a window up for me?”

When she sensed Rick's presence in front of her, she opened her eyes. Yep. No overnight change. Battered khaki shorts, hiking boots, and shoulder length hair were the only coverings on the bronzed muscular physique of Dev's buddy. He currently leaned back on the railing of her porch, and when her eyes reached Rick's chocolate brown gaze, she sensed that he was waiting for her to give him a sign. Like lick the drip of sweat running down his....

Window. Right. “Of course.”

He reached out to take her hand and assist her from the rocker. His grip was sure, and under other circumstances, she might have followed his slight tug and tumbled against that luscious, smooth chest.

Instead, she stepped away. Pulling up her braid, she let the overhead fan blow on her heated skin as she moved toward the door. Even though Chloe was chagrined with this annoying physical attraction to her most recent male roommate, she decided to give herself a break. She was supercharged with hormones and the man would have tempted a nun.

When she stepped through the door he held open, he stopped her with a touch on her bare shoulder. “I'm going to finish up tonight around seven. Can I take you out to dinner?”

Since she was sick of moping around without Dev, she gave Rick a bright smile. “Yes.”

For a half second, he looked surprised and even hesitant. But before she could rescind, he shrugged his shoulders and gave her a sexy grin. “The only condition is that we pick up some of that killer ice cream you've been feeding me so we can have dessert at home.”

Chloe gulped. Rick and dessert. “It's an addiction.”

His eyes narrowed. “And now you've hooked me.” He seemed about to say something else, but his cell phone rang and he stepped away to answer it.

“Price here.” He turned away from her, but she rudely stayed put to try to figure out what made this man tick. She also was more than a little interested in whether the caller could be Dev.

Her non-anonymous donor had not contacted her since his departing terse note last week. *Taking the painting.* That had flabbergasted her, but a little ray of hope that maybe the man cared also flared to life. *Left my cell number. Call if you need me.* Not bloody likely, even though she needed him for a whole lot of things.

“No, not yet,” Rick murmured into the phone. “I'll finish up this evening and possibly head back tomorrow. It depends.” He turned toward her and winked. “I don't have the details worked out yet.” Now he out and out laughed. “Too damn bad.”

He smirked. “My phone is running out of juice, so I'm only going to answer official calls.” His eyes narrowed. “I'd better not find myself called back onto the duty roster. Uh huh. Right back at you, slick.” He clicked his phone closed and reached for her hand. “Let's go finish those windows, sugar.”

“Mmmmm.” Rick threw his head back and groaned. “God, that was good.”

Chloe laughed as she cleared the bowls from the kitchen table. “They make this ice cream locally. This one was dark chocolate with fresh raspberries mixed in. I can't stay away from it.”

Cupping his hands behind his head, he tipped the chair back and watched her as she loaded the dishwasher. She tried not to dwell on the way his white linen shirt stretched across his chest. Though it wasn't covered with light brown hair for her to run her hands over, it was right up there in the buffest-chests-of-all-time catalog.

“In spite of your appetite, Chloe, you don't seem to have gained any weight except where the baby is.” It was the first time either one of them had referred to her pregnancy. “Every where else seems just about perfect.”

“Perfectly bloated.”

She heard the chair legs hit the floor and sensed him behind her at the sink. He was an inch or two shorter than Dev, but he was still an impressive figure of a man to have hovering. “Chloe?”

“Yes?” she whispered.

“I know you and Dev were involved, or maybe you still are, but I've got to tell you.” His fingers dusted across the bare shoulders exposed by her loose sundress. “I find you to be one sexy lady.”

This was surreal. She was twenty-nine years old, pregnant, and only now did she meet the two most appealing men of her life, all within the space of four weeks. Only one had her heart, but the jerk had ripped it out without looking back. How the hell had she allowed herself to get so tangled up? She felt the tears well up, even as she leaned just a bit back into Rick's strength.

He put his chin on top of her head and hugged her to his chest. But after a moment, he turned her toward him and noticed her tears.

“Ah, sweetheart,” he croaked. “You're killing me here.” He gave her a lopsided smile that looked a little sad. His thumbs wiped the tears from her cheeks as he cradled her face in his big hands. “Is it my man, Dev?”

She nodded between sobs. “I wish he'd never found me.”

“Uh huh.” He took her hands and walked backwards until they reached her living room. “Tell Dr. Rick all about it.”

“He's made me miserable.”

“I can see that.” He sat in her big recliner, lifted her onto his lap, and cradled her in his arms. “He's an ass.” He rubbed her back and crooned into her ear. “Lower than whale shit in the ocean.”

She sniffed and wiped her face on his shirt. “He hasn't called me or anything.” She leaned back. “And then he sent *you*.”

“Me?” He looked insulted. “Why am *I* suddenly the problem?”

“Your perfect body. Your sexy smile. You're too nice. Too charming....”

He raised his eyebrows. “And those things piss you off?”

“Noooo,” she wailed. “It's just, why couldn't you have shown up before I met him?” Her hands gripped the cloth of his shirt. “Then maybe I wouldn't be so wrapped up in the big jerk. So perfectly ruined for anyone else.”

“He's a fucking idiot,” Rick swore. Then he mumbled under his breath. “I'm just fucked.”

“What do you mean?”

He smoothed her hair back from her face. “Well, here you are, all soft and rosy and more than any man could wish for.” He shifted with discomfort in the chair and she noticed his arousal, which she really did not want to think about right now. “And here I am, trying to do the right thing.” His hands skimmed down her bare arms. “And you're thinking of Dev.” Rick's thumb drifted across her lower lip. “And I'm thinking of him, too, and what I'm thinking is he's fucked up the night for both of us.” He shook his head. “And the pisser is that the poor bastard's probably more miserable than either of us.”

“No way.”

“Yes, way, though it pains me to point it out to you.” He shifted her so that her back was turned more toward his chest and took her hands in his. “He's all alone, wallowing in misery, sitting in his butt-ugly apartment, staring at that painting of you. Trust me, his gut is twisted in twenty seven knots.”

He guided her hands down to her womb and molded her hands to her swollen belly. “You, on the other hand, have got junior here.” He pulled her hands up to his face. “And tonight, you've got me to hold you.” Rick tightened his arms for a moment. “And I've got about fifty kilos of heaven in my arms.”

She turned her head and looked at him, licking her lips. “But I can't, um, I mean it's tempting, but so soon after Dev, I can't....”

“Shhhhh. It's okay.” He tucked her head onto his chest and continued to use her hands to dust up and down her body. “I'm just helping to soothe your soul.”

She closed her eyes as he crooned in her ear for several minutes, but she was startled from her reverie when she felt her fingers dust against the underside of her breasts. She realized that she was incredibly turned on, but she was a little uncomfortable with the situation and had to say something. “My soul,” she said, feeling it necessary to point out, “doesn't wear a forty-two D.”

“Ahhh.” She heard the smile in his voice. “But I'm thinking your body could use a little solace, too.” Her hands were slowly brought up to her breasts again. “Give yourself a break, Chloe girl. I'm just here to guide you on your journey. Think of poor Dev, all alone, and what he's missing here.” He moved her fingers lightly across her nipples. “He's not here

to appreciate the way your hair smells. The way you long for his mouth on your bare skin.” Her hands drifted below her womb and, intertwined with his, they began to drag her skirt up. “He can’t feel how you need him to fill you.”

Dev. She was aching for him. She closed her eyes and saw his green eyes, tortured with longing, practically begging her to allow him to be with her at the birth. His whispered name drifted into the darkened room. The silence was broken only by the sound of rustling fabric and her own desire. Her fingers dusted across her moist panties and she moaned.

“That’s it, sugar. He needs you so much. And you need him.” Rick brought one of her hands to her lips and dusted a finger back and forth across the crease. “Open,” he whispered. As her fingers probed her mouth, her other hand dusted across a nipple. Her wet hand drifted down to her core and cupped her hot center firmly, then lightly dusted over her wet panties.

“Ahhh,” she whispered, longing to be filled, missing Dev, but somehow reveling in the heat and nearness of the man beneath her. She was on fire and let go of her concerns. She was safe with Rick. She lifted her leg and set her foot on the arm of the recliner.

He sucked in a breath, then shuddered against her back. “So damn sweet.” Their fingers moved together and tickled at the edge of her panties, slowly working beneath them, pulling and pushing on her swollen lips as they were slowly exposed.

Her mouth was open, sucking the hot air down her dry throat, all of her attention on the need between her legs. “I can’t stand much more.”

“I know, sugar,” he whispered. “I think,” he continued as he kissed her ear, “you need,” his lips drifted down her neck, licking a soft trail, “to be touched,” he drawled, licking back up to her ear, “right ... here.” Fingertips, his and hers, indistinguishable from one another, pushed lightly at the wet entrance of her vault, while her other hand was simultaneously brought up to push down firmly on her clitoris.

Chloe arched her back and stiffened against him, forcing their fingers inside to be grasped and caressed by her hot center. With every slight shift of the pressure, her contractions continued to rack her needy body.

“Ah shit,” Rick hissed. His body lurched up against her soft bottom, cradling her between his thighs, growling between his teeth, arms shaking with the restraint he was exerting. “Don’t. Move.”

Chloe quickly snapped out of her heated stupor, ignoring the aftershocks hitting her body. She shifted and reached for his hard length, gripping him through his pants. Molding her hand to his erection, ignoring his hiss of breath, she put her lips to his neck, then firmly squeezed and drew her hand along his length. “Don’t you *dare* hold back.”

He groaned, but then pulled her tight and thrust against her hand until she felt him shudder and slump back into the chair. Call her wicked, but she was inordinately proud of the hot wetness that seeped beneath her fingers. “God, I’m sorry,” he whispered against her ear, pulling her close to his chest.

“I’m not,” she answered sleepily, content to lie in his arms.

“I know you’re Dev’s,” he said firmly.

“You’re right.” She was glad he didn’t misunderstand the situation. “But you’ve become a good friend to me, too.” She

pulled her head back and grinned at him. “And you brought great comfort to my soul.”

He laughed and gave her a friendly hug. “Just call me Father Rick.”

“Now how about you tuck me in and then go get some sleep before your long drive tomorrow?”

He lifted her without effort and started for her bedroom. “Anything for a member of my flock.”

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Chapter Eight

“Say that again.” Dev was stunned.

“That you look like shit?” When Dev shook his head, Rick sighed. “In spite of you being a major asshole, Devlin, and in spite of Chloe being turned on by having my superior buff body at her disposal, amazingly, she only wants you.”

Thank God. Dev had done a lot of soul searching the past week and had finally admitted that the reason he was damn miserable was that he belonged with Chloe. And his baby. His drab apartment echoed with emptiness. He wanted-no, he needed to be around his woman, even if it meant taking a risk she'd tire of him someday. Suddenly being without her at all was a lot worse than the risk of *maybe* getting dumped.

Dev's thrill of happiness took a minor dip, though, when he noticed that Rick looked a whole lot more relaxed than when he had left. “And how exactly is it that you know she *was* turned on?”

“You really don't deserve her, you know.” Rick just shook his head and pulled his sunglasses down over his eyes from the top of his head. Dev's reflection was the only thing visible in the mirrored lenses. “She was not interested in sleeping with me.”

Dev couldn't help himself. “That leaves a lot of ground uncovered.”

“Christ, B.D. You ask me to try to seduce the lady, which was a shitty thing to do to your wife. And then when I put myself through the torture of snuggling up close to that delectable body, you complain.”

He wanted to do a lot more than complain. He wanted to pound Rick into a pile of dust. He wanted to know just how fucking close Rick had gotten. “You don't look any worse for the wear,” he snarled. “Buddy.”

Rick took off his glasses and took a couple of steps closer. “Let me tell you this, asshole. If she would have had me, I... “He punched Dev's shoulder a little harder than a friendly tap would require, then shook his head and walked to the door. “Jesus. Be happy, why don't you? You're lucky you've got her.” He replaced his sunglasses, opened the door, and turned with a shit eating smile. “Of course, after she reads the note I left, that may all change.”

Dev rubbed his eyes. He had hardly slept since Rick had left, and he'd pushed his knee too hard on the weight machines. It was swollen again. "I know I don't want to hear this, but what did you tell her?"

Rick smiled with the first real humor since he arrived. "I told her that you sent me to see if she was going to cheat on you."

"Shit." He'd never get her to trust him again. "Why?"

"Because she deserves to have you grovel. And you've put me through the fires of hell for the past week." His smile dimmed. "Now. I am going to go get very drunk and very laid, not necessarily in that order. If I'm extremely lucky, I can accomplish both at the same time. Stay away from me for a while."

"I'm sure you'll think of a way for me to return the favor some day."

"That's the only reason you're still on your feet."

After Dev shut the door, he got a bottle of water and mulled over his options. He could grovel long distance and then travel to Atlanta. But then she'd be on the lookout for him and nail his ass the minute he got within a hundred yards. Jesus. She probably had a restraining order on him already. No, his way was much better.

* * * *

Chloe gradually awoke and wasn't sure why, especially since it was still pitch black outside. There wasn't any kind of unusual noise. She felt safe with her brand spanking new alarm system, which she could tell was still armed by the control panel she could see from her bed. The lack of barking from her neighbor's attentive German shepherd reassured her as well. Still, something didn't seem right.

She threw off the lightweight sheet that was the only cover she could tolerate, even with the air conditioning on arctic blast and the sub-hurricane gale from the two fans aimed at her bed. Grudgingly, she put on an oversized t-shirt just in case she ran into trouble. Of course, the t-shirt that said *Don't Mess with a Pregnant Woman* was unlikely to intimidate even a weasel of a burglar.

At least she could take care of one of her twice nightly visits to the bathroom. After splashing a little water on her face, she padded in her bare feet into the kitchen to get a glass of ice water.

That was when she noticed the plant on the kitchen table. It hadn't been there when she'd gone to bed, and she couldn't imagine Jay visiting at—she glanced at the clock and saw it was four AM.

The small clay pot held greenery that looked more like a bush than a house plant. When she looked closer, she could see little maple shaped leaves surrounding small purple flowers and unripened berries. A small card was tied to a branch with a purple ribbon.

Chloe dropped into a chair and noticed that her heart started to beat faster. Dev? She removed the envelope and opened it with trepidation. All the card said was *Raspberry—the flower of remorse*.

Tapping her fingers on the table, she analyzed her emotions. She was hurt and angry that he had left and that she had not

heard a peep from him. If he thought he could just slink inside of her house and buy her forgiveness with a lousy plant, he'd soon learn differently. On the other hand, she had practically pushed him out the door. And more importantly, her heart argued, *he was back*. She felt the ache in her gut relax and a little thrill shot up her spine.

Trailing her fingertips over her pregnant belly, Chloe realized that her jolt of happiness needed to be tempered with practicality. The only way Dev was going to get back in permanently was to work at it. He needed to demonstrate he was capable of staying. She would not go through this again.

* * * *

The next night, long after her lights were out, Dev stood at the door to Chloe's room and felt the vise on his chest ease just as it had last night when he'd watched her sleeping peacefully. The tightness had been with him ever since he'd driven out of Atlanta two weeks before.

Of course, he was by no means over the hump. His fiery Chloe had left a few surprises for him tonight. And though Dev chose to view them in a positive light, he admitted that their meaning could be open to interpretation.

For instance, the rat traps that had been set in front of every window and door had taken her a lot of time and effort to set up, but anyone willing to expend that effort must still care, right? If she didn't, she could have had her brother sitting inside the door with a sawed off shotgun. Simpler and much more effective.

And the dried flowers on her kitchen table? The flower was coxcomb, which wasn't real hard to interpret, especially since the red flowering portion was demolished in a heap of dust. Since he wasn't an idiot, the meat pounder sitting next to the demolished blossom momentarily caused his balls to suck up into his abdomen. Her note confirmed his assessment of her emotions. It said *Kitchen Mallet—a tool used to beat meat to a bloody pulp; Cockscomb—the flower of foolish action*.

Well, he couldn't deny he'd been a fool. So he turned around and began to arrange his own surprise for her. Of course the last thing he did before he left was to hide the hefty kitchen mallet high above the refrigerator, just behind a container of Christmas cookie cutters.

* * * *

Chloe awoke to the sweet smell of carnations. She found the first one just outside her bedroom door. It was sitting across the rat trap that had been disengaged. When she walked around the rest of her house, she found a flower on each unset trap and gathered them one by one, enjoying their sweet fragrance. She felt her lips quirk with amusement at the thought of him dismantling each trap in the dark and went to get her coffee going.

Another surprise was on the kitchen table. A huge bunch of pussy willows was tied together with a blue ribbon. The card on the table was larger this time. It said *Red Carnations—the flower that says Alas for My Unhappy Heart* and *Pussywillows—the flower of motherhood*. On the bottom of the note, a small addition was scrawled in his handwriting. *You don't need traps to catch me—I'm yours*.

Hmmm. Maybe. Chloe put the pussy willows and the gathered carnations in vases, and stared at the note over coffee. She decided that the time for games was over. She took a large red marker and circled '*I'm yours*' and then wrote three words in big bold letters beside it, leaving it on her kitchen table for him to find this evening.

FOR HOW LONG? Dev set down the note with a sigh. He didn't blame her for asking, but he had no trouble with the answer. He lingered in the kitchen long enough to make certain that the meat mallet was still safely tucked away, stopped to straighten the painting he'd replaced on her wall, and then padded into her bedroom on bare feet. The three dozen red tulips he had with him were on the bulky side, but the clerk had assured him that they were an *avowal of true love*, and that's what he hoped to convince her of tonight.

He began to drop them one by one, starting at her bedroom door, trailing over to her bed side table, and ended with at least a dozen blossoms on her bed. He took the last one and rubbed it across her lips. Chloe blinked a few times, then rolled on to her back and opened her eyes. She didn't look surprised or openly hostile, so Dev optimistically sat down beside her. "I brought you tulips."

"So I see." She sat up and rearranged her pillow behind her, all the time holding the sheet to her chest. Since her shoulders were perfectly bare, he had to restrain himself from unveiling what was hidden by the sheet.

"You don't have any kitchen utensils hidden under your pillow, do you?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Could be. I think I'm being stalked by a florist."

Dev blew out his breath. "Sounds like you need a husband in your bed instead of a kitchen utensil."

"I tried that once," she whispered. "Not very reliable."

His gut clenched. "He was an asshole."

Her eyes narrowed. "You think you could do better?"

"I know I can."

"Why?"

"I'm a little slow on the uptake when it comes to this stuff, but even I figured out that I'm crazy about you. And life without you seriously sucks."

"What am I supposed to do when you change your mind?"

"I won't. I couldn't." He handed her a tulip. "They tell me this is a symbol of love." He reached into his pocket and brought out a small box. "But I thought I'd hedge my bets."

She opened the jeweler's box and her eyes widened. "They're beautiful."

He reached into the box and removed one of the earrings and pulled her closer. He smoothed the hair behind her ear and

inserted the first post through her ear before kissing her earlobe. Dev pushed the gold bells with his finger and heard a faint tinkle. “I had them made for you. They're bluebells.” He fitted the other ring to her ear and gently held her face. “They represent gratitude. And constancy.”

“You're sure?”

“Oh yeah. I want us—and our son—to have a life together, Chloe. And you need to know, I'm going to switch out of the unit that takes me away so much. But we might have to leave Atlanta. I can't ask you to marry me again, but I can ask you this. Will you take me again as your husband?”

She smiled brilliantly. “Yes.”

He lifted her onto his lap and kissed her. God she felt good. The skin of her back was so soft. Her bare breasts pillowed against his chest. Her soft bottom was nestled up tight against his perpetually hard cock when in her presence. His arms had been so empty. He couldn't believe she had forgiven him so easily for his stunt with Rick. “Listen, about the note Rick left you.”

She ran her fingers across his chest. “Was he supposed to give me a note from you?”

Her fingers were now beneath his t-shirt and it was getting more difficult to think of anything besides her lush body. “No. Um, his note.”

She was kissing his neck, licking her way up toward his ear. “I didn't see any note from him. What was he supposed to have said?”

Talk about tiptoeing through a minefield. He was going to kill Rick. The asshole hadn't told her anything, he'd just wanted to make Dev miserable. Of course, it was real hard to care right now with a naked Chloe in his arms. “Nothing. He just enjoyed his visit with you.” *Too god damned much.*

She leaned back and looked at his face. “And that's okay with you?”

Hell, no. But it was his own damn fault. “Sugar, only an idiot would have sent a guy like Rick to you instead of staying where I belong. As long as you want me as your husband, I'll be the happiest man alive.”

“Then you'll be happy for a long time.” Chloe untucked his black t-shirt and began to open the zipper on his pants. “Now, what are you going to do about the fact that you're not in the right uniform for this room?”

Oh, man. Dev had never thought so before meeting her, but he was one lucky bastard. He scooped her off his lap, placed her back into the bed and took all of five seconds to get naked. He crawled up and surrounded her with his legs and arms, keeping his chest off of her belly. “How's junior?”

“Restless. Kicking a lot.”

“I'm looking forward to feeling the runt do his somersaults.” He rolled onto his back and lifted her on top of him. “Of

course, there's something else I'm looking forward to.”

She reached forward and took him in her hand. “I can see that.”

He hissed and reached for her breasts. “I can't wait to hear those earrings sing while I'm deep inside of you.” He swept his fingers down and felt her plump lips and weeping pussy, then lifted her down until he was buried inside. He began to help her move her hips and felt himself grow harder, reveling in the soft jingle of her earrings.

“No matter where we are,” he rasped, and increased the pace, already feeling her tightening around him, “every time I hear those bells ring, I'm going to think of how much I love seeing you come.” He pinched her nipples lightly and Chloe stiffened and contracted around him. He followed her over the top.

A long time later as he was spooned against her, she lifted her head. “Dev?”

“Yeah, sugar?”

“I just thought of another benefit of being married to you.”

“Besides the fact that you're crazy in love with me?”

“Yeah. And besides the fact that I get full time access to your truly buff body.”

“What's that sugar?”

“I'll have a free lifetime supply of gold medal-winning sperm.”

He felt himself rising again. “I'll cooperate, but only if you test the product real often to make sure it meets your standards.”

“I was hoping you'd say that.”

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Epilogue

Dev had to be honest. Even at one day of age, his son was a wrinkled, red, splotchy, wiggling mass of humanity. Cute he was not.

Young Quinn Gallagher was currently howling blood-curdling screams, but Dev couldn't care less. The kid was spectacular. He was healthy. And he was theirs. Dev's throat had been swollen with emotion since the delivery and it was

still nearly impossible for him to talk without choking up. He had been relieved when Jay had finally left this morning after keeping vigil during the delivery.

He paced the room and cuddled his son to his chest, a little intimidated and a little amused at the power of the rage and impatience in the boy.

“Knock, knock.” The door opened before any response could be given and Rick and Dev's ‘little’ brother walked into the room. Connor and Dev looked quite a bit alike, but Connor was an inch taller and a little bulkier than Dev from all his construction work.

While Dev had been in his groveling mode with Chloe, she had encouraged him to patch things up with his brother. It sucked to have to apologize to a man for being angry that said man had slept with your fiancé, but since the end result was that Dev had ended up with Chloe, he muddled his way through. It was good to have his brother back.

Connor froze. “Man, I never thought I'd see the day.”

“Come meet your nephew.”

Connor moved closer and narrowed his eyes. “He doesn't seem too happy right now.” He reached his large hand out and touched the little Quinn's fist. Connor had to clear his throat before he could talk again. “I'll wait for the next shift.”

Since Dev knew exactly how Connor felt, he gave him time to pull himself together. “It probably would be better to wait until he's eaten.”

He glanced at the bed just in time to see his beautiful wife bare a truly perfect breast to try to appease their little beast. Only he could really see her, but that didn't stop him from wedging himself between her and Rick.

Rick smiled. “Why don't you let me say hello to your wife?” The bastard knew that Rick's friendship with Chloe drove him a little crazy.

“Why don't you just hold your godson instead.” That wiped the smug grin off of his face. “Meet Quinn.”

Rick clenched his jaw, took a deep breath, and then gingerly took the baby from Dev. After a minute, Rick's posture relaxed and he strolled around the room with him. Quinn stopped crying. “Hey. I'm a natural.”

“Yeah, you've got a definite aptitude for fatherhood.” Dev had been fooled several times by his son's momentary breaks from screaming, but then he realized that the respite was only because the little sucker had managed to find his fist and get it to his hungry mouth. “In fact, I think you should seriously consider finding your own woman and start a family.” It couldn't happen soon enough to suit Dev.

“Yeah, it's past time that you two old men settle down,” said Connor.

“Your day will come, bro.” At least Dev hoped so.

“Not if I can help it.”

Dev turned and saw that Chloe was ready. The sight went a long way toward making it easy to ignore Rick and Connor's needling. He sighed with pure masculine appreciation and leaned down close to Chloe. “Sweetheart, have I told you lately how jealous I'm going to be of our son?”

Even though she still looked plum tuckered out, she pursed her lips and whispered back. “If you're a good boy, mamma might give you a treat now and then.”

The lower muscles on his abdomen tightened and his rampant cock woke right up, stretching and lazily surveying the area for some action. “After the night you just had, how can you still manage to do this to me?”

She laughed and raised her arms. “Bring him here.”

Dev took Quinn from Rick and lowered the baby into her arms. He watched with pride as the greedy little glutton went straight for the money. Chloe's nipple was buried in Quinn's mouth within two seconds. *Hooyah*. His woman had given him quite a boy. The boy had brought him to the woman. And Dev was going to spend the rest of his life thanking them both.

The End

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