



Star Spangled Valentine
By Dahlia Rose

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Chapter One

The register was all tallied up for the day, and the sales had been good. Raye Lucas walked into the back office to put the day's money into the safe until tomorrow when she could go to the bank. No one would think running a pottery shop and ceramic gift boutique in Lawton, Oklahoma would be profitable. Surprisingly, it was because Lawton was a military town right outside Fort Sill. Many soldiers came in to make a trinket for a girlfriend or families who were visiting a loved one in the service. She even started a small program where soldiers who went to war could come in and work in the back rooms making pottery with anonymity. She thought it would help them deal with the raging emotions and PTSD associated with what they went through. Raye started the program thinking it wouldn't be successful. She had over a hundred soldiers that came in at various times of the week, and some of the things they created were so beautiful she sold them in the shop—with the promise that no one would ever know who created it unless they wanted them to. Zest for Life Pottery made a good living for her and the one person she cared most about in the world, her daughter Belle.

She had a good life and loved where it was going. It was peaceful and calm, and each night when she tucked Belle in and kissed her good night she thought how blessed she was. But Raye lived her life alone, without a man. Not that she didn't have many a soldier try to date her, but because one was enough. She swore after her last relationship she would never let another man in uniform into her heart.

After locking her office for the day, she walked back out front just as her mother came in holding the hand of her darling daughter. She smiled when she saw the chocolate stain around Belle's mouth and on the front of her pink frill top. There was also some on the face of her favorite stuffed toy. Lulu would have to be washed tonight, Raye thought. Her mother watched Belle in the day time and brought her to Raye's shop just before she left to work on base as a night shift nurse.

"I see you gave her a treat before you got here," Raye said dryly.

“Who can resist giving this pretty face a chocolate cone?” her mother said.

Raye looked down at her smiling daughter and felt love almost burst her heart. With hair that was pulled back into a curly pony tail of light brown curls and eyes that were light green set right about chubby cheeks and pale chocolate skin, her daughter was a vision of cuteness. Anyone could see she was a mixed child. She had a lot of her father’s Caucasian features. Even her eyes was a paler version of his deep green. When she could see some of her father’s stubbornness coming through in Belle’s personality, it made her ache. She never regretted having her, not once.

“I can resist because it ruins her dinner,” Raye said amused. “Grandma spoils you, doesn’t she?”

Belle went off in a spiel of some words that Raye could understand and some that were absolutely nonsensical. You couldn’t expect more from an eighteen-month-old baby who was right on target in growth and development, her pediatrician had said.

“It’s a grandmother’s right to treat her sweet baby.” Her mother kissed Belle in a loud snacking kiss. “See you tomorrow, sugar plum.”

“Bye, mom. Say bye-bye, Belle.”

Chubby fingers waved at her grandmother while Raye watched her mother leave. Donna Lucas was the picture of beauty at fifty-five. She looked like forty and carried herself with class. She wore her hair pinned back and a nurse’s uniform while at work. But at home her sweet smile and personality showed through when she wore casual jeans and colorful tops.

They had lost Raye’s father ten years before, a commander that was felled by a heart attack. Being a military family was all they knew, so neither of them wanted to leave Lawton after that. Her mom continued her job on base, and Raye grew up as a military brat. Raye didn’t know what she would have done without her while she was pregnant. It was a hard few months because she was so sick and bedridden. They didn’t live together but close by, and her mother would come every day and take care of her even after a long shift. Her mother slept on the couch to catch up on

rest in between taking care of Raye. They both feared Belle would be lost at times, but her mother's fierce determination and both their prayers played a role in Belle being born. She was a blessing.

"Let's lock up, sweet baby, and go home. I think today we'll have chicken and potatoes for dinner," Raye said. "Can you say potatoes?"

"Toes!" Belle squealed and went off on a string of gibberish.

"I can't ask for more than that," Raye said and went around turning off lights.

She put on her sunglasses and stepped outside into the warm evening sun. January in Lawton was surprisingly warm. Only a light coat was needed, and no one complained about the mild winter. She locked the door and turned into a hard barrier that blocked her path. Holding on to Belle protectively in her arms, Raye lifted her head to apologize. The words died in her throat when she saw a face she could hardly forget, one that haunted her dreams on some nights. Sean Martin was back in Lawton. Panic rose in her in a wave, and it took all within her not to hightail it and run while holding onto Belle.

"Raye Lucas, you look good." His voice was a deep timbre.

"Get out of my way, Sean." She bit the words out hoping the baby couldn't sense her tension.

"We can't even be civil? How about how are you, Sean, or when did you get back?" he replied.

He looked good, too good, better than she remembered. He stood at six feet tall with broad shoulders. He always could lift her easily, and she felt like a small thing in his arms even though she was five feet five. His dark hair was haloed by the setting sun, and emerald green eyes pierced her soul. The smile he wore on his lips she remembered kissing, hearing them call her name when they made love. It made her crave to reach up and caress his rugged jaw. He was her safety, the one she loved that shattered her heart into pieces she was still trying to gather.

"Trust me whatever civility that would have been afforded to you was lost eighteen months ago," Raye snapped.

“I saw the flyer for the CFS on base. I thought I would come out and see what it is about.” He asked, “Do you own this place?”

She gave a laugh that sounded brittle to her own ears. “Big bad Sean Martin wanting to take Ceramics For Soldiers, I would never think it. Yes, I own this place, and you’re not welcome here.”

“Jesus, Raye,” he muttered, “give me a little slack.”

“Sean, you got your slack when you told me goodbye. Let’s just keep it that way.”

“Who’s the little one? Are you babysitting?” Sean asked.

“It’s none of your business.”

Belle whimpered in her arms and turned. *No, oh no!* Raye had hoped she would keep her face turned away from Sean’s gaze. But luck was not on her side. Belle rubbed her crunched up face and said “Mama.” Raye raised alarmed eyes to Sean, and even behind the dark tint of her sunglasses she could see the color drain from his face.

“Mom. You’re a mother?” His voice was husky. He reached out a trembling finger to touch Belle, and Raye shifted her away. He looked at the baby, and she saw realization hit him, one that she had hoped and prayed she would never have to see.

“Don’t you touch her!” she whispered fiercely.

“She’s mine, isn’t she?” he asked. When she didn’t answer, he said it again with fierce intensity. “Isn’t she?”

Raye raised her head defiantly. “What do you care if she is our not? You got your bars, I see, Staff Sergeant Martin. A child let alone a woman who loved you was never in your plan.”

“How could you keep this from me? My daughter, Raye. God knows I knew I hurt you, but this is just damn cold,” Sean said harshly.

She looked at him amazed. “How was I supposed to find you, I wonder? Do you think I was going to be one of those women in the commander’s office begging for child support or hoping you would take me back? You should know me better than that, Sean. She is my child, nothing more.”

“I want to see her.... I want to get to know her.”

For a moment she wondered if the husky edge to his voice was emotion. Raye didn't want to know or care. She saw what his version of love could do, and he wasn't going to do it to Belle.

"Why, Sean, huh?" Raye countered. "So when you get that itch you can break her heart too? I refuse to watch my baby ask where her daddy is every night when you get that urge to jump. We don't want you in our lives."

"I'll fight you for her, Raye. I'll take you to court," he promised.

Her heart filled with fear, but she didn't show it. "You do that and see how far it gets you. I didn't even put your name on the birth certificate. I never asked for anything from you. I don't want child support, and I sure as hell don't want you. So you do it, Sean, and see how far you can push me. I'm not the same girl you left behind. You fight for your country and would die for it. I'll fight for her and do the same." The baby began to cry, and Raye shushed her gently. "I'm taking my child home. Stay out of our lives, Sean. We don't need or want you."

One more look and she saw the tortured expression on his face. She could actually think he cared, but she knew better. Sean martin only cared about himself. She found Belle's pacifier and stuck the soother into her mouth. She tucked her safely into her car seat and drove off without looking back. She held off the trembling of her body until after dinner and a play session with Belle before bed. It was when the baby was fast asleep in her crib underneath a pink Care Bear blanket and her breath smelling like warm milk that Raye let the emotion assault her in waves. She sank onto the couch and cried like the first time he broke her heart, and she was swept back into the past, remembering when they first met.

Valentine Day 2008

"Dance with me?"

The voice that came from behind her stopped all conversation between her and her friends. The club Cabarets was full for Valentine's Dday with couples, soldiers who were looking for a match, and the women who

wanted to be on the arm of a guy in uniform. She was wanting neither, only looking for a good time with the girls. This was the fifth time a guy came up to ask her to dance. But when she turned to say no, it died on her lips when she saw Sean standing there. He was wearing his ACU uniform. At that time he was only a Specialist First Class. She didn't know what made her say yes, but she did, and that started their whirlwind romance. While they moved on the floor nothing ever felt so right.

"You and me are going to last forever," he had whispered in her ears. The words made her shiver, and excitement played along her skin.

She looked up at him, and his eyes were alight with merriment. "Really? Who says I want forever, not just right now?"

"I can see you're a forever kind of girl, and you shouldn't settle for less. Luckily for you I'm here to fill that position," he said solemnly.

That statement made her laugh. "It's a hard position, lots of late night work. Sometimes you might have to work through lunch. You think you can handle that, soldier?"

"Let's find out," he murmured.

He took her lips in a kiss that made her senses swim right there on the dance floor. Others were doing the same, but for some reason people began to cheer. He dipped her low as their lips devoured each other, and even though she was not expecting it, she fell in love with him that night. Each day was more exciting, more thrilling, and each day it went deeper untill she breathed Sean, thought about him, and wanted to be with him forever. Months later he broke her heart, and nothing was ever the same again. He did it all for a dangerous new job and a few stripes on his arm.

Chapter Two

The next day Sean took part in a drill like he usually did. With each step in formation, with each order called, he followed them dutifully. This was his living since he was seventeen years old and his father signed him into the army. Each move was etched into the fiber of his being until it was second nature, so while he did everything perfectly it was on automatic. His mind was on Raye and his child, a little girl. one he never knew he had.

You have a daughter. The thought almost made him miss a step, but he caught the rhythm again easily. He knew the way he ended it was harsh. Hell he almost didn't recover from it. But he couldn't tell her the truth. The mission that he went on almost cost him his life, and he didn't want her to be here waiting for him worrying. It was best he ended things, and when he saw the hurt it caused, he knew that even if he made it home he would never be able to go back. Months away had helped him resign himself to the fact. Now seeing her again had totally blown his plans of distance apart. Knowing they had a child together had made it harder than before. He loved her. *God knows I still love her.* But from that one meeting, Sean knew she had closed her heart off to him.

The easiest thing would be to leave them both alone and try to get transferred to a new post. Sean could no more do that than stop breathing. Even if he never had her, he needed to be with his daughter. His father signed him up for the military because being a father ruined his perfectly outlined world. He would be dammed if he did that to a child of his. So he came to a conclusion while he systematically took apart his service weapon and cleaned it before putting it back together again. He would fight to see his daughter, but court was not the answer. Slow and easy he'd regain her trust, and if he gained her as well, He would worship her for the rest of his existence This was the final day of drill before he would have four days of leave. Then he would have to fix the biggest mistake he ever made.

Even though he was part of the ranger jump team based out of Fort Sill, he still had to complete training with his own platoon when the team wasn't activated. It was time for the physical training part of the day, and while he ran in unison with the other soldiers he served with, he let his mind wander back to the past. To when he fucked up big time with Raye and he killed whatever was building between them.

July 4th 2008

The fireworks lit the night sky, but they were lying on a blanket on the hood of his humvee outside city limits facing the army base. He had called in a favor from one of the guys in the motor pool just to take her out and tell her the good news. He got into the ranger jump team, and he would be training with some of the most elite jumpers. They would be going where soldiers couldn't, doing dangerous missions, and he would gain his sergeant stripes. Excitement was in every fiber of his being just thinking about it. Thirty two, he was older by far than some that had gotten in but, he'd been training all his life for this. She would be happy for him. He knew it

But as the night progressed and he dropped little hints, she in turn let it be known that she was glad he was on base. She thought he would become an instructor and train younger soldiers. She saw home and family and the white picket fence, and he saw the glory he wanted dwindling away and the nothingness of just being mediocre. He couldn't have that. He wasn't ready for what she was talking about. He loved her, yes, but to give up something he worked for all his life was unfathomable. While he held her and they watched the fireworks burst over head, the warm summer breeze caressed their skin out in the dessert after their heated loving. Sean made the choice that he would regret for the rest of his life.

"Why so quiet, Sean?" she asked.

Her fingers were leaving delicious trails along his bare chest making him think of fucking her again. But he knew there would be no time for that, not now and probably not ever again.

“Aren’t you putting the cart before the horse?” he asked. Heard the chill in his voice and winced.

She laughed lightly almost hesitantly. “You always said this was forever, and I’m working on that assumption. Living in sin is nice for a few years but....”

“But we should get married so you can be put on my medical and stuff, right?”

Raye lifted her head and looked at him in confusion. “I didn’t say that. Sean, you know none of that matters to me.”

“Doesn’t it? You seem to want to rush us to the alter,”

“I thought that was what you wanted,” she said slowly. She sat up and pulled her shirt tighter around her like it was suddenly too cold.

“I want to go to go to war without wondering about a woman at home with her hand in my bank account.” He was being needlessly cruel, but it was the only way to save her from being a widow one of these days. He loved her too much to even bear the thought of her watching them lower him into the ground. They guys said it themselves. A jumper’s life was not a long one, especially in the middle of a war. “I want to have fun, fuck, enjoy life, sweetie.”

“B-but all that you said for months now. It’s not...I would have never invested, not my heart. God knows I would never have given you my heart.”

He tried to lighten it, make it less heavy handed. “All women think with their heart. I’m sorry, but it’s just not where I want to be right now. You’re twenty-five to my thirty-two. In a month or two you’ll be with someone else saying the same thing, and I’ll be a distant memory. I’m leaving in a week, and I don’t need the baggage of writing emails and sending pictures. I don’t want a family, Raye. It’s not built into my DNA.”

“Did you come to that conclusion before or after the romp in the humvee?” she asked bitterly. “Take me home, Sean. Don’t worry about softening the goodbye. I get the point.”

The silence between then was deafening while he drove her back to her apartment. When he pulled up, she grabbed her bag and went to get out in a rush. He had closed his hands around her arms to stop her, and she didn’t even look at him.

“Raye, I didn’t mean to hurt you, I’m sorry,” he said softly. But he knew the damage of his words had hit its mark and done what it needed to do.

“Fuck you, Sean Martin.”

It was the first time he had ever heard her curse and the last words she said to him before she ran up to her apartment. He had left to begin jumper trainer the next week. Soon after that she must have found out she was pregnant. No wonder she didn’t try to find him after all he said. When he left she was fun and vivacious living in a small apartment and still trying to figure out life. Now in just eighteen months she had become a mother and a business woman and doing it all by herself without asking for help. He knew his words did that to her, made her strong, so much so she would be unbending. This was his fault, and now he would have to take the rocky path to get back in her life and the life of his daughter. With sweat running down his face, he sat on the sidewalk after the run and a horrifying thought crossed his mind. *I don’t even know my daughter’s name.*

By six in the evening, he was cleaned up and heading toward Raye’s home. She wasn’t living in the apartment anymore but now owned a house in a newly built small community in Lawton. It was easy to find out her address. The program she started for soldiers had gained popularity, and she was listed with the USO. He drove looking at the numbers of each house on streets that were so new the tar was still black. They were all the same, cookie cutter replicas of each other down to the sweet smelling snow on the mountain bushes that framed each side of the houses. He found six nineteen near the end of the cul-de-sac and pulled his sports car into the driveway. He looked around in the leather interior of his coupe.

I'm going to have to get something more baby-friendly. Surprisingly, the thought didn't fill him with fear. He wanted this. Until he had it, he never knew how much. He pulled the bag from the seat next to him and walked up to the door. Sean rang the bell nervously and prayed she would let him past the front door.

When Raye opened the door her eyes were cold. "I won't even ask how you got my address so what are you doing here?"

He cleared his throat. "Raye, please, let me see her. Let me talk to you."

"I talked to a lawyer today," she said, and his heart filled with panic.

"What did he or she say?" he asked hoarsely. He could see the chances of him knowing his daughter dwindling. If he couldn't he would have to leave Lawton. He couldn't bear being in the same city with them and not have them.

"He said it was best we settle this out of court between us." She gave a cold laugh. "It seems even though I didn't put your name on the birth certificate you still have the right for a paternity test and all that good stuff. You can of course file to pay child support, and I don't have to take it, but you have rights....lucky you."

"Thank you for being honest," he said relieved. He was actually elated but tried hard not to show it. "How will we work it out between us?"

"Let me make this entirely clear, Sean. There is no us. You made sure of that," she said between clenched teeth. "As for Belle first you get to know her. Then we go from there. I don't want you bouncing in and out of her life, so you make perfectly sure this is what you want."

"Her name is Belle..." He smiled. "Belle Martin."

"No, Belle Lucas," she amended for him. "I will not agree to weekend visits or anything until you get your position with the military cleared up and a proper house. Am I clear?" When he nodded, she added with venom, "You hurt me once, but let me tell you if you ever hurt her or make a tear fall from her eyes, I will flay you myself."

"Flay?" His lips twitched even though he could see she was not amused. Being a mother brought out a protective streak in her. He felt his

chest swell with pride knowing his daughter had such a fierce protector in Raye. Winning her over would be harder than he ever imagined.

She narrowed her eyes at him. Don't mess with me, Sean. I will be civil. Nothing else, and only for Belle."

He nodded. "May I come in and meet her?"

Raye nodded stiffly and stepped aside so he could come through the door. He looked around the house that was decorated in blues and earthy tones along with some of her pottery works. Toys sat in the middle of the cream carpet and so did the baby girl wearing a light blue jumper with ducks down the side. Her hair held a blue bow, and she looked up at him curiously as he stepped into the living room. Raye invited him over to the sofa, and he sat down. Ray sat next to him, not close enough to touch, but he could smell her perfume. She held her hands out to Belle who got up and toddled over to her mother's arms. Raye picked her up and put the baby on her lap to face Sean. He couldn't help but think of the birth he missed because of his stupidity and how many milestones in her short life he would never see.

"Belle, this is Sean.... I mean daddy," Raye said gently for their daughter. Yet he heard the tense way she said the word daddy. "Hold out your hands to her. If she wants to come to you, she will."

Sean noticed his hands trembled when he held them out. It was a mix of excitement, fear, and awe. He held his breath as the little girl decided whether she wanted to come to him or not. With her lips puckered in a tiny circle she held out her chubby arms to Sean so he could take her. She had to weigh about twenty-five pounds he estimated when he set her on his lap. The smell of her baby shampoo and powder filled his nostrils, and he couldn't resist burying his face in her soft hair. Sean closed his eyes as emotions assaulted him. His child, his daughter in his arms, and he made the silent promise to always be there for her. She would be daddy's little girl.

"Hey, sweetheart, hi, Belle," he said gently. He held out his hand to her, and she placed her chubby fingers in his big palm. "I'm your daddy. I already love you so much. You won't ever know how much." He picked

up the bag he had set next to him. "I brought you a present, well two. I got you an elephant because I always wanted one when I was growing up. Daddy will buy you a real one and a panda with a glowing tummy that sings you to sleep."

He knew it was empty promises but Sean knew if there was any possible way to do it, he would be the one to try. pressed the panda's tummy, and she oohed in delight when it played the lullaby All the Pretty Horses. She wiggled out of his arms, and he put her down so she could play with her new toys. He couldn't help touching her every so often to make sure she was real.

He looked at Raye and said simply, "Thank you for this."

"For what?" Raye asked.

"Letting me meet her and for bringing her into this world. I know you had options and after what I did..."

Raye gave a sarcastic laugh. "Don't think what you did to me would ever make me think about terminating my pregnancy. You didn't rate that much on my scale. From the time I found out I was pregnant with her she was mine and was loved."

"You should've found me, Raye. I would've done the honorable thing," Sean said softly.

She shook her head in denial. "I nether wanted your money or your support. Remember you were better off without a hand in your bank account. Trust me if we were paupers I would not have asked you."

"Raye, there are reasons why I said those things. I thought I was protecting you," Sean said.

"By breaking my heart and calling me a gold digger? I feel better already," she snapped. "Look we share a child. Don't try to explain how being a cold callous bastard made my life better."

Belle looked up and dropped the panda. She held up her arms to him. Sean picked her up easily, and she put her tiny arms around his neck. It was a show of affection, acceptance, and of love. Raye turned away from the scene.

“I’ll leave you alone for a bit to get to know her.” With that she went to the kitchen, but he noticed she was always in ear shot just in case the baby cried. He wished she had stayed and he could make some headway with her. But while their child’s heart was innocent and pure so willing to give love, Raye had built a wall of steel around hers. Later that night after she let him help put the baby to bed and watch her fall asleep, she ushered him out just as quickly as she let him in.

Thunder rolled in the background, and he saw lightning flash between tumultuous clouds on the dark horizon. It reflected everything that was going on inside him—happiness, sadness, want, and need. Impulsively and without explanation he turned the car around on the deserted highway. The wheels of the sport car squealed in protest as he headed back to her house. He pulled up outside not even bothering to pull into the driveway and left his car door open. He ran the short distance up to her door. Sean pressed the doorbell insistently until she opened it abruptly.

Before she could even speak he pulled her into his arms and took her lips in a kiss. She struggled against the onslaught of his mouth for a moment before succumbing to the desire of his lips. He stepped inside using his body to propel her backward. He closed the door with a swift movement of his hand before pressing her against the wall. Passion flowed from her in the kiss making his body harden and a moan erupt from his lips. His tongue penetrated her mouth, and this time it was her who whimpered in delight. He wanted more, craved her like his next breath. Eighteen months and she still tasted the same, intoxicated him to no end, proved that there would be no one else in his life but her. It had always been Raye. Sean pulled away wanting to take more, to lift her into his arms and take her to the softest place he could find and sink his cock inside her. But he knew it was too soon. He had to prove to her that he still deserved her love.

He looked at her and kissed her once more, gently before pulling away. “No matter what you say, Raye, you can’t deny this. You still love me. You still want me. I’ll work as long as it takes for you to let me back into your life, and this time it will be for good. That’s a promise.”

She had her fingers pressed against her lips and still stood against the wall when he left making sure to turn the lock on the doorknob before he closed it tight. He would always make sure that his family was protected. He always would now the goals in his life had shifted considerably.

* * * *

The next few days Sean spent as much time with Belle as he could. He reveled in how much a child could weave love for them around your heart so quickly it became second nature just to think about them first. Each experience was new and exciting from feeding her lunch to giving her bath and changing a very stinky diaper. He recalled how Raye actually laughed at him when he was given the task of cleaning her up. For a moment he saw the old Raye, the one who always had a smile on her lips and happiness in her eyes.

“She drinks only milk, eats fruit and some potatoes and stuff. How can it stink so bad?” he asked Raye as he changed Belle on the floor.

“That’s exactly the reason why,” Raye replied. “She’s like a vegetarian. She does not have enough teeth for meats yet unless it’s pureed. Suck it up, Daddy. There will be a lot more before she is even potty trained.”

She spoke with him, had conversations, but after the kiss that he shared with Raye, she kept away from him even more than before. He could see the unwavering resolve in her eyes not to let him in again, but he could also see the want and the need that he evoked inside her. The same that pumped through his veins each time he was anywhere near her. Each day she looked so damn good it took every ounce of strength inside him not to pull her into his arms again. But he stayed back, and while his fingers itched to touch her, he knew that she would run like a scared rabbit if he did it again. She had to come to him, and let him in her way. This was not something that could be forced.

It was Sunday and the last day of his leave before he had to head back to normal duties on base. It didn’t take long for him to realize that he

would be resigning his position in the Rangers and his special jump qualification. He had more to lose now. He didn't want his daughter to see him in a body bag one day as a mass of broken bones. When Monday morning rolled around, he would be in his commander's office asking for a permanent position on base. With his qualification and his stripes, he could be a platoon leader or even an instructor. He was amazed that less than two years ago when she mentioned it he felt like his life was ending, and here he was making the decision readily. He couldn't look into his little girl's eyes that were filled with laughter as he swung her in the baby swing and say that priorities didn't change. She and her mother were now his world. He didn't want to share custody. He wanted them to be together. He questioned himself if taking it slow was the best course of action or if he should push. He wished he had someone to talk to about the situation that was so very complicated.

It was as if his prayers were answered when he took Belle back home. She started to yawn while they played so he knew it was nap time. He opened the front door and instead of Raye standing there, it was her mother. He had met the matriarch of the Lucas family only once, and that was not through being introduced by Raye. He had hurt his hand and went to the base hospital. Donna Luca was head nurse that day and was formidable in that environment. He certainly didn't look forward to dealing with her now. He was the man who broke up with her daughter and left her pregnant and skipped town. Sean knew it didn't exactly happen that way, but he assumed that is how her mother would see it. Instead of being met with anger or coldness worse than what Raye herself could dish out, she met him with a bright smile when he walked through the door with Belle in his arms.

"Hi, sugar plum," she crooned when Belle squealed and held out her arms to her. "Hi, I'm Donna Lucas."

"I've met you, ma'am." Training took over, and he stood at attention. "You took care of me a few years back when I got a cut across my forearm. I needed fifteen stitches."

She smiled. “Oh, yes, I remember. You were dead set against stitches and wanted a few butterfly Band-Aids. Who knew you would end up being the father of my granddaughter.”

Ouch. Sean cleared his throat. “Ma’am, I can explain about that. I didn’t know about Belle. If I had...”

She cut him off. “First the ma’am thing has got to stop. I’m not on base, and neither are you, so stand down, soldier. Next let me put this little one down, and then we can talk.”

“I’ll do it, Mrs. Lucas. We kind of have a thing now.” He held his arms out to Belle, and she came to him, willingly snuggling against his chest. I’ll get her bottle and put her down.”

He felt her eyes on him as he went down the hall to the baby’s nursery. There he sat with Belle snuggled in his arms while she drank her warm milk, and he watched as her eyes drooped. He lay her in the crib and changed her diaper and covered her with a light blanket. Love filled his heart as he brushed a curl away from her cheek and left her in her room. Donna Lucas was walking out of the kitchen holding two mugs with steam curling from the tops. She passed one to him and motioned him to take a seat.

“Now lets clear the air. You look like you expect me to be your executioner.” Donna smiled gently. “I don’t know much about the relationship you and my daughter had, but I know it ended badly.”

“It was my fault,” Sean announced easily. “I thought I was protecting her, but I ended up ruining the best thing that ever happened to me. I still love her, Mrs. Lucas, but she won’t even give me the time of day.”

“Call me Donna, please, and when it comes to Raye, all I can tell you is that this will not be easy,” she said. “I saw a change in her after you broke up and she found out she was pregnant. She shored up her feelings so tight no one could get in, not even me. But when she got sick around her fourth month...”

“Wait she was sick?” Sean asked astonished.

“She developed complications when she was pregnant, borderline pre-eclampsia, and she was spotting a considerable amount. They thought she

was going to lose the baby, and they put her on complete bed rest. Around work I took care of her because she was only allowed to get up to go to the bathroom. At the end they took Belle via c-section six weeks early because her blood pressure was sky-rocketing. It was touch and go for both of them. They got get her pressure down, but the baby was not breathing well.” Donna sighed, and he noticed her hands shook a little. “They were both so fragile for a while, but thank God he pulled them through.”

“Oh, Jesus.” Sean felt anxiety crawl in his belly. He had come close to losing them both and didn’t even know it. “Are they both healthy now?”

Donna nodded. “One hundred percent. Belle is growing like a weed, and the only thing that needs to be fixed with Raye is in her heart.”

“How do I do that though?” Sean implored. “She is so dead set against letting me in. If she was in this room right now she would be across it so I couldn’t even be close to her.”

“That’s Raye, stubborn as hell.” Donna laughed softly. “When her father died, even though she was fifteen she refused to cry. She said he wouldn’t want me to cry for him. He had a good life. This from a teenager. All through the military service then the private family gathering she held on to it. She wanted to be my strength. She broke down a week later. I heard the worst noise in her room, and she trashed it bawling like a baby. Then crumpled on the floor thinking her dad would be ashamed because she did cry.” Donna patted his hand. “You’re a soldier, and sometimes you have to charge in and knock those walls down. Then sometimes you have to retreat and let the smoke clear. The trick is to figure out when to do what. Trust your instincts.”

“So does that mean you are giving me permission to court your daughter?” Sean grinned.

“You two have a baby together. I think courting is over,” Donna said dryly. “I give you permission to love her and treat her right. If not I’ll have to flay you.”

Sean laughed out loud. “What is with you Lucas women and flaying?”

Donna grinned, and he felt a new rush of hope. All he had to do was figure out when to charge and retreat. It was time to put a tactical approach to winning Raye's heart once more.

Chapter Three

One week, since Sean hurtled back into her life and she was sitting looking at custody papers she had drawn up. She would go to the vital statistics office at the court house and put his name on Belle's birth certificate and give him every opportunity to be a father. But she still wanted nothing from him, no money, no insurance. She just wanted him to be there for Belle. Her baby deserved that much. She watched him with her and honestly could see the love in his eyes when he looked at their daughter. She thought she could see it in his eyes when he looked at her. But Raye knew it was a mirage, something she had seen when she was twenty-five and so in love with him it hurt. Maybe she wished she could have it again and that's what made the illusion so easy to replicate.

It was impossible because if he ever got that close again he would surely break her. But the kiss, it was like drinking from ambrosia and wanting more. He tasted so good, better than she remembered, and she hated to admit she was addicted. At that point Raye hated the weak part of her that loved him.

She expected him to show up at any minute. Her mom was off so she was sitting with Belle at home. They had issues to discuss so Raye waited at her shop for him to arrive after she closed at five.

The knock on the door made her lift her head from the papers that she had stopped paying attention to minutes ago. She walked out of the back office to unlock the door and let him in. He was wearing his uniform. From the top of his head where he wore a beret down to his tan boots, he looked too damn good. *It doesn't help that he's six feet two and cut like granite*, she thought mournfully.

She firmed her shoulders and spoke. "Hi, we can talk in my office."

He looked around. "Nice shop. I still want to sign up for the CRF program."

"I'll find you a slot." Raye sat at her desk and pulled out her schedule book. "Looking through the list I can fit you in on Tuesdays at two."

Sean nodded. "That's fine. So what did you want to talk to me about?"

She lifted the scheduling book and handed him the papers from beneath. He scanned them briefly before handing them back to her. “I don’t want these.”

Her eyes flew to his face. “What else do you expect? I’m being fair. Sean, every other weekend when you get your orders straight is more than adequate. As you can see I’m not asking for anything. Your money is safe.”

“It’s not about the money, Raye. Can’t you let the past go?”

She laughed sarcastically. “The past is what is giving you this right now. I want you to have some kind of relationship with your daughter. I had one with my dad and won’t deny her that.”

“I don’t want the papers,” he said stubbornly.

“What the hell do you want, Sean?” She threw her hands in the air. “You came back into my life and I have to share my daughter with you. There is nothing more I can possibly give!”

He was out of his seat in a flash, pulling her from the chair she sat in. He hauled her against his chest, and Raye felt as if she was drowning in his intense emerald gaze.

His voice was husky when he spoke. “I don’t want them because I like how we are now. I don’t want some drawn up court documents making the distance between us bigger. I want us to get closer, to be a family. Papers won’t do that. You letting me in will.”

She shook her head in denial. He was saying all the right words she wanted to hear, but then that was Sean. He always had the right words to make her feel like she was the only thing in the world that made him happy. She felt tears fill her eyes and fall down her cheeks. Sean brushed them away and kissed her fiercely.

He pressed his forehead against hers. “Forgive me for what I did. Please give me the chance to prove to you I was just a stupid idiot who thought about his career as a life not a job.”

“You were thirty-two, and it’s only two years later, Sean. What has changed, huh? Tell me what won’t make you run like a bat out of hell when a new position is offered to you?” She looked up at him. “You could

have told me goodbye another way. But you made sure it hurt, and you did a good job of it. You can't be my hero in a uniform. I don't believe in them anymore. I don't believe in you."

"I won't let you push me away. Those barriers you built up I will knock down, and if you build them back up, I'll just knock them down again. I am in this for the long haul, baby. You keep pushing me away, and I'm going to keep coming back."

She never fully recovered from being alone, pregnant, and hurting both physically and mentally. Raye opened her mouth to refuse him, to deny him and to hurt him like he destroyed her. Sean never let her speak a word. He swooped in for a kiss that made heat travel through her body. Yet again she was pressed against the wall. This time it was her office. She could feel the hardness of his body through his uniform. He molded his body against her as their tongues dueled and parried. Fighting the battle that waged between them searching for conquest with neither gaining anything but more passion, fire, and lust. He kissed his way down her neck, and he lifted her against him. She couldn't help but wrap her legs around his waist while his hand pushed her skirt high to cup her thighs. His hands were big just like she remembered, squeezing her, and a guttural moan escaped him.

"Sean..." She gasped his name. Wanting to tell him no but unwilling to stop the feelings rolling through her.

"Please, I need you just let me touch you just a little bit," he muttered against her lips. "I feel like I'm dying without you."

"Yes." She heard the words come from her own lips in a whimper.

Something broke inside her, a crack in the walls she kept shored up tight. His lips found hers once more, and his tongue buried deep into her mouth. She shivered as his fingers slipped between the elastic of her panties to touch her. She jerked at the pleasurable invasion. His tongue imitated in her what his fingers did as he inserted them into her pussy. He pressed them deep making her cry out against his lips, and he moaned in response.

“Let me give you this,” he muttered as he fucked her with his fingers, and she arched her head against the wall letting the feelings overwhelm her senses. “Come for me, Raye. I’ll lick your come from my fingers just to have a taste of you.”

One of her feet touched the floor while he held the other right around his waist. It didn’t matter because Raye still felt like she was weightless. His thumb worked against her clit while he fucked her with two digits. She lifted her trembling hands to work the buttons of her blouse so he could gain access to her breasts. With a moan he let go of her leg, and his fingers slipped from her wet pussy. Raye moaned in disappointment but not for long. He fisted the material of her blouse, and the small buttons went flying across the room in every direction. She heard them hit the floor but didn’t care. His hot mouth enclosed around her nipple down to the areola and sucked it deep into his mouth. Raye cried out as the agonizing pleasure shot through her core.

Oh my God, I’m burning alive! The thought careened through her head as his hand lifted her leg high around him again. Sean burrowed between the thin cloth barrier of her panties and penetrated her with his fingers again. His mouth and tongue licking at her breasts and his fingers fucking her hard was too much for her to control. Her orgasm took her suddenly leaving her breathless as a low cry escaped her lips. He grunted against her breast as her body gushed its juice against his hand. He sank his fingers deeper as if he was trying to wring ever last drop from her shaking body. She was panting as he lowered her legs to the floor. He took his hand from between her legs and through heavy lids she watched him lick his fingers as if they were drenched in sweet cream. He took her lips, kissing her slow and sensually. She could taste her own juice from his mouth.

He pulled away and cupped her face in his hands. “I got my taste, and you were delicious. I plan to have more everyday for the rest of our lives but only when you’re ready and you come to me and say yes. Then I’m going to fuck you hard. I’m going to love you, Raye. I won’t be going away. No papers, you can rip them up because come Valentine’s Day you’re going to me mine again.”

With another hard kiss he left her shaking against the wall, breathless, and still wracked with desire. She watched him leave, and again he turned the lock on the door when he stepped outside and was gone. Raye sank to the floor trembling, wanting to run behind him and scream yes. Her heart and mind were conflicted. There was no doubt that her body wanted him, but fear of being hurt again overrode everything in her mind. She wouldn't run after him, but she didn't know what to do either. Raye felt helpless like the world she had built up since he left was on a ledge ready to crumble into the sea. The one that was safe and perfect for her and Belle. The passion slowly bedded from her body, yet she ached and wanted him so much. Raye put her head against her knees and cried.

* * * *

The tears dried, and it was a lucky thing she kept an extra suit of clothes at work. Owning a pottery shop could be a messy job and for those days that Belle was in her playpen in the office with her, a change of clothes was definitely needed. She pulled the shirt on over her head and headed to her car. Her fingers still shook even as she put the keys in the ignition and pulled her car out slowly from the parking spot to head home. When she pulled into her driveway, Raye took a deep breath and headed into the house. From the time she walked through the door Belle squealed and ran over to be picked up. She smiled as her daughter spewed gibberish at her before pressing a wet kiss on her cheek. Then she wiggled to get down to get back over to her panda which had now become a favorite toy. There was nothing in the world that could ruin Belle's baby talk for her, and Raye instantly smiled. She met her mother's knowing gaze and ducked her head. She was never able to hide anything from her mother even when she was sixteen and came home from making out with Anthony Pinto on base.

"Sean called. He said he will be over tomorrow," her mother said casually. "You look a bit disheveled."

"I'm fine," she lied and then sighed. "No, I'm not fine, Mom."

“I can tell. Want to talk about it?” her mom asked. “Dinner is going to take another half an hour or so.”

“Let me go get changed and cleaned up.” Raye headed to her bedroom.

She stripped out of her clothes and changed her panties that were still moist from when Sean made her come. Dressed in a comfortable sweat suit she headed back into the living room and flopped on the couch. She put her feet up and threw her arm over her eyes.

“That bad, huh?” She could hear the humor in her mom’s voice.

“Mom, how can one man make me so crazy?” she mourned. “I want to hate him for what he did, but he makes it so hard, and then he kisses me like he did today and touches me.... What do I do, Mom?”

“I loved your father like that,” Her mother said wistfully. “I remember he used to make me tingle all over.”

“Mom!” Raye gasped. “That is way too much information!”

“Well it’s true.”

Raye looked at her mother. “How do I forgive him for what he did?”

“Why didn’t you contact him when you found out you were pregnant?”

“Because of what he said. I just didn’t want to be another girl looking to get child support from an army man, and that is how he would have seen me,” Raye explained. “That’s how he broke up with me, by telling me marriage was my way of putting my hands in his pockets, that I was just a fun time. He broke my heart, and now he wants back in.”

“I see a man who made a stupid mistake and in doing so he broke your heart. I also see a guy who is trying to pick up those pieces and glue them back together,” her mother pointed out. “He saw Belle and knew she was his, never ran, never accused, just asked to be able to be in her life and yours. Wounds heal if you let them.”

“The wounds were deep, Mom. I don’t think they healed from two years ago.” Raye sighed. “I gave him the papers that would give him visitation rights and everything with Belle. I even noted in there that I didn’t want anything from him.”

“And how did he take that?”

She could hear the careful tone in her mother's voice. "He didn't want them. He told me he would have me and Belle as his family by the time Valentine's Day came around."

"That's only two weeks away."

"Why do I think you're rooting for him, hmm?"

Her mother gave her an innocent look. "I want what will make you and sugar plum happy."

"Uh-huh and what do you think will do that?"

She watched as her mother got up from her seat and smoothed down her skirt. "I don't know, honey. That is your choice to make. I'll get dinner on the table, and then I have to leave. I've got a date."

It was not surprising to hear her mom was going out. She was beautiful and vivacious, even more so in her later years. But lately the dates had become a regular thing, almost twice a week.

"Who is this guy, Ms. Lady?" Raye peered at her mom owlishly and forgot her own problems for a bit. "Will I have to get out the interrogation light and put him in the hot seat?"

"You will do no such thing, Raye Lucas," her mother said primly. "It's Major Dalton. We've been socializing, and it's nice. Plus I'm very careful, and we always use protection."

"Mom!"

"Honey, I may be older, but I'm not dead, and neither is he." She winked and headed into the kitchen.

Belle toddled over to Raye who scooped her up and tickled her chubby daughter and teased her loud enough for her mother to hear. "Grandma is getting play, sweetie. She is kinda dirty."

"Very funny, Raye." Came the reply from the kitchen.

Of course she knew Belle had no idea what she was saying or talking about, but the laughter of her baby made her laugh too. "Let's find some kids' shows for you and mommy to watch." She sat up and took the remote from the side table drawer and flicked on the TV. It was on the news, and the weather man was pointing out something on the screen. She turned it up and heard the forecaster's comments. *There is a large storm*

heading our way from the northeast. Very much out of season but dangerous nonetheless. We'll see the beginning of it from Wednesday night, and hopefully it will only skirt us with its outer bands. But we Oklahoma natives are a tough sort. I know we're going to be just fine.

Raye made a mental note to get their emergency bag together and extra candles and blankets. She never did trust a weather man when he said everything was going to be alright.

Chapter Four

She almost left the shop because she knew that today Sean would be coming in for his first CFS appointment. She got a giant lump of clay out of the back and placed it on the table along with an apron and the various tools he would need to mold his clay. Some of them preferred to work with the wheel making pots and vases. She knew Sean. He would prefer to work with the clay, cutting molding, and smoothing until it took shape to what he saw in his mind's eye. He had good hands that were strong when they needed to be but could also show such gentleness in each caress. She had felt those hands on her body countless times driving her to pleasurable heights. Raye had also seen how he held Belle, like she was a fragile piece of china that needed to be protected.

When the program started there were a lot of skeptics on the base, and she was asked more than once how could working with pottery help soldiers combat PTSD? She knew how she felt when she sculpted and created her art. A sense of peace came over her as she immersed herself in a new piece, and she knew those men and women saw too much to ever let their minds settle, especially at night. She watched them all through their sessions and saw a calm come over them as they concentrated on something other than the military. Some of them created beautiful pieces. She could see hope and dreams and love in every one. Some of the art made her so sad it broke her heart. Grief, death, and loss in more ways than one were channeled into the clay as they molded. She wondered what Sean would create. She was almost excited to see. But after their encounter in her office a few days earlier and how tense the meeting was at their house, how would he react to her or her to him?

The bell on the door rang signaling his arrival, and she sighed in dismay. She had a secondary doorway around the side to keep the soldiers from having to interact with regular customers. Raye made sure they had their privacy in all ways and made sure to keep a tight schedule on how soldiers came and left. So by the time he opened the door, the last person who had the room was already gone. He was wearing his civilian clothes,

blue jeans and a long sleeve black polo shirt. He came through the front and smiled at her for a moment before he let the door of her pottery shop close. While other customers looked at him curiously he was completely relaxed. *Typical Sean*, she thought. He was full of pride in all that he did.

“You could have come through the other entrance you know,” she said when he stood next to the counter.

“Why? I served my country, and now you’re trying to help me. Why should I be ashamed?” he asked.

“You shouldn’t be,” Raye replied. “The room is all set up for you so come on back.”

He followed her with a casual stride. He looked around the room. “This is a nice set up.”

“Thanks.”

“So how does this work?” Sean asked.

She walked over to the table in the center of the room and placed her hand on the block of clay. “You sit here and create whatever you want. No one will judge it or you. If you want me to see it or comment I will. If you don’t want me or anyone to see, cover it and put it in that locker over there. There is a key, and I’ll mark it as yours if you decide to use the space. You get an hour per day, but if you want more time and there is no one scheduled after you, take the time. I won’t bother you.”

He nodded. “Thanks.”

“I have customers. I’ll be back to check on you later. Do you want coffee, bottled water, or a soda maybe?” Raye asked.

Sean smiled. “No, thanks, not right now. Why do I feel so nervous all of a sudden?”

“Most do at first,” she said gently. “I think it’s because when you guys are in here alone, your mind wanders, and you have to deal with stuff you try to hard to put out of your head.”

“I saw things, did things that....I...never mind.” He shook his head. “I’ll get to work.”

“You can talk to me, Sean, anytime, ok?” Raye said. He had no one in his life. His mother was gone, and he hadn’t talked to his father since he

was seventeen. The realization hit her that she and Belle were the only thing he ever had.

"I appreciate that." He hesitated. "You know my dad will probably never know he has a granddaughter. Family was never the most important thing to him. When Mom died it was almost painful to be stuck in the same house with him. I guess he took as long as he could before he signed me up for the army." Sean gave a soft laugh. "His loss because I have the most beautiful daughter in the world."

"Yes, she is," Raye agreed and closed the door quietly as she went out. She understood that not only was he dealing with the events he saw while he was deployed but trying to settle a past that didn't give him a lot of options.

She worked with customers, talked, and laughed. All the while the back room was quiet. Raye poked her head around the door only once and saw him immersed in what he was doing. There was a pile of clay that he cut off to one side from where he tried to get the clay to take shape. By the time the hour was up and she went back he had already covered what he was working on and was gently placing it in the dry locker she kept. It would keep the clay moist enough to be malleable but dry enough that it would not fall apart. She was curious to what he was creating but kept it to herself. She would offer him the same privacy as any other soldier that came into her store.

"How was your first time?" She mentally slapped her hand to her forehead for her choice of words.

Sean's lips quirked in amusement. "If you're talking about the clay, it was actually quite relaxing. Got a lot of thinking done while I was working."

"I'm glad." She turned to walk away. "I've got to close up. You can wash up in the bathroom there."

"Hey, do you want to head out for a few drinks or something?" He held up his clay covered hands. "It would be totally innocent of course, only a mom and a dad sitting down to have a civilized conversation about their beautiful daughter."

“Innocent and all about Belle, huh?” Raye replied. “I don’t see why not. Let me get everything locked up, and we can go.”

He grinned and went into the bathroom while Raye headed out to the front showroom to turn the lock and put the closed sign on the door. Before she could, a young man hit the door with such force he knocked her back.

He waved a knife at her and snarled. “Lady, gimme what’s in the register, or I’ll slice you.”

Oh God a robbery! She had never had a problem in this area before, and now she was being held up. Fear like nothing she had ever felt made her skin clammy, and she held up trembling hands as she walked backward to the counter and the register.

“Come on, lady, hurry up. I ain’t got all day!” The man was sweating and rubbing his nose. She didn’t need to be a professional to know he was looking for money to get his next fix.

“I’m trying. Please don’t hurt me.” She could hardly get her trembling fingers to work. All she could think about was her being stabbed or hurt, not being able to go home to Belle. He could have whatever was in the register. *If I can just get this damn thing to open!*

He slammed his hand down on the counter, and it made her cry out in fear. “Lady, come on!”

The register dinged. As it did she caught movement from the corner of her eye. In her fear, she forgot Sean was in the back. Everything seemed to move in slow motion. The man slashed the knife at her, and if she didn’t arch away from the counter he would have cut her face. Sean didn’t go around the barrier where the cash register sat. He went over it, and his foot connected with the jaw of the attacker. The knife clattered to the floor, and Sean’s kick sent him skating back. Sean’s face was one of pure ferocity. He picked the man up by the collar and punched him in the face one, twice, and three times.

“Sean, stop!” she screamed, and his fist was poised in midair.

He dropped the man back in disgust, and he slumped against the hard wood floor moaning, his nose bleeding and his face covered in blood.

“I called the cops from when he came in. They are on their way,” Sean said harshly. She could see him trying to control his breathing and his anger. “Are you ok?”

“Fine, just... whew, oh my God if you weren’t here...” She pressed her trembling hand against her, lips but a nervous laugh escaped her. “I can sure use that drink right now.”

He pulled her into his arms as two cop cars screeched to a stop outside. “Everything is going to be ok.”

It was another hour and half of the cops arresting the crook, taking pictures and witness statements, before she could actually lock up and leave. There was no damage only some blood on the floor that she cleaned up while Sean spoke to the police. She called her mother to let her know what happened and through her frantic questions managed to calm her mom down. She agreed to stay with Belle and put her to bed until she got home. From there they took Sean’s car to one of the local hangouts where the music was smooth jazz and sensual country love songs. The ambience was low lighting and secluded booths. As they slid into the leather seats a waitress came over to take their order.

“I’d like two shots of bourbon and a sunrise martini, please,” she ordered. “Don’t say anything, Sean. I just got held up.”

“I wasn’t going to make a peep.” She could hear the amusement in his voice. “I’ll have a beer.”

“That guy could’ve killed me if you weren’t there.”

“Don’t think like that.” He rubbed her shoulders gently. “I was there, and you’re going to get some added security in that place.”

“My mind is already working on it. Sometimes Belle stays there with me if mom has to go to work early. If he came in when she was there....oh my God.”

He kissed her temple. “Nothing like that will ever happen. I’ll make sure of it.”

Their drinks came, and Raye downed her bourbon shots one after the other before taking a sip of her martini. She heaved a deep sigh. “I haven’t been out since Belle was born. Do you know that? Not for drinks with my

friends. There aren't a lot around anyway. Hayley and Jessica got married to guys on base, and I think they are stationed in Germany. They were the only two close friends I had. I kind of grew up from the wild partying really quick when I got pregnant."

"Your mom told me how sick you were," Sean said. "You should've called me."

"That was not an option. You know that," she answered. The bourbon warmed her nicely and stopped the shakes. It also made her kind of tipsy, and she recalled she did not eat lunch that day." She giggled. "I can see you now. Oh, I can't jump from planes because I gotta a kid back in Oklahoma."

"You never know what could have happened, Raye. You never gave me or yourself the chance to find out," he said.

She laughed. "My heart couldn't take any more rejection. I was deflecting it, and I'm beginning to rhyme."

Sean called the waitress over and gave her two twenties for their drinks. "How about I take you home and you go relax?"

"We just got here, Sean Martin," she protested as he slid out of the booth and helped her to her feet. She picked up the glass and finished her martini before putting the glass back on the table.

"Yeah but adrenaline mixed with alcohol and probably not eating can go straight to your head." He smiled. "Like now."

"Then let's go for a drive so my head will clear. We'll go across the plains like we used to right outside Fort Sill." She looked up at him. "Let's go back to the past. I can pretend that you still loved me to distraction."

"Come on. Let's go." He didn't comment on what she said. Instead Sean cupped a hand under elbow and they left. He helped her into the low slug coupe before he got in himself.

"With a baby you might want to consider getting a different vehicle," she commented. "For now how about you open the sun roof."

He said nothing and did as she asked. Raye wondered what he was thinking while they drove out of Lawton into the openness of Oklahoma.

She wasn't that tipsy, just kind of buzzed. But for some reason she felt trapped within herself like the control she had over every small detail in her life was becoming too restrictive. Impulsively, she undid her seat belt and stood in the seat so her body was half out of the car. She could see the deep midnight blue of the sky and feel the sting of the cold night air against her cheeks. There was nothing around, no cars passing by, only the beauty of Oklahoma and an endless horizon.

"What are you doing?" Sean yelled over the sound of the wind. "Raye Lucas, get yourself back in this car!"

"I feel free, nothing holding onto my soul, just free!" She knew her voice was carried away by the wind, but she didn't care. She was so tired of holding onto her feelings, tired of being scared. Raye slipped her body back into the car. She pointed ahead. "Pull over."

He sent a glance her way. "Why?"

"Because I asked nicely, do it!" she laughed. "Pull over, Sean."

He did as she asked, and when they were parked by the side of the highway on the dusty Oklahoma ground, he asked with a grin, "I'm parked. Now what, crazy woman?"

She moved closer to him and slid her arm around his neck and whispered, "This."

This time Raye was the one to claim the kiss. Sean moaned in his throat and practically pulled her into his lap as their tongues dueled. His hands were everywhere touching and massaging her flesh. She gave as good as she got sliding her tongue deep into his mouth and drinking him in. The car was being too confined. She wanted to touch him, wanted to taste him like he did to her.

Working on impulse she dragged her lips away from his and gasped the one word. "Outside."

Without waiting for his reply she scrambled out of her seat and slammed the door. Seconds later he was in front of her pressing her against the metal body of the car and kissing her senseless. She reached between them feeling his cock rigid hard beneath the material of his jeans. Raye moved from her position slipping from his grasp. He shut the car

door and turned, and she was against his chest taking his lips again while she unbuckled his belt.

“I want your cock in my mouth,” she said.

His zipper made a hiss as she worked the metal teeth apart. While going to her knees she took his jeans and boxers down his legs. His cock sprung free, and she eagerly wrapped her fingers around the erect shaft stoking him firmly until he groaned in pleasure. Raye took his cock in her mouth and felt his thighs tighten as she pushed him deeper between her lips.

“Ah, shit.” The harsh words left his lips, and she looked up to see his head thrown back in pleasure. “Oh, baby, that feels so good. God, don’t stop!”

The desire in his voice spurred her on. She sucked and licked at his shaft and the under side of his balls until he gave a guttural moan. “God, I can’t stand it. Don’t tease me anymore.”

She obeyed his request and took his rod deep in her mouth once more, sucking until she felt him throb in response. He buried his fingers in her hair and pumped his engorged length between her lips.

He pulled away suddenly. His breathing was harsh as he looked down at her. “You’ve had your taste. We’ve got to stop. I’m so close to coming that I can’t hold back.”

Raye stroked his length again and watched his eyes close in pleasure. “I want you to come, Sean. I want to taste it on my tongue.”

She licked the tip and tasted the salty mix of his precome before sliding her mouth over his ramrod shaft again. This time he didn’t pull away as she pleased him with her mouth. Raye could feel his fingers clench in her hair while her lips stroked him faster and her tongue licked at the sensitive head of his cock. A throaty moan escaped him. He fucked her mouth feverishly until she felt the first taste of his seed on her tongue and his harsh cry filled the night air. She was wet, wanting and aching for him. Sean pulled her up and kissed her ravenously. A gust of wind blew, and she shivered.

“You’re cold. Come on. I’m taking you home,” he murmured.

“Did you like that?” She felt doubt creep into her chest.

He lifted her chin to look into his eyes and took her hand and pressed it against his throbbing shaft. “Do you have to even ask? I want you, Raye, so damn much that even coming just now didn’t take the edge off my ache.”

“Then why...?”

“Because its cold out here and you had a rough day,” he replied. “The next time we get together like this, Raye, I’m not stopping, because I won’t feel complete until I have you wrapped around my cock.”

He fixed his clothes and bundled her up in the car before he got in. He closed the sun roof and held her hand as he pulled back onto the road. He dropped her off at home with the promise he would see her again soon. One kiss turned into two, and passion rose within her again. Remembering his words she shivered in anticipation knowing that trying to deny it was useless. When they got together it was like a runaway freight train with no way of stopping until they collided. The explosion would be massive, and as she stepped into her house, she wondered how her heart would recover this time, when it all went wrong.

* * * *

Thunder rumbled overhead as Sean worked with some of the new soldiers that we were coming into the base. This was part of his duties on base, and hopefully it would be permanent. The Ranger’s Platoon leader was sad to see him asking for transfer off the unit. But they came to a compromise that benefited them both. With approval he would become one of the head trainers on base for the Special Forces. It still kept him in the midst of a job he loved and kept his skills honed. The only time that they could call him up was if they were deployed. The rain began falling in heavy drops that soaked them through in minutes. He looked up at the clouds while the young men ran through the downpour.

He’d lived all his life in Oklahoma and knew how to read the weather well. This storm was going to be bad, and the first thing that entered his

thoughts was Raye and Belle. He hoped she'd taken the usual precautions for weather like this. He wouldn't be able to go to her, not for awhile yet. For now his duties took center stage. At the end of the run, he called for the group of soldiers to fall out. They were allowed to take a fifteen minute break and rehydrate from the mile run. Next it would be the obstacle course, and that alone plus the harsh terrain would take a toll on them. Most of them would be bruised and sore tonight when they went back to the barracks. He took the time to walk over to the radar section of the base which was not far away. From there they monitored the weather as well as conducted field artillery training. Sean took off his beret when he stepped inside the small room. All around him monitors beeped and showed graphs and charts in laminated neon green. On the screen he could see the storm system clearly defined.

"Hey, guys, it's getting bad out there. Should I call off the rest of training?" he asked.

A soldier stood and saluted. "That would be best, sir. The weatherman was way off. This system is going to hit Lawton and the surrounding areas hard. We've already seen funnel clouds forming at some points."

"Did you alert command?" Sean asked. He felt fear grip his chest. He needed to call Raye to make sure she and Belle were ok.

"Yes, sir. We have confirmation to lock it down," the soldier replied.

"Well then sound the alarm and lock everything down." Sean ordered.

While he walked out he took his cell phone from his pocket. He had Raye's number on speed dial. In the background the alarms wailed and people began to scurry around to take any and everything that could be a possible threat in high winds under cover or to lock them down. It was standard for Fort Sill. They were along the line of Tornado Alley, and all precautions had to be taken to ensure everyone was safe. Raye's cell phone rang and rang, and he began to panic until she picked up the phone.

"Are you ok? Do you have everything you need?" he asked. "The storm is going to be bad."

Because of the weather her voice was mixed with static on the line. "We're fine. The weatherman said it's going to skirt Lawton."

The wind had picked up, and he had to shout to be heard. “No, honey, he is dead wrong. We are going to be in the midst of it, and it’s going to be bad. Get Belle and head down to the basement!”

He put his finger in his ear, and in the background of the phone, he could hear the sirens in her neighborhood wail. “Raye, go to the basement now!” But the line had already gone dead. From the steps of the radar unit, he watched as the clouds twisted and formed a funnel cloud and touched the ground across on the plain. *Holy fuck!* Terror filled his chest because he saw a second one taking shape in the sky. He knew the direction that Raye’s community laid, and they would be in the thick of the funnel clouds. The woman he loved and his baby were in danger. The wind had picked considerably to the point that trash cans were rolling across the paved parking lots. He was looking frantically for a vehicle to drive. He would drive into the middle of hell if that was what it took to save them.

“Sergeant! Sarg! We gotta get to shelter. We have a funnel heading our way!” One of the soliders from the radar unit ran out and grabbed his shoulder, but Sean pushed him away.

“My wife and child are out there!” he yelled.

“Grab him. He can’t go out in this!” the soldier shouted. “Sorry, sir, but this is for your own safety!”

“No, let me go!” Sean struggled against the many hands that grabbed and propelled him along with then to safety. All he could think about was Raye and Belle as he was held under cover. *Are they hurt? Did they get to safety? Will I find them dead?* The noise as the tornado passed was deafening. A freight train made less noise. The wind outside pressing against the walls made his ears pop and his hearing muffled like he had cotton in them. He had to swallow to get it clear. It looked like the concrete was pulsating, yet he knew it was impossible. The minutes ticked away for what seemed like an eternity until he thought he would go mad. He wanted out of the protective room that held more than twenty men. He wanted to rip at the concrete bunker until he could get free and go find the two people he loved.

“They’ll be fine, sir. They must have had warning to get to safety.”

He heard the voice behind him speak and a hand on his shoulder trying to comfort him. It was the soldier who ordered the rest to drag him into the bunker. He was sure one day he would thank the man for saving his life. Right now it wasn't possible because terror held onto his throat so tight he couldn't speak.

When the all clear finally sounded, he was the first out the door, not caring about the damage around him. He found a humvee and got into the driver's seat. No doubt they would send soldiers out to help with rescue and damage. He couldn't wait for that. He needed to leave now and find them. Every second mattered.

"Where are you going, Staff Sergeant?" The voice of his commander stopped him just as he was putting the key in the ignition.

"My girl and my baby, they don't live on base..." Sean swallowed roughly. "I need to go make sure they are ok."

"You're seeing Raye Lucas, correct?"

"Yes, sir. Her mother is head nurse here on base," Sean replied.

The commander nodded. "Go, son. Make sure they safe."

"Thank you so much, Major Dalton, sir," Sean said gratefully.

That was all he needed. Sean pulled out of the parking and with a savage twist of the wheel high tailed it off base. When he drove through Lawton he saw it was spared with only minor damage. When he got to her community, he was floored. Houses lay like tooth picks strewn with family possessions. People walked around like they were in a daze, and he knew the look well. He had lived through many a tornado and seen it too many times. Some of the houses were spared, but he knew they needed help. He used the radio in the humvee to call into the base. They would get ambulances and whatever else was needed from Lawton out there. He knew he would see familiar Army uniforms as well help the communities that surrounded the base. The rain still fell even though the worse was over for now. But until the storm passed, nothing was safe.

He reached Raye's house. From the front everything looked ok, but he could see plastic and insulation flapping from behind the house. Propelled into action, he jumped from the humvee and ran up to the door. He didn't

know if anything blocked the entry so without hesitation he kicked in the front door and charged inside. The kitchen was gone, and so was part of Belle's room.

"Raye!" He rushed around looking and not knowing how to get to the basement from the inside. He was ready to rip the foundation apart with his bare hands to reach them. He heard a baby's wail that broke his heart in pieces. He heard thumping from behind some debris that was once the kitchen. He moved them away with urgency not even caring about the splinter of wood that bit into his palms. He reached the door and used all his strength to wrench it open. She stood there with the baby wrapped in a blanket and fear in her eyes. He pulled her to him, the baby between their bodies, as the rain fell and held onto her tight. Belle began to struggle beneath the blanket, and she poked her face out to see. There was never a sweeter smile than the one she gave him when she saw him. Little chubby hands reached out and patted his face as if to say it's ok, Daddy. Relief made his knees weak and almost made him crumple to the ground.

"I heard when you told us to get to cover. I had already taken two bags down there last night. We were heading down the stairs when the sirens began." She was speaking in a rush, and he knew it was shock. "We're ok, we're ok."

He knew it was more of a reassurance for her rather than him. So he held her tight until she stopped repeating the words.

"I'm going to head down to get those bags and take you to your mom's house, ok?" he said gently. He cupped her chin and brought her gaze to his. "Ok, Raye?"

"Alright." Her tone was gentle and subdued.

He walked her out to the humvee so she and the baby would be warm. The storm made the evening chilly and the rain falling made it worse. He didn't want either of them to end up sick, so getting them into the dry vehicle was priority. When they were settled inside, he went back and got the bags from the where she stored them. She had packed down to baby milk and diapers in one bag. *That's my Raye, always prepared*, he thought

with a smile. On his way out, he saw the panda and the elephant he bought for Belle on the sofa. Sean grabbed those and headed back outside.

“Hey, baby girl, look what I found,” he said to the girl peeking out from under the blanket. She reached out and grabbed the panda and pressed it’s belly for the lullaby. The sweet song filled the interior of the humvee as he drove away. He got her to her mother’s house quickly, and Donna rushed out when they pulled up.

“Oh, thank you, Sean. Thank you so much!” she said. “I knew you would get them. I knew it.”

“They’re both fine, Donna, just a little damp,” Sean assured her. “Get them inside and warmed up. I have to go help out. It’s going to be a long night.”

Donna took the baby but not before he kissed her sweet chubby cheeks. Donna walked up to the house carrying the Belle and he turned Raye to face him.

“Are you going to be ok?” he asked.

“Yeah. I guess I’ll have to go look at the damage when this is all over.” She laughed. “I spent all I saved to buy that house, and it’s gone.”

Sean pulled her close. “Everything in there can be replaced. You and Belle are priceless.”

He kissed her, and she received the kiss willingly. “I’ll be back. I have to go back on base and help coordinate relief efforts.”

“Don’t go,” she whispered.

Her simple words hit the core of him. “Other people need help, honey, but I swear I’ll be back.”

He walked her up to the front door and with a final kiss put her inside the room and closed the door. It was a moment of vulnerability from her when she was always so strong. After the blinding fear he felt nothing but relief, and a grin spread across his face. Those cracks in her walls were becoming fissures, and soon he would have her heart once more.

Chapter Five

It was two days of seeing the destruction in the news, staying at her mother's house and dealing with her insurance company before she saw Sean again. In that time her nerves had frayed to almost nothing, and she was so tense her neck ached. He called as much as he could to check in on her and Belle, but because of the damage on base and in the surrounding communities he was on call to help with relief efforts. Her contractor guy told her it would take a few months to rebuild the back part of her house. Actually it was more like her house was condemned because the structure was unsafe. So they would demolish and rebuild, but it could take awhile since she was not the only one whose home was destroyed. The poor man tried to soften the blow as much as possible, but needless to say she had to go pack up what she could salvage from her home and box it away. Until her house was rebuilt she would be living with her mother. She couldn't complain actually. She was better off than some who were now homeless and waiting on FEMA help to find housing. But just knowing she lost almost everything she worked for made the blow just as hard.

Even though he was at work and she didn't see him, Sean was amazing. Things were delivered to her mother's house—clothes for Belle, a new crib set, and clothes for her since her bedroom was demolished. At first she refused the help recalling every word he said when they broke up. But when he threatened to go AWOL just to come over there and talk to her, she relented. Even though she hated to admit it, her mother pointed out they were in a relationship. She just chose not to see it. Now she was scared to death wondering where it was leading to for her and Belle.

It was well after six and she was in her mother's living room, cradling a fussy Belle in her arms and the phone between her ear and shoulder. Because of the tornado every ambulance chaser lawyer was calling. They wanted to help her to get more from the insurance company or to sue the housing community. After fielding about a dozen of those calls, she was now on the phone with her insurance agent who was trying to down play

the damage to her home. All she wanted was to get her home fixed, and this guy was trying to be a pain in the ass.

“I don’t care what your pansy ass of an inspector said. I can prove my house is not structurally sound, and there is no way you can slap some duct tape on it and called it fixed!” she said into the phone. “I’ve had about ninety-nine lawyers call me today, and I’m sure one of them wouldn’t mind suing the pants off your company for me especially when I get on the news holding a crying baby in front of my home and tell them you are trying to underpay me to fix my home after I have been so diligent in paying you.”

The doorbell rang, and the mother came from her kitchen and held up her hand to let her know she would get it. She listened to her insurance adjuster on the phone while her mom opened the door. Sean stepped through looking handsome in his uniform but tired around the eyes. While she was on the phone fighting for her home, he was out picking up the debris of what nature had unleashed. He came over and plucked Belle from her arms, and her tired body eased in relief from the weight of the baby. Belle instantly quieted down as he cooed and played with her while she put her attention back to what the agent was saying on the phone.

“No, you listen, sir, Alan, or whatever. My house is totaled. I will get someone from the county and prove it is, and then if you don’t pay up on my policy, I’m taking you to court.” She felt hot angry tears threaten to fall. “How can you dare try to undercut families after destruction like this. Your bottom line is money. Ours is family and trying to get a safe place for them to live. You have never met me, but let me guarantee you I am not some weak little thing that will take what you dish out. I will fight you, so you think about that until my paperwork comes in.”

She turned her phone off with a furious press of the button and took a deep breath silently asking for patience. If not she would throw the phone across the room. Her mom came and embraced her which made her want to cry all the more. It was no one’s fault. The weather could be savage in Oklahoma, but dealing with people who saw only the bottom line could drive a person to drink or do something worse.

“Don’t worry, honey. They will do what’s right. We’ll make them,” her mother assured her.

“I can make a few calls for you if you want?” Sean offered. “Sometimes these guys think because it’s a woman they can bully you into a low ball number.”

She shook her head. “No, this is my home, my problem. Thanks for asking though.”

Belle reached up and pulled Sean’s face down for a sloppy kiss. He laughed and wiped the excess drool from his cheek. He nuzzled her neck and made her laugh before saying, “Baby slobber kisses are nice.”

Raye had to laugh. “Sorry, she is teething. I think we have some molars coming up.”

“No need to be sorry. I’ll take her kisses any day of the week.”

Her mom came and took Belle from his arms. “Why don’t you take Raye out for some air. I think she needs it. Maybe you can grab a bite to eat.”

“Mom, I’m ok really. Sean is here to see Belle,” Raye protested.

“I’m here to see both of you not just the baby,” Sean pointed out.

“I won’t be good company with all this going on,” Raye replied. “I’m not even dressed.”

“We’ll go get a burger and sit in the car and watch the stars,” Sean suggested. “Come on. You need to get away for a little bit.”

“You two are ganging up on me,” Raye said.

“We are. Now go get cleaned up, and I’ll play with Belle for a little bit and catch up with your mom.” Sean took Belle and lifted her high. The baby squealed in delight.

“What could you and mom have to catch up on?” Raye asked.

“Oh the fact that she is dating my commander, Major Dalton.” Sean grinned and winked. “He was the one who let me off base to go find you. Then today when he asked how Donna Lucas’s daughter and grandchild was doing, I put two and two together.”

Raye watched her mother duck her head but not before she caught the shy smile. “Mom, are you and this major getting serious?”

“I’ll invite him over for dinner soon, and you will get to meet him,” Her mom replied and slapped at Sean’s hand lightly. “Thank you, Sean Martin, she’ll have more questions about my love life.

Sean laughed, and Raye replied, “Well I should know the man who is courting my mother.”

Her mother held up a finger. “Now that’s enough of that. You go get dressed and get out of here and relax for a bit.”

Raye went upstairs to the room she now shared with Belle until her house was rebuilt. She changed clothes after a quick shower, she put on a burgundy skirt that flared lightly at her knees and a beige knit top that clung to her hips and a wide brown belt. Raye looked at herself in the mirror and decided to leave her hair down. With everything going on, her state of dressing was a ponytail and sweats suits. Since the tornado, the weather turned cool again, and she put on a pair of ankle boots and headed downstairs. Sean was sitting on the sofa, and he had achieved what she was trying to do all afternoon. Belle was sleeping in his arms soundly sucking her thumb, and cute baby sighs escaped her lips. The books were right after all. Babies could sense their parent’s anxiety, and while she was all frayed nerves and limited patience, Sean’s calming presence helped calm the baby.

“I’m ready,” she whispered so as not to wake the peacefully sleeping child.

Her mom took Belle from Sean’s arms. “Have fun you two.”

She kissed the baby goodbye as her mom passed to take her upstairs to bed. The door locked behind them as she and Sean stepped out into the night. She gasped when she saw the gleaming midnight blue Ford Explorer in the driveway.

“You got rid of the coupe?” she asked as they got closer. She could see it was one of the newer models.

“Like you said, it’s not really a car for a man with a baby.” He opened the door and helped her into the vehicle. “I even got a car seat. I haven’t had time to install it yet, so it’s back at my place.”

When he was settled in the driver seat he pressed a button on the dash. Raye felt the seat warming beneath her and laughed. “Bun warmers.”

“Now that sounds inviting,” he commented as he pulled slowly out of the driveway.

“You would think so wouldn’t you?” she teased.

“So where do you want to eat?” Sean asked casually.

“Honestly, I’m not really hungry,” she confessed. “With everything that’s going on, my appetite is gone. I did have half a sandwich and the rest of Belle’s spaghetti-o’s this afternoon and a cup of coffee.”

“Sounds nutritious,” Sean said dryly. “We’ll eat later. How’s that?”

“Ok,” she agreed. “Where are we going to go, movies maybe?”

“I have an idea. Are you game?” Sean asked.

She shrugged. “Sure why not.”

She watched the night go by as he drove through Lawton. There were more people on the streets than usual at night. Most stores and restaurants were staying open late so people could come in and eat or shop for replacement items. A lot of the eateries had discounted prices or offering free meals to people displaced by the tornado. It was a military town, yes, but it was close-knit as well, taking care of its own when times were dire. Monday she would have to get back to work and open her shop. She didn’t expect sales to rise, but it was the main reason she wanted to reopen. It had been a few days since the CRS program had to be rescheduled. She wanted to get the solider participants back on their regular schedule knowing that the routine helped them cope. On the outskirts of Lawton, Sean made a right turned and headed over the dry plains. No one would expect just a few days earlier that the ground was drenched in rain. Nothing was damp. The earth had sucked all the water back into its depths because the Explorer kicked up dust as it went across the sandy ground.

She finally understood where he was going when he took the familiar well-worn path to Mount Scott. It was one of the tourist attractions in Oklahoma and a lot of her business came from people staying at the lodges or camping in the area. She finally pulled into one of the lookout points there and parked the car. Above the stars glittered in the dark sky

like a blanket covered in diamonds. Below the lights of Lawton stood fixed and bright illuminating the night. The expanse of Oklahoma ground was between them, going on for miles as far as the eye could until it met the sky. It was a picturesque scene that brought tourists and locals alike to the mountain.

“I haven’t been up here in forever. I forgot how beautiful it is.” She sighed. “My dad had this old Chevy convertible that he adored. He used to bring me and my mom up here, and I would lie across the back seat and look up at the sky. We would count the stars, and he would say, ‘Sugar plum, if you can get to one thousand stars, I will catch one for you.’” She laughed softly as the memory filled her with warmth and sadness. “Each time I would make it to about five hundred before I started yawning. I never got to a thousand. We would go home, and when he tucked me in I would say, ‘Sorry, Daddy I didn’t make it this time.’ He would kiss me and pull my blankets tighter around me and say, ‘Don’t worry, sweetheart, I’ll still catch one for you.’”

“Sounds like an amazing man,” Sean’s said. “I hear your mom calling Belle sugar plum. I guess the nickname was passed down.”

“Yes, it was.” Raye turned to him and smiled. “He *was* amazing. I turned fifteen two weeks before he died, and he bought me this silver necklace with a star-shaped pendant. In the middle of the star was a small diamond. On the back it was engraved with *I caught one just for you*. I have it put away for Belle when she turns fifteen. I’d catch one for her too if I could.”

“Here, let’s do this.” He unfastened his seatbelt and then hers and reached around her to press a button. She heard a soft whirring sound as her seat went back, and then Sean opened the wide sunroof before putting his own seat back. “You don’t have to reach a thousand. Just pick out a star for you and one for Belle, and I’ll get them.”

“That’s a nice sentiment.” Raye laughed.

Sean reached down and clasped her hand with his. “It’s the truth. Pick them.”

Raye shook her head and played along with the game. “Ok, those two right there by the tip of the tree. Those will be mine and Belle’s.”

“Good. They are yours.” He kissed her hand.

“You’re a nut you know that?” She laughed.

“Nuts about you and my daughter.” Lying back she watched him stare into the sky, and then his emerald green gaze met hers. “If you haven’t figured it out yet, Raye, I love you just as much or more as when I first met you. You blessed me with a daughter, the thing that was missing from my heart. I never knew what it was like because I lost my mom when I was so young, and even then the distance between my parents was evident. Having her and the slobbery kisses the way she stares at me loving me without any expectations other than being just her daddy, it’s made me whole, given me new perspective, and I want to be for her what your dad was for you.”

His words faded off into silence, and she contemplated everything he said.

“Yes,” she said simply.

He looked at her with a question in his eyes. “Yes? What do you mean?”

“You said the only time you would make love to me was when I came to you and said yes,” Raye reminded him. “So my answer is yes. Make love to me, Sean, right here and now.”

His gaze became intense as he pulled her to him and greedily took her lips. Soon he groaned in frustration as the center console barred him from touching her the way he wanted to.

“Backseat,” he said against her lips and was out of the car in seconds and asked. “Why do I feel like I’m sixteen again?”

Raye giggled as he righted his seat and then hers with haste. She stripped her top off and left it where it lay as she climbed into the rear of the car. She shimmied out of her skirt and panties. Sean gave a growl of frustration as he worked feverishly at the laces of his boots. He climbed in and continued to undress, and she caressed his broad shoulders. He pulled

her into his arms, and their lips met in excitement. There was nothing adolescent about the way he touched her or made her feel.

“God, I missed how you feel. Your skin is like silk,” he whispered as he cupped her breasts.

She moaned as lips played with her pert nipples one after the other before sucking one deep into his mouth. The heat of the sensations pulled at her core making her wet with need. Raye was sitting with her back against the door while Sean was between her legs. While his lips nibbled at the heavy globes of her breast, his hands caressed her torso moving downward until he reached her pussy. He cupped her mound, and her hips rose to meet his hand, inviting him to do more. She cried out in surprise as Sean grabbed her hips and pulled her lower against the leather seat. There was not a lot of space even in the back of the explorer, but he made do. She felt him go to his knees and raised her hips easily to meet his lips. Sean kissed the inside of her thighs teasing her with gentle nips as his mouth moved to the center of her desire. When she felt his hot breath against her pussy, she moaned and her head moved slowly from side to side in anticipation.

The first lick of his tongue against the smooth velvety fold of her sex was long and slow as if he was savoring the initial taste of a dessert treat. With a moan he pierced her with his tongue, and Raye shuddered, crying out his name. He licked her again, lazily teasing her with each deliberate movement of his tongue. Sean laid her hips back against the cool seat and spread the folds of her pussy to lick at her clit. He sucked at the sensitive bud, and she grabbed his head, grinding herself against him to intensify the pleasure. His hand splayed across her belly, and he used his thumb to continue the manipulation of her clit. She felt his hot gaze on her while he slipped his fingers inside her, slowly filling her with two digits and moving them at a leisurely pace. She felt her pussy throb and clutched at the pleasurable invasion. She raised her hips, impatiently asking for more. Raye looked at him and saw pure desire as he watched his fingers bury into the recess of her snatch each time. She pressed her legs wider exposing more of the pink flesh at her core.

His breath hissed out between his teeth before he murmured, "Hearing you moan and watching your pussy take my fingers makes me so damn horny."

"Sean, please stop teasing me. Make me come," she gasped out. "I can't stand it anymore."

"I promised you slow loving, sweetheart," he replied.

"Next time, baby." She lifted her head up to meet his gaze. "I want to feel you inside me taking me hard. Don't make me wait."

She visibly saw his control snap, and the pace of his fingers fucking her increased. Her bones felt like they liquefied, and she lay back and arched into his hand. He pistoned his fingers in and out of her, and she could hear the sound of her wetness echoing in the silent vehicle.

"Ah, fuck!" she cried out as pleasure assaulted her.

"Is this how you want it?" he growled. "Hot and hard? Tell me you like it, Raye."

"God, yes, I love it!" She could feel her body searching for the ultimate goal of release.

"Come for me, baby, I want to hear you come."

His words spurred her on as she arched off the seat to meet his hand, until she screamed while she came. Her breath was mingled with whimpers as she lay pliant on the seat of the car.

"I need you now."

His voice was harsh, and he helped her to straddle him. With one smooth thrust, he buried himself to the hilt in her pussy. His groan filled the air when she began to ride him. Her knees were pressed against the leather, and she used that to help direct her movements. Raye leaned back, and she could feel the driver's seat against her back. Cupping her breast in her hand, she invited him to partake, and Sean accepted. They moved in unison. Her hips undulated meeting his thrusts as he sucked at her nipples. She heard their primal sounds filling the air and was amazed to know it was coming from them both.

"Raye, you feel so good wrapped around my cock." He kissed her hard. "Give me all of you, baby. Come with me."

“Take me there, Sean. Now!”

He pulled her against him so that her breasts were pressed to his chest. His fingers dug into her hips as he pounded into her, sending them both careening toward release. Raye felt her orgasm wash over her, and it left her breathless. Sean grabbed her hair and brought her to him for a searing kiss, and he found his own release. He groaned in gratification, and she felt his hot seed fill her. Raye rested her head on his hard chest, and his arms wrapped around her protectively.

“Come home with me tonight,” he said kissing her neck.

“I’ve got to get home to Belle,” she replied and sighed with contentment.

“No, you don’t. I have Donna’s permission to keep you out all night and bring you home before she goes to work in the morning. I don’t have to report in until twenty-one hundred hours.”

She kissed him, and humor filled her voice. “So you were conspiring with my mom, huh? Did she know you were going to take advantage of me.”

“I think she was hoping I would,” Sean teased.

“Hey now!” She slapped him on the shoulder lightly.

“Come home with me, Raye. I want to have you in my arms tonight.” Sean kissed her gently. “Please.”

“Well since you asked nicely.”

They got dressed, and in a few minutes were sitting back where they started. Looking out the window as he pulled away, Raye took a mental snapshot of the night to tuck away in her memory. Sean looked over and smiled at her as he drove and took her hand. While he held it and caressed her skin with his thumb, she couldn’t help but wonder what would go wrong to ruin her happiness again. She couldn’t help waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Chapter Six

Sean watched her sleep in his bed at his on-base apartment. At the time when he got the small one bedroom, he had no clue he had a child or even a chance with Raye again. But now he sat on the side of the bed watching her sleep. The moonlight coming through the window bathed her skin in its glow. Like his car and his job he was in the process of getting a house in one of the communities close to the base. It was a huge ranch style with four bedrooms and a big front and back yard. He already had the plan to put a playhouse in the back yard for when Belle was old enough to use it and for any new children they may have. He grinned wide amazed that now instead of thinking about jumping out of planes and taking dangerous missions he was thinking about more kids. *I want a son with Raye*. But he wanted to make sure everything was in place before he announced it to her. To show her how serious he was and how wonderful life would be with him. Donna had mentioned the name of Raye's contractor in passing, and he had kept it in memory. The next day he would go talk to the builder and hopefully get him to drag his feet for awhile. He saw no use in paying to get a new house built when he had a family house in the works. Sean knew he was going to marry her. It was just a matter of her saying yes. By Valentine's Day everything would be in place, and he would show her exactly how he felt.

He looked at her sleeping once more and moved her hair off her face in a tender gesture. She smiled in her sleep, and that made his heart feel like it would burst with the love he felt. He could kick himself everyday for the mistake he made almost two years go. But now he had been blessed with a second chance. Not many men could be so lucky. They had taken a shower and lay in bed naked, talking and reconnecting. Sean woke up later on like he always did since he returned from deployment. The echoes of the past months' war still reverberated in his ears. He went into the bathroom to cool his face with water from the sink and remind himself that the smell and the sounds were all in the past.

Raye was lying on her belly. Sean trailed his fingers down her skin following the path of the moonlight across her back and down the rise of her ass. Desire made him ache from this one action alone. He gently pulled the blanket down the rest of the way and spread her legs, unable to deny himself the urge to touch her. He trailed his fingertips along the slit of her pussy, dipping them lightly between the velvety folds. Even in her sleep her body responded to him, and he felt her getting wet just by his touch. She moaned in her sleep lifting her hips against his seeking hand. She shifted to her back with her eyes still closed, but her breathing had changed. He watched her breasts rise and fall with delicate pants as he aroused her body. Sean reached between her legs again and spread the lips of her pussy with his fingers to find her clit. She gave a soft cry and opened her eyes.

“What’re you doing?” she asked with a husky voice. “I thought I was dreaming.”

“No, baby, this is no dream,” Sean said huskily. “I couldn’t help myself. I just had to touch you. I want to feel you come for me.”

She moaned and spread her legs wider, and Sean took the invitation and moved his hand lower feeling the warmth of her body before slipping his fingers inside her. She was like liquid heat wrapped around his fingers—clenching, throbbing, and her body tried desperately to hold onto his digits for maximum pleasure. Sean closed his eyes as yearning rushed through him and aching need that he knew could only be quenched by merging their bodies until they found satisfaction. He bent his head and took her upturned nipple into his mouth while he fucked her with his fingers. The resounding cry of need that escaped her lips took the last of his control, and he gave in to the primal want that she elicited in him. Sean moved from beside her and urgently turned her to her stomach.

“Yes, yes, yes,” Raye chanted as she got onto her hands and knees, spurring him on to take her.

Sean watched her clench her hands in the sheets anticipating him taking her from behind. He rubbed the tip of his engorged cock along the

wet slit of her pussy teasing her entrance and himself by watching the head of his rod dip between the aroused swollen lips of her sex.

“Do it. God, fuck me now,” she moaned.

Raye arched her back accentuating the curve of her ass. She reminded him of a sleek cat waiting to be petted. He thrust deep inside her and felt her heat surround his cock and milk his shaft. She was so damn tight and wet he thought he would die from the sheer pleasure of being buried with the walls of her snatch.. He pumped his cock between the lips of her pussy watching it withdraw slick and wet with her juice. She moaned low in her throat and shifted until she could hold on to the headboard of the bed. Sean fucked her without reservation, and together they were running on primal instinct to find gratification. He didn't know how but their loving was so fierce that soon her hands were pressed against the wall above the headboard, Using his thighs he spread her legs wider so he could drive himself deeper into her core. One hand caressed and played with her nipples while his other lay flat against her torso and pulled her into his thrusts.

“Raye.” Her name was torn from his lips. He was in the grip of the most intense pleasure he ever felt in his life. He felt her hand cover his on her torso and move it down to the top of her mound. Sean knew what she wanted and gave it by finding her clit and rubbing it with his finger. That once action made Raye throw her head back and scream while her body bucked and jerked under his onslaught. She was like a wild mare that needed to be tamed. No matter how she wiggled or moved, he was there, trapping her into the cocoon of sexual desire that they were creating. Sean couldn't stop even if the world was coming down around them. The only thing he could see, smell, or taste was her, only and always Raye, and she was his.

“I'm coming, Sean, yes!”

Her wail of delight made his cock throb and his balls tighten in sweet pain as he felt the edges of his own release. With a throaty gasp and a loud whimper she threw her head back until it rested against his chest and gave herself to the power of her release. He felt her juice coat him like liquid

velvet and drip down his cock to his balls. He didn't stop. With a primal growl he fucked her hard until he felt his orgasm careen through his body and rock him to his core. His seed rushed through his shaft, heating his groin and emptying the sac that hung between his legs. He couldn't stop moving. He thrust hard, prolonging the orgasm as much as he could until bliss turned to nirvana and ended in contentment. They fell together onto the bed, a tangle of legs and arms while their bodies shook from the power of their need. The air was thick with the scent of their loving, so tangible that Sean felt as if he could reach out and touch it. He wondered vaguely why people did drugs if they could have this in the arms of the person they loved.

They fell asleep again still wrapped in each other until his alarm went off and it was time to take her home. They shared a kiss before she got out of his truck and headed into the house, and she waved and closed the door behind her. Sean knew he had a stupid grin on his face when he pulled away and didn't care. He felt like giving a cowboy whoop even though he was originally from New England. Sean felt like he was the luckiest man alive.

* * * *

The day before Valentine's Day and her shop was abuzz with activity. In the weeks past she had crafted trinket boxes and other items in many shapes including hearts. Some of them were painted in red, white with trails of silver. In other pieces she had intricately carved hearts and flowers into the clay before firing them in the small kiln that was in the very back of her store. Not only were her pieces on sale but some that soldiers had made. Those sold out quickly to the tourists and other people who visited her store. With each piece sold she made sure to tally the amount separately. Both her and the soldiers who came into her store agreed any profit made from their work would be donated to the USO or to a fund to help families who had lost loved ones in Iraq or Afghanistan.

In the midst of it she was in a war with her contractor who seemed not able to get the material to start rebuilding her house. She saw rebuilding work going on all around her neighborhood. Hers was the only house that stood silent and decimated in homage to the wall of wind that had passed through in seconds, bringing destruction in its wake. Finally, she closed the door to the shop and turned the sign to ‘closed.’ Sean was still in back putting the final touches on his first crafted piece. He had hinted that it was a surprise for her, and she would get it the next day. There was also mention of a few more surprises that would be coming her way. Raye smiled thinking about the circle that her life had taken in two years. A break up, a child, and now Sean was back in their lives. It all felt complete. She loved him, and he loved her. He gave her the space she needed, didn’t try to control her life and understood the reason why she depended on herself. The hurt he inflicted still stung at times when she thought about it, but he more than showed that he wanted to make up for past mistakes. His love was the balm she needed to finally close that open wound.

The night before she had finally met Major Dalton when he came over for dinner. The man was sweet on her mother, and she could tell her mother felt the same about him. She thanked him profusely for letting Sean leave base on the day of the tornado. She saw the older man with silver hair and blue eyes blush at her mother’s praise for being her hero. Major Dalton was polite and charismatic, and Raye liked him as soon as she met him. He and Belle took to each other instantly. He had no children or grandchildren, and tonight Belle was with him and her mother visiting the fair that pulled into town a few days before. She knew her daughter was completely safe with the older couple and bid them goodbye from the shop earlier that afternoon. They would be home by at least nine at night, so she planned to make good use of the few hours alone she had with Sean. The door clicked as she opened it to poke her head in.

Sean blocked his project with his body. “Hey, no peeking!”

“I am certainly not trying to look even though I’m curious.” Raye grinned. “I’ll be in my office working on some stuff. When you get done, come to my office and get me, okay?”

“I’m almost done. I’ll be there in a few.” Sean winked at her.

“See you in a bit,” she replied and closed the door.

She crossed the small hallway to her office and stepped inside. The register had already been emptied and the books updated with the day’s profit. There was nothing she had to do but love Sean. Raye began to strip off her clothes. She shimmied out of the jeans she wore and the sweater with bell sleeves. Her bra and panties came next, and she threw her clothes on a table in the corner before sitting in the leather office chair behind her desk. She planned to be very naughty in her office with Sean.

His knock echoed on the wooden door about half an hour later. “Come in,” she called.

When he opened the door and stepped inside, his eyes widened at the sight of her nudity, and then she saw the green of his irises darken with desire.

“Why did you knock?” She smiled sweetly.

He cleared his throat. “I thought you would be... um... busy.”

“Nope not busy, just sitting here,” she said lightly and leaned back and spread her legs cupping her breasts at the same time. “Do you see something you like, anything you need?”

His voice was hoarse with need, and he began to undress. “Yes, I do. Can I come and get it?”

“I wish you would,” she said in a sultry voice.

She turned the chair away from her desk. By the time he dropped to his knees between her spread legs, Sean was completely nude, and his cock was erect.

Sean kissed her torso before he bent low and licked her pussy. “I’m going to make you come hard. Don’t resist. Let it happen.”

His tongue against her heated sex made her grab the arms of her chair and gasp. She arched against his seeking mouth. Sean pulled her lower in the chair, lifted her legs over his shoulders, and devoured her snatch like a

man possessed. His tongue delved inside her. He sucked at her clit and used his thumb of penetrate her. Under the onslaught of the oral ministration, Raye almost died from the heat of it. He sucked at her clit, and she felt one long finger enter her, sliding deep and touching the place that made her cry out. With each stroke of the digit in her pussy combined with the guttural moans of enjoyment coming from his lips, her pleasure was increased tenfold. There was no one who could make her feel like this in only minutes of touching her.

“Oh, hell, I’m coming.”

Raye felt the smooth leather under her fingers as she clutched the arms of her chair. Her orgasm took hold like she was caught in a whirlpool of sensation, and there was no escaping it. She cried out as it crested, flushing her skin and tightening her nipples. Raye was still panting, trying to catch her breath as he stood and lifted her easily. Their lips met, and he thrust his tongue deep in her mouth. He sat in the chair and impaled her onto his cock. She whimpered against his lips in pleasure at how deep he was. Her legs were over the arms of the chair which made it difficult to move, but that was not a problem for Sean’s strong arms as he took over her movements. She held onto his neck as he lifted and released her in repetition onto his rod. She arched against the onslaught, never knowing having him could be so intense. He was a man bent on dominating her body and merging their souls.. His primal groan echoed in the room. His eyes were closed, and his lips bared as if the pleasure he felt was too agonizing to bear. Raye couldn’t help but look at his face as he took her until her own eyes closed when she succumbed to the need that built inside her.

“Fuck!” he said harshly.

“Oh, yes!” she answered in return.

They tumbled off the edge of sanity into the swirling tumultuous orgasm that held them in its grips and would not let go. While Sean came, he kept impaling her onto this length, and her orgasm rolled through her in waves. She felt his seed inside her, felt her body clench and release its own sexual fluid around him. They stayed in that bliss until they drained

every last sensation from their coupling, and she sagged against his sweat sheened chest weak in the aftermath.

“Well that was a most exceptional after craft reward.” He kissed her and smiled. “Those other soldiers that come in don’t know how lucky I am. I get special attention from the teacher.”

Raye laughed. “That’s because you’re this teacher’s pet.”

He lifted her easily and deposited her naked body in the chair. “I have to run down the hall and put my project in the locker. I left it drying a bit before I came in here.”

“You’re going naked?” she asked amused.

“Why not? Who’s going to see?”

“Don’t get paint on it. I might have to clean it off,” she teased.

“That sounds interesting. Maybe I’ll paint it red, white, and blue and see what happens.”

Raye laughed as he swaggered off down the hallway naked with no sense of embarrassment. She sat back thinking she should get dressed but really not wanting to. A loud buzzing came from the floor and she looked down curiously. It kept up its constant noise until she crossed to his pants and found his phone in the pocket. She wasn’t going to answer it, but when she saw the name of her contractor on the readout of the touch screen phone, she wondered if Bill the man who was supposed to be rebuilding her house got his number from her mother. She touched the screen of the phone, and the call connected. Before she could say a word Bill began to speak.

“Hey, Sarg, I got everything fixed. Ms. Lucas’s project is on hold until your say so. She won’t be getting her supplies...hello... hello?”

She pressed the ‘end call’ button and stood numb. Raye heard the words, and every sense of happiness drained from her until it left her weak. She leaned against the desk to keep her balance and not fall. *Why would Sean be working for me not to get my supplies? Why would Bill have to wait for his say so? What is he planning?* It dawned on her that he might be using this as some kind of way to take Belle. *How could I be so*

stupid? she thought miserably, and then anger infused her. *How dare he? He hasn't changed, not one damn bit. It's still all lies!*

"I've done my piece and look no paint on certain areas," Sean announced when he stepped back in the door. He saw the look on her face, and his smile fell away. "What's wrong? Dear God, is something wrong with Belle? Is she hurt?"

Her laugh was brittle to her own ears. "Belle is fine. It's your lies that I have a problem with."

He looked at her somberly. "I have never lied to you, Raye."

"Oh really, then why does my contractor seem to be answering to you and withholding my materials for my house? The house that Belle lives in?" she shot back. "What, you think if we live with my mother long enough you can go to court and file for full custody? Was that your plan instead of signing the custody papers and this bullshit sweet talk a way to con me?"

"Hell, no, Raye if you would listen to me, I can explain," he replied.

She waved her hand to cut him off. "Forget it. I don't to hear anything that comes out of your mouth. I should have fought you. Instead I fell for you again." She laughed harshly at herself. "I am such a fool. Get your clothes and get out of my place."

"I've hurt you so bad before you expect the worse out of me, don't you?" Sean asked quietly. Raye could swear she saw sadness in his eyes, but she dared not believe it. "Won't you listen to reason?"

"No, get out." Her voice was cold as ice. She threw his phone at him, and he caught it easily. She wished it had hit him to cause him an ounce of pain he had caused her. "This time it's not you breaking it off. It's me."

"Fine, then I'll prove it to you." He shoved his feet into his pants before putting on his shoes and then his shirt. "Can I take my project with me?"

"Take it because if it stays here, I'll smash it to bits." She was still naked as she watched him. The anger and hurt was so big inside her she began to shake. She yelled at his back. "I'm sending the papers for Belle

to your house, Sean. Sign them, or I will fight you every step of the way! You won't take my child from me!"

He didn't say one word. She heard the bell of her front door ding as he went out. She didn't have to follow him to know he locked the door behind him. He always did. She put on her clothes with silent tears falling down her cheeks. Twice he had betrayed her, broke her heart, and she vowed there would never be a third. She was done loving Sean, and even as she made the vow, she knew that was a lie. She could never get him out of her heart, but she would learn to live without him again. She went home making sure to be in bed by the time her mother came in with the sleeping Belle in her arms.

She made her voice sleepy as if she awoke when her mother stepped inside the bedroom. Raye was relived when Belle was placed in her crib sound asleep and her mother whispered good night and left the room. For tonight she would not have to answer the questions she knew would come. She got out of bed and caressed the sleeping baby's cheek and felt her tears fall again. They were alone again, well not really because Belle would always have her daddy. She wondered how she would bear to see him each time he picked up their daughter for a visit. Raye went back to bed and began to shore up those walls around her heart that she had let crumble, building it up brick by brick until it was solid once more.

* * * *

The next morning Raye sat at the breakfast table feeding Belle oatmeal with blueberries and smiling as her daughter babbled on with purple smears all around her mouth. She could feel the watchful stare of her mom as she had puttered around the kitchen making the baby's breakfast. Now she sat with her cup of coffee saying nothing but waiting patiently for Raye to speak. *Why do moms have to be such know-it-alls?* Her eyes were red-rimmed. She couldn't hide that no matter how much water she splashed on her face.

Raye felt her gaze and looked over to her mom who took a sip from her cup. "Want to talk about it?"

"No," Raye replied. "It's over, and that's all there is to it."

"Hmmm does he know that?" her mother asked.

"What do you mean, Mom? I told him so. Of course he knows!"

Raye turned as her mother pointed to the big dinning room window. Two men were coming up the walkway way carrying huge bouquets of flowers. One bunch was red roses, and one was pink daisies. The doorbell rang, and her mother went to open the door. The men came in and put both vases on the table filling the house with their scent. Belle squealed in delight, but Raye wouldn't let her touch them. She had no doubt that her precious daughter might try to eat one of the daisies.

"Mom, take over here. Let me get my purse to tip them," Raye asked.

"Feed the baby." Her mom waved her away and took her purse from the chair and gave the men each ten dollars.

They left with thanks, and she heard her mom wish them happy Valentine's Day before closing the door.

"Aren't you going to read the cards?" Her mother asked when she walked back in.

Raye shook her head. "Why should I? If he wants to waste his money it's his problem."

"You are an obstinate child. I'll read them."

As her mother took the cards from the holders in the midst of the flowers, Raye had to admit she was curious and excited to hear what was in the notes.

Her mother began to read the first one. "Raye, you wont talk to me, so I have to do this another way. Be ready at six tonight, and have Belle ready too. We have some place special to go for Valentine's Day. I do love you. Sean." Her mother looked up to her with a smile. "That's wonderful, darling. You have a date tonight."

"Not likely." Raye snorted. "He'd better not show up here expecting anything."

“I don’t think Sean Martin is one you can say no to. He seems very... um persuasive,” her mother replied.

“He might have you fooled but not me,” Raye retorted. She hesitated before asking, “What does Belle’s card say?”

“I thought you didn’t want to know?”

“Mom!”

“Fine. It says.” She opened the envelope as if she was one of the presenters at an award show. “My baby girl Belle, I think I loved you even before I met you. I’m sorry I missed so many days of your life, but I promise not to ever miss another. Be my Valentine’s, sweet daughter, because you will always have your daddy’s heart.”

His words choked Raye up, but she refused to let her mother see it. No doubt he loved Belle, but it was his love for her she couldn’t trust. Instead she cleared her throat and said, “That was very nice of him.”

“Nice! That was the sweetest thing I have ever read!” her mother protested. “Now you listen here, Ms. Stubborn. If you want to ruin whatever chance you and this sweet baby has for a happy life, then you sit here and wallow without knowing all the answers. But when you do that make sure you know the consequences are yours! I’m going out with the Major tonight. I suggest that you stop playing like you are still a teenager and grow up!” She moved forward, and she wrapped her arms around Raye and pulled her against her stomach. “Now I love you. You know I do. Let the past go. I had to learn that so I could move on and be happy with someone else. You father would never want me to be alone still pining for his ghost. I don’t want you to look back on these years from now and regret, ok?”

Raye knew her mom. She never exploded unless she believed in something so much that she could not hold her tongue. It took a lot for her to say the things she said to Raye, and when Donna Lucas chastised you felt well and truly put in your place.

“I’m sorry, Mom, but what if years from now I let him in, and he hurts me, let alone Belle?” Raye asked. Her voice was husky with tears.

She felt her mom bend and place a kiss on her forehead. “Then I’ll flay him myself, and he knows it. Get dressed and take Belle tonight, honey. I think you’ll learn that some happily ever afters do come true.”

Raye looked at her mother as she walked away and sighed. Belle babbled asking for more oatmeal in her own special language. “I guess we get pretty for your daddy tonight,” Raye said and gave the baby another spoonful of her breakfast. She was excited and dubious all at once, but she would follow her mother’s advice.

By five fifty-five in the evening with the sun going down. Raye was already a mass of jittery nerves. She expected him to not have a word to say to her after last night. The response she assumed she would get was in the form of court papers and a messy custody battle. Instead she was sitting tapping her foot wearing a red silky jumper that was cuffed at the ankles, and Belle wore a romper in pink. When the bell rang precisely at six, she took a deep breath and headed to the door. Sean stood on her step in his dress uniform, the one he should’ve been wearing the first night they met.

“Are you ready to go? Because if you aren’t I’m going to carry you over my shoulder and Belle in my arms,” Sean said. She could see he was in no mood to play.

“No need to get forceful. We’re ready.” Raye gave him the tart reply.

His face softened considerably when Belle toddled over, and he picked her up. “Hey, sweetheart, let’s get you in the car seat.”

Without a word he walked away talking to the baby softly and leaving her standing there. She got her coat, and by the time she locked the door, Belle was strapped into the seat in the back of his truck. He was sitting behind the wheel, waiting and saying nothing. She got in, and he started the truck and pulled away silently.

“So are you going to tell me what this is about?” she asked.

“As I said before you won’t listen, so I’ll have to show you.”

“Listen, Sean....”

‘I don’t want to hear it, Raye. You have all the preconceived notions about my intentions. Well I’m going to show you you’re wrong.’ His words were clipped and to the point.

She sat back and pursed her lips as he drove, feeling uncomfortable. It seemed to take an hour before he pulled into another community, one that was definitely more ritzy than hers. He parked in the driveway of a red brick style ranch house and stopped the car.

He turned to her. “This is ours—yours, mine, and Belle’s. Your name is on the deed as well as mine, and if anything happens to us, she is the owner. This is why I asked Bill to hold off on your materials, because I figured you could put the insurance money in a trust for Belle so that she has a college fund and we could have our family here. I used my VA loan to get the house and put down the down payment. Together, Raye, working together we can take care of a home.”

“Oh, Sean, I didn’t...”

He held up his hand. “Not another word. We can check out the house tomorrow when it’s daylight, after I get off duty.”

He pulled out of the driveway and headed out of the housing community and back to the open road. When he parked, she knew exactly where they were. It was the spot where he broke her heart on the hood on a humvee.

He cleared his throat. “Two years ago, I was an idiot. I broke your heart in the worse possible way. In these past weeks I thought I was proving to you that as a man I wanted to be held accountable for the hurt I inflicted. But it is so much more than that that. I wanted to show you old wounds can heal and make our future better. I guess I wasn’t too good at it because you doubted me at the first sign of trouble instead of listening to me. I changed my MOS. I’m not an active ranger unless we get called up to go overseas. After three tours over there, I don’t see that happening. Instead I’m now a trainer. I’ll be teaching the new guys how to be safe and strong and how to survive. I’ll be home every night unless there’s field training, and then you’ll know before hand.”

He went into his pocket and pulled out a ring box. He opened it to reveal a sparkling diamond set in white gold. "Marry me, Raye, and I promise that I will be the best husband to you and best father to Belle and any future children we may have. But you have to let the past go and let me show you I never stopped loving you then, and I never will in the future."

Belle was doing her gibberish talk in the backseat as if she was saying, "Mommy, you're wrong this time." Raye looked at the ring then looked at him. She knew she was wrong. From the time that phone call came in, she'd jumped to conclusions. Now it was time for her to make it up to him because he was a good man and an honorable man. Fear made her too blind to see it but not any more.

She cupped his face in her hands. "You better not apologize to me ever again for this or the past. I was the one who did you wrong in this. I should have trusted my heart and you more. Sean, I'm sorry, and yes we can take care of the house and the kids, and I'll make you boxed meals for when you're in the field, and if you have to ship out, we'll be waiting for you at home. I love you. We'll always love you for the rest of your life."

He swallowed and nodded. His voice came out husky, "That's all I ever want or need."

He pulled her in close for a kiss. Even though it was less than a full day, she realized how much she missed his kisses, his arms holding her, and she never wanted to feel like that again.

"There is one more present, but we have to go outside," he murmured against her lips. "Come on and see."

She nodded happily and opened the door to step from the car. Sean took a two way radio from the dashboard and left the explorer as well. He went to the passenger door behind him to take Belle from her safety seat. He held the baby in his arms and went around standing with her in the front of the vehicle.

He pressed the button on the radio, and she heard the crackle. "Ok, guys, do your thing."

“Roger that, Sarg,” Came the response, and he put the radio on the hood of the Explorer.

She heard the first whistle and gasped when she saw the trail of red head up into the sky and explode into a burst of red and silver. More fireworks followed, and disintegrated into the sky. Red, white, blues, and pinks, hearts, stars, and fire burst that seemed to stay suspended in the night sky forever. She looked at Belle who clapped her hands and pointed. She grinned showing her five teeth in the front. Raye never saw a cuter sight than her daughter with her daddy, enjoying fireworks that were totally out of season.

“I figure I owed you a night sky filled with stars for the one I messed up long ago. She was created on a night like this. We should start out life together the very same way.” Sean grinned at her. “What’s better than a Valentine’s night mixed with the fourth of July?”

“You marvelous, crazy, and handsome man, I love you for this and so much more!” She spread her arms wide and laughed joyously twirling under the sky filled with color.

Raye rushed over to kiss him soundly, and Sean wrapped his arms around her. They all stood and watched the rest of their star spangled valentine.

The End

About the Author

Dahlia Rose is the best-selling author of contemporary and paranormal romance with a hint of Caribbean spice. She was born and raised on a Caribbean island and now currently lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, with her five kids, who she affectionately nicknamed “The Children of the Corn,” and her biggest supporter and longtime love. She has a love of erotica, dark fantasy, sci-fi, and the things that go bump in the night. Books and writing are her biggest passions, and she hopes to open your imagination to the unknown between the pages of her books.

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