



Club Botlicelli

Enticing

Emma

Allie Standifer

Enticing Emma
by Allie Standifer

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A Total-E-Bound Publication

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Enticing Emma

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

Enticing Emma
by Allie Standifer

Club Botticelli

ENTICING EMMA

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Allie Standifer

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Dedication

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To Tammie:

For always understanding, being there and making me laugh
when I never thought I could.

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Chapter One

* * * *

Fake silver snowflakes dangled over her head as Emma Flintock weaved her way through Club Botticelli's dancing patrons. Low, sultry music pumped through the high tech speakers while soft lighting added an overall erotic effect to warehouse-sized room. Her black silk top and matching tights looked so out of place among the wildly dressed dancers.

At least here at Club B she wouldn't be mocked for not-so-slim hip size. After all, her good friend, Olivia Paisley, had started the club to cater to men and women outside the size-two categories. In spite of all the naysayers, the club turned into the city's hottest night spot. But that didn't mean she wouldn't have a talk with Livia about all the damn silver and purple decorations.

She hated this time of year. Hated being reminded of the fact she was alone and probably would be for the rest of her life. Winter Solstice, like every other major holiday her friends celebrated, only stabbed home her empty bed and brought back memories of the only man to ever break her heart. Before thoughts of Brock could drag her down, Emma shook her head and focused on something besides the wildly dancing club goers and the holiday decorations mocking her everywhere she looked.

Across the room, a swirl of sunshine blonde hair caught her attention. Oh yeah, she mentally reminded herself, *that's*

what she had to be grateful for. Loyal friends beyond her wildest dreams. The blonde hair belonged to Briley Evans, owner of Real People Travel, a travel agency that catered to people above size-two persuasion. Her outspoken friend gestured to the group surrounding her, waving her arms with abandon to emphasis whatever point she wanted to make.

The circle of people laughed, and Emma felt her heart expand with love. So what if she didn't have a man in her life? Good friends were worth more than ten men combined. And they stuck around longer. And, if you were really lucky...wore the same shoe size.

"Emma!" Reece, the first to spot her, cried out in pleasure. "About time you drug yourself out of your book. I had the National Guard on speed dial in case we needed heavy lifting to dig you out."

Everyone laughed, including Emma who, as a best-selling romance author, was known to lose track of time and reality two weeks before deadline. Feeling a flush of embarrassment creep of her cheeks, she tucked a wayward strand of curly hair behind her ear. "The book is safely in the hands of my editor. I'm all yours now."

"Or until the next plot hits you." Briley smirked before taking a large sip of the amber liqueur swirling in her glass.

"The life of a writer."

"We're glad you made it, Em," Olivia Paisley broke in. "And I, for one, can't wait to get my hands on your latest book. It's Stone's story, right. River's mysterious yet haunted brother?"

Amazed, as always, that someone like Olivia actually bought, read and enjoyed her work, Emma nodded. "Yeah, he seemed to be a fan favourite."

"Well, he certainly was a favourite of mine." The former supermodel winked.

It warmed Emma's heart to see her friend so content after years of doubting her sexual appeal. A cheating fiancé had that effect on any woman, even glamorous curvy models with looks to die for.

Two strong muscular arms pulled Olivia against a wide masculine chest. "Too bad you've only got room in your life for one favourite now," Ethan Newton proclaimed before leaning down to place a loving kiss on Olivia's upturned mouth.

"The sacrifices I make to keep my man happy."

But anyone looking at the couple saw they were head over heels in love with each other. Though jealousy nipped at her, Emma truly felt happy for them. They deserved their happily ever after the troubles they'd been through to be together.

Recee snorted in disgust. "Any more of this lovey-dovey crap and I'm going to lose my dinner. I'm surrounded by romance, sappy music and people in love. Ugh, the only thing worse than the holidays is Valentine's Day."

At five-foot-ten with curly brown hair and unusual navy blue eyes, Reccee could have had any man she wanted, but the plus-sized jewellery designer never dated and never explained her reasons why.

"Sing it, Sister Recce," Emma agreed then realised she should have kept her mouth shut when five pairs of curious eyes swung her way. "What?"

"Em, you write romance novels. They are nothing but happily ever after. How could you not love Valentine's Day?" Olivia asked, confusion wrinkling her pretty brow while her eyes narrowed.

Immediately, a pair of sky blue eyes came to mind. Yeah, she wrote love stories for a living, but it didn't mean she believed in one for her own life. Reality had already killed that dream. But she didn't want her friends to know of the man who'd broken her heart so many years ago. The pain had diminished, but the shame of not being enough lived on.

Since the truth would only lead to more questions and embarrassment, Emma touted out the party line of singles throughout the world. "It's a holiday made up by greeting card companies to sucker men into spending money and women into demanding they spend it. All in an effort to prove their love, which is what the other three hundred and sixty-four days of the year are for. I'd much rather receive tulips on an ordinary Wednesday because a man was thinking of me."

"You tell 'em, sister." Recce lifted her hand up to high-five Emma. "Besides, we're smart ladies, we work for a living, and if we want flowers or candy, we can damn well go buy it ourselves."

"Oh thank God," Ethan muttered before pulling away from Olivia. "I see my brother just walked in. I'm going over to talk manly things so I don't get kicked out the testosterone club. Or my balls just might shrivel up and fall off in protest."

With a quick but passionate kiss for Olivia, Ethan left their group and almost ran to where his brother stood across the club.

"He's a work in progress," Olivia admitted with a secret smile on her face.

"Oh, I'll bet he is." Briley smirked good-naturedly and flipped her hair over her shoulder.

"Where's Trinity?" Emma asked, noticing their fifth member missing for the first time.

"She called and said something about running late. She's having problems with the security for her next show. If she's not here by the time we leave for dinner, then she'll join us at the restaurant." Reece looked annoyed by the delay, but lately, everything annoyed the jewellery designer.

"Enough about Trinity," Emma broke in before Reece's mood could deteriorate further. "Tell us all about Ethan's plan for your first Valentine's Day," she demanded of Olivia. Though the big lovers' holiday loomed in the distance, she knew her friend would have already made big plans.

The other woman laughed before taking a sip of her bottled water. "You just said what a joke the holiday was. Why would you care what Ethan and I do?"

Emma rolled her eyes. "Just because I think it's the lamest day of the year does not mean I don't want my friend, who happens to be in love with a great man, to be wined and dined with the best of them."

"Don't try to understand the girl, Livia," Briley said, leaning back against the bar. "She's a writer and she's got her own separate reality."

Feeling as mature as a two-year old, Emma stuck her tongue out. "Lot you know. My reality is filled with buff naked men falling over themselves to grant my every whim. I'm their sex goddess and they worship at my feet."

"I think I want in on that." A familiar husky voice came from behind her. "Show me where to sign up."

Emma whirled around, feeling her ankle length cotton skirt swirl around her legs as she faced the man who'd haunted her dreams for the past six years. "You," she whispered, unable to believe her own eyes.

No matter how much she blinked, his image remained. All six feet of him with the same summer blue eyes she remembered. His cheekbones stood out in stark relief against his tanned skin while small lines fanned out from the corner of his eyes. But new details competed for her attention. His blond hair had been cut brutally short, a scar bisected his lips, and his build, no longer lanky, had filled out with muscle.

"Brock Cage," she said. How could he be standing there in front of her? After all these years and all the miles she'd put between them?

"Hello, Emma." His lips curved in that familiar half smile that used to make her heart race. "Miss me, baby?"

Then he leant down, pulled her into his arms and took possession of her mouth, as if nothing had changed between them. Like he'd never broken her heart and left her standing alone on their wedding day.

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Chapter Two

* * * *

Home.

The word screamed from his soul the minute Brock pulled a shocked Emma into his arms. After the nightmare of the past six years, touching this woman made him feel clean again.

Amazingly enough, she tasted the same—like sunshine and as sweet as rainbows. Guiltlessly, he used her gasp of shock to slide his tongue between her lips and plunder her mouth the way he'd dreamt every fucking night.

Part of him couldn't accept that Emma, his Emma, was back in his arms. It felt too much like a fantasy to be real, but when her small fists started pounding on his back, Brock knew he was finally back where he belonged.

With regret, he lifted his head to stare at the only woman he'd ever loved. With too many emotions running through him, Brock fell back on humour to cover the depth of his need. "You don't call or write, Em. I might start thinking you don't care anymore."

"Get your hands off her," an irate female voice cut through their cocoon of solitude, "if you want to walk out of here with the same parts you walked in with." A tall, lushly stacked woman with masses of curly brown hair and dangerously narrowed dark blue eyes glared daggers at him.

"And don't think she's kidding, either." Another woman spoke up from behind the bristling Amazon. "I've seen her with knives."

A gorgeous blonde goddess with deep green moved easily in front of the two bloodthirsty females. "Why don't you let our friend go before I have to call M over here to change your mind? He's my head of security and very fond of our Emma. After that, I'll let Recee loose on you." While her voice remained soft, the hardness beneath spoke volumes. These three women wanted to protect Emma from him. While he appreciated and respected their determination, no would get between him and the woman he loved ever again.

He flashed his most charming smile, the one that usually worked on females all over the world. "Ladies, the last thing I want to do is hurt Emma. I came here to talk, but couldn't resist her." He gave a small shrug as if saying *who can blame me?* But all the while, his arms remained tightly clasped around Emma's rigid body.

The one the goddess had called Recee bared her straight white teeth at him. "One more chance, hot shot, before we permanently remove your future donations to the gene pool."

His balls shrivelled up under that stark look of menace. "I don't want any trouble—" Brock started to say before the neatly dressed blonde interrupted.

"Then you shouldn't have grabbed Emma like that."

Damn it, how had this gotten so clusterfucked so quickly? He'd only meant to pop in, look Emma over and leave. But one glance at her wicked curves and generous breasts and his

brain had headed south. "I love Emma. I'd never do anything to hurt her. She's my fiancée."

In a flurry of angry movements, Emma clawed at his chest, squirming and twisting against his already aroused body, even his cowardly balls un-tucked themselves with the feel of her sweet flesh rubbing against him.

"No." she screamed, fighting against him. "I'm not yours. I'll never be yours again."

Ignoring the hot stabbing pain in his chest from her words, Brock concentrated on stilling her movements. "Hush, baby, and settle down before you bruise that soft skin."

Hazel blue eyes gazed at him with blind anger. "Let me go or so help me, I'll sic Reece on you."

"Damn straight, Em." The evil smile on the other woman's face had his balls twitching again. "Say the word and his future progeny with cease to exist."

"Woman, what is it with you and my balls? Did you lose yours? Trying to find a big enough pair for a replacement?" Stupid thing to say, but a man could only take so much.

"Like your set would be big enough to cover my pinkie toe," she retorted.

"Honey, everything all right here?"

The speaker—a tall man with tawny hair and intelligent brown eyes—walked up, quickly followed by a younger version of himself except with shaggy blond hair. Both men carried themselves with an air of confidence and control. Brock could handle a fight between them, but he didn't want to start off spilling the blood of Emma's friends.

The goddess walked over to the tawny-haired man who wrapped a possessive arm around her waist. "This guy," she pointed one long finger in Brock's direction, "seems to know our Emma."

"Really?" The guy arched a brow. "Too bad for him Emma doesn't look to return the affection."

"We can take care of this, Olivia," the younger brother piped in, the eager light of battle flaring in his dark eyes.

"Noah, stop." Olivia put her hand on the younger man's arm. "Ethan, get that look off your face right now or I'm calling M."

Threatened with the mysterious M, both men throttled back.

"But he's got Emma." Noah crossed his arms and glared at Brock. "And it doesn't look like Em wants to be there."

"Five minutes, Livia, that's all I need," The bloodthirsty brunette added then twirled a blade between her fingers.

In a move he made sure none of them could notice, Brock signalled to his own friends to watch his six, but keep their distance unless needed.

"Damn, you people are violent," he muttered, wondering if he could bring himself to hit a woman, even one who repeatedly threatened his ability to father children.

"Stop it, all of you." Emma squirmed from his hold and stepped back, keeping everyone in her sight. "There's going to be no bloodshed over Brock. He's not worth it."

As one, the three women moved to encircle her, using their own bodies to hide Emma from his view.

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Frustrated and angry, Brock ran a hand through his short crop of hair. "Look, I don't want any trouble. I just want to talk with Emma. We won't even leave the room."

"Damn right you won't."

His gaze met the knife-wielding loon's. "Do you ever get tired of threatening people?"

She shrugged. "Everyone's got to have a hobby."

"And knitting is too complicated for you?"

A muffled snort of laughter came from the Noah. "He's got you there, Recce."

"Care to be my next special project, Noah?" she asked in a dangerously sweet tone, then with a flick of her wrist, the knife disappeared.

Damn, this was one scary ass female.

In a smart move, Noah backed away, hands defensibly held out. "Nope, I like everything exactly where it is on my body."

"Enough," Emma cried out from the middle of her protective circle.

Brock watched her push through all that lovely feminine flesh surrounding her.

"Emma, are you sure?" Olivia asked, concern darkening her eyes. "M can throw him out of here. You never have to see him again."

Brock spoke up, not willing to be cut out of the conversation. "Emma, I came here to talk to you. There are things you deserve to know."

She glared at him. "You lost all your rights six years ago, Brockston Cage. Anything you couldn't tell me then I sure as

hell don't want to know now." She straightened her spine.
"Now get out before Olivia is forced to throw you out."

After living through hell and crawling in the blood of his friends, Brock had no intention of leaving. He hadn't survived gun fights, bombs, IEDs and knife attacks only to be dismissed by the one woman who'd kept him alive though it all. "Not going to happen, Em. I'm here to stay. The sooner you get used to it the easier it will be on everyone."

* * * *

I'm here to stay.

Brock's words echoed through Emma's head two hours later as she sat on Olivia's couch, trying to get her still racing heart under control.

"Trinity, how could you bring that man into the club?" Olivia demanded while she rubbed Emma's back in a soothing motion. "And walk away before even telling us what was going on."

Trinity shook her short cap of black hair. "I didn't know he'd lock on to her like a heat-seeking missile. I heard him asking about her at the door. I brought him over where we could keep an eye on him. I went to get M in case we needed his help.

"A little warning next time, Trin," Olivia scolded.

"Emma, honey, you might need to let us in on the big Brock secret in case he shows back up," Briley stated from her position on the wide leather chaise longue.

"There's nothing to tell," she denied even while heat flamed her cheeks. How could he still taste the same after all

these years? And how could her traitorous body still burn for the hard feel of him?

"Emmy, from where I stood, the two of you sparked enough energy to light up the city for a month," Recee said, a knowing smirk curving her lips.

"Get your eyesight checked," she advised, not willing to admit the same spark of desire still existed between them.

"So I *imagined* the serious tongue action between the two of you?"

"Recee, lay off me, or so help me, I'll turn you into my next character."

While most people would be thrilled to be the muse behind a writer's talent, Recee backed away. "Fine, but I'm just saying..." The other woman pouted as she leaned against the wall.

"We all know there's something between the two of you. We're just saying it might help us understand if you explain your history," Olivia explained in her gentle tone.

"He did say you're engaged to be married," Trinity chimed in cheerfully while she snagged popcorn from the air with her mouth. "Though the rat bastard didn't mention that when I let him in."

"*Were* engaged," Emma said emphatically. "As in past tense."

"Sounds like this Brock person isn't thinking in the past tense. He sounds more like a present or future kind of guy to me." Briley gave her a knowing look, and Emma felt the weight of everyone's curiosity.

"There's nothing glamorous or tragic about our relationship. We met, fell in love—or at least I did—he left for his first tour, came back and broke off our engagement three weeks before the wedding."

"Your leaving a lot of the details out of the story, little girl," Reece pointed out in a matter-of-fact tone. "If it had been that cut and dried, you wouldn't be up here hiding away from that mighty nibble-worthy man."

Feeling caged in, Emma stood. "Why do the details matter? It's over; we're over. Just because Brock got some wild hair up his ass six years later means nothing. I won't allow it to mean anything."

"Because if you did, then you'd leave yourself vulnerable to that pain all over again." Having gone through a painful breakup pre-Ethan, Olivia best understood Emma's pain and wariness.

"Yes," she agreed softly, "something like that."

"But, Emma, if you don't allow yourself to feel pain, you'll never feel happiness. The good always comes with the bad. It's what makes us appreciate happiness so much more."

Emma was shaking her head before Olivia had finished speaking. "I'm not that strong, Olivia. I can't risk loving him again. It nearly killed me when he walked away the first time."

"How did it happen? Like with Scott? You caught him cheating?"

Not even aware of what she was saying, Emma opened her mouth and let the dark secrets haunting her heart spill into the light of day.

"Six years ago, I went home for the summer. My hometown is pretty small and there's not much to do there. I generally spent my time swimming or at the library. One day, I went in and found this good-looking guy sitting in what I considered my chair. I asked him to move, he offered to let me sit in his lap." She chuckled softly. "Then I tried to wait him out, but Brock was way more stubborn than I was. Finally fed up, I gathered my things, told him he could keep the damn chair and left. Five minutes later, he was outside following me, apologising. He'd deliberately sat in that chair knowing it was the one I always claimed. Said he'd been looking for a way to meet me without coming off like a stalker. I laughed, he laughed and we were inseparable until the day I left for my junior year."

Emma stopped for a breath, tears trailing down her cheeks.

"Even being two hours away, we still found ways to be together. Brock took as many as three jobs during the week so he would have the money to see me on the weekends. When I came home for Christmas, he asked me to marry him. I said yes and started planning our big June wedding. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to me, Brock had signed up with the National Guard to earn extra money for our honeymoon. The last thing he expected was for his unit to be called up and sent into a war zone, but it happened. I cried for a week straight after he left. I sent letters and packages almost daily. He'd send me e-mails, telling me he loved and missed me and we'd be together soon. Then the letters started coming further and further apart until one day he stopped writing."

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Emma paced the elegant floor, wringing her hands as she relived those horrible days in her memory. "I thought he'd died. I walked over to his parents' house to wait for the bad news with them, but his mother said he'd e-mailed her just that morning. Confused, I went home and prayed for his safe return. Three months later, my prayers were answered, sort of.

"Brock did come home, but not as the same man he'd left. He'd grown hard, cynical, and nothing I said or did could break through the shell he'd wrapped himself in. Three weeks before the wedding, he showed up at my window saying we had to talk. I met him in the backyard just as the sun started to rise. In the calmest tone I'd ever heard, Brock told me he couldn't marry me. He was very sorry if this caused me any pain. I begged and pleaded with him to tell me what changed, but he kept saying he couldn't marry me. Fool that I was, I refused to believe him. I told him we'd talk later and sort everything out. Instead, his mother handed me a note and told me Brock had reenlisted and was already on his way back to his unit."

Emma gave a small sniff and wiped the moisture from her face. "That's the last time I saw him...until tonight."

"Oh Emma." Olivia was there with her comforting embrace, rocking her gently and murmuring nonsense words designed to ease her pain. "I'm so sorry. I wish I'd let Reece at him now."

"Hindsight and all that, doll," Reece muttered, looking angry all over again.

"He'll be back, or at least he said he would be. We can let her have a go at Brock then," Trinity offered with a small smile and a handful of tissues.

"And what if Brock is actually sincere?" Briley said, startling the group with the sheer belief in her voice. "What if he understands the mistake he'd made and is looking for a way to make it up to Emma? Do we kick him while he'd down?" She lifted her perfectly waxed eyebrows at them. "I, for one, will allow him his chance. The man served our country and deserves our respect for that if nothing else."

"But, Briley, he broke Emma's heart," Olivia protested as her arms tightened protectively. "Surely you can't mean to let him do it again."

Standing straight, Bri met each woman's gaze. "And who's to say he'll be the one to break her heart. From what I saw downstairs, the man has it bad. And," she said, walking closer, "don't forget he did say he needed to explain some things to you. What if those things include his behaviour six years ago? Are you so scared that you'd miss out on finding the answer to all your questions? Or are you brave enough to finally stop running and face the demons from your past?"

Briley's light brown eyes raked scathingly over the small group. "Contrary to popular opinion, I haven't made a pact with the devil, but I do recognise someone who's been to hell and back, in the literal sense. And your man has, Em. Cut him some slack, listen to what he has to say. If you don't like it, leave, but at least you won't keep wondering for the rest of your life."

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She shrugged on her coat, dug into her pocket and waved one of the club's napkins in the air. "It's his contact information. Use it or don't, but at least this Brock will know he had the guts to face you and try to make things right. Will you be able to say the same, Emma?"

The words echoed in Emma's head and heart as her friend slammed out of the apartment. Maybe Briley had a point, but what about Emma's feelings and fears? How could she trust Brock not to destroy her world all over again?

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Chapter Three

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"I fucked up big time," Brock said over his glass of single malt whisky.

"What, you thought she'd take one look at your ugly mug and swoon in your arms?" Garen 'Flash' Swifthorse asked, not sounding sympathetic.

"Shit, man, I don't know what I thought. For years, I've been planning how this op would go down. Then one look at Emma and *bam*, all my plans go down the drain." More than anything, Brock wanted to go back in time and fix the mess he'd made. But wishing wouldn't change fact, and the fact was Emma hated him. Not that he could blame her, not after the way he'd ended things between them, but damn it, he didn't want her hate. He wanted her love. He always had.

"So what's plan B?"

Brock lifted his head to stare at his best friend. Though he'd never understand it, women were drawn to his friend like bees to honey. Must be something to do with his Native American father's side of the family. His buddy had the stoic routine down pat. With his black hair, black eyes, bronzed skin and prominent cheekbones, Garen couldn't deny his heritage. A heritage he used guiltlessly to seduce woman with astonishing success.

"There is no plan B, yet." In order to have a second plan, Brock needed to think. In order to think, he needed to stop

the pathetic pain shooting through his chest with every thought of Emma.

"Let me get this straight. All you want to do is talk to the chick, tell her why you freaked and ran six years ago. You're not going to do anything that will allow her to press charges or start our business off on the wrong foot?" A snort of disbelief came from Garen before he slapped Brock on the back of his head.

"What?" His head jerked hard from the ridiculous question as much as the slap. "I'd never hurt any woman, much less Emma. And so long as we keep the fat cats happy and smug in their little secular world, they won't care what we do."

Garen nodded. "This has got to be the easiest rotation we've ever pulled. Legally breaking into top-notch facilities and getting paid big bucks to do it. Oh, how I love stupid people with lots of money."

Brock agreed. After finishing his last tour and knowing he wouldn't make it out of another one alive or sane, he'd retired and started wondering about his future. A picture in his memory of Emma's bright, laughing eyes convinced Brock he wouldn't have a future without the woman he'd never stopped loving

"Kidnap her." Garen said suddenly.

"What?"

"Snatch her when she's away from her friends, take her someplace she can't get away from you. Then you can take your time explaining *everything*." The stress Garen placed on the last word added a fresh layer to the mountain of guilt Brock carried.

"You want me to kidnap Emma?" As ridiculous and asinine as Garen's plan sounded, part of Brock's brain sat up and listened.

"Look, man, we both know you'd never hurt her. Somewhere deep down, I think she knows it too. Women are like that, they know shit without anyone saying a word. Tell her you just need the chance to explain and tell her how sorry you are for the way things turned out. If it doesn't work, then she'll walk away, but at least you'll have given it your best shot. And if it does," Garen's black brows rose and fell in a mocking parody, "come up for air at least once to let me know you're still alive and kicking."

It will never work, Brock's brain told him.

But what if it does? his stupid heart taunted. What if he could get Emma alone long enough to explain then beg, on his knees if necessary, to give him another chance?

At this point what else did he have to lose?

"Explain to me how we'd go about kidnapping the woman I love and not getting our asses thrown in jail?"

Garen clapped him on the back and laughed. "So happy you asked, my brother. It just so happens I have a plan."

He reached beneath his chair and pulled out a thick stack of papers.

"Just so happens, huh?"

Garen gave a careless shrug. "Had to do something to keep myself busy while you were busy getting taken down by a bunch of helpless females."

The thought of any of Emma's Valkyrie friends being considered helpless with their knives and balls-to-the-wall

nerve amused the hell out of him. Laughing, he reached down to clear off the old wooden coffee table. "I'll remember that if you ever run into one of them in a dark alley."

Spreading the blueprints and handwritten notes on the scared surface, Garen just grinned. "Just let me at them, my brother, I'll have them under me and purring before they know what's happening."

Feeling optimistic for the first time since kissing Emma, Brock laughed and punched his friend in the shoulder. "You keep thinking that, buddy. I promise to claim whatever remains are left after they get done with you."

* * * *

"Really, I'm fine. I just want to take a hot shower then climb into bed and sleep for a week," Emma assured her well-meaning, but overprotective friends. After promising to call should she need anything at anytime, Emma finally ended the call and powered off her phone.

"I just need twenty-four hours of peace and quiet," she told herself as she stripped down to shower.

Flipping the water on as hot as she could stand it, Emma stepped under the biting spray, moaning when the heat hit her tense muscles. Taking her time, she slowly washed and conditioned her hair, took care of her necessary shaving and scrubbed every inch of wet skin with her favourite strawberry salt scrub.

Twenty minutes later, when she stepped out into her steamy pale green floor mat, Emma's control was back. Not all the way, she knew, but enough to keep her from doing

something stupid, like falling straight into Brock's lying arms and begging him to take her.

"Yeah, and that worked out great the first time you tried that, my girl." The warning, while well meant, wouldn't do a thing for her if Brock showed up. Something in her, a part she hated, always caved when it came to that man. She could be strong, fight off greedy agents, stingy publishers. Hell, throw in a mugger or two and Emma would come out smelling like a rose, but add Brock anywhere into her equation, and she folded like a cheap umbrella.

Years ago, she'd thought taking another lover would break the strange hold Brock had over her, but it hadn't happened. While sex with Mitch had been good—she'd come after all—deep in her heart Emma knew something had been missing. The something that was always there when Brock touched her, that singular feeling that went straight from her pussy to her heart, however weird that sounded.

After ending things with an understanding Mitch, Emma went searching for a new source of personal satisfaction. Stumbling over several discreet websites designed for ladies' pleasure had led to several nervous orders.

When her purchases had come, the toys were everything the site had said and more. They vibrated, rolled, shook, and on her favourite, Big Blue, the synthetic cock crevasses were filled with beads, which moved erotically with every pull of her vaginal muscles.

Her first experience with the thick blue electric erection had almost caused her to pass out, the pleasure had been so intense. But even with the best orgasms in the world, Emma

still felt empty once the pleasure faded away. There were no strong masculine arms to hold her, no scent of sweaty male to fill her senses and no steady heartbeat to lull her into sleep.

"Stop it, Emma. You're being maudlin and childish. No one has it all."

Olivia does, her childish inner voice taunted. She has the relationship, the career and the friends

So, Emma consoled herself as she shut the house down for the night and climbed into her wide soft bed, *two out of three isn't bad.*

And if in a small part of her brain laughed at her foolish notions, Emma ignored it and willed herself sleep.

* * * *

The simple cottage was perfect for his Emma, Brock thought as he scoped the neighbourhood with his night vision goggles. From the simple white paint to the bright blue shutters, the house looked inviting and cosy, a place where people would be welcomed. Even the picture perfect white picket fence fit with the fairy tale air of the cottage.

"Last light out twenty minutes ago." Garen's voice flowed through the earbud in Brock's ear.

"Let's give her another thirty before we infiltrate." Shit, he could not believe what his friend and business partner had talked him into. Breaking and entering his ex-lover's home with the sole intention of kidnapping. It sounded like the plot out of a really bad movie. It ate him up to use the skills Uncle Sam had taught him to defend his country on a small helpless

woman. "But all's fair in love and war, right?" He leaned his elbow on the car door and let out a long sigh.

"Damn straight," Garen agreed from his position in a large oak tree overlooking the back of Emma's house.

"You do realise we're going to hell for this?" Brock asked, barely whispering the words through the lip mike.

"Aw, come on, Cage, don't be such a pansy ass. You love Emma, and from what I saw in Club B tonight, she's still got it bad for you. Our plan simply eliminates loud and sexy obstacles."

"You say it and I still don't believe it." Brock hit the L.E.D. light on his wrist watch. "Ten minutes until show time."

"I got your six."

He'd damn well better have Brock's back since this stupid plan was all Garen's idea. Another sweep through the sensitive glasses assured Brock nothing had changed. Emma's neighbourhood had tucked in for the night and all stood secure.

The sound of the passenger door closing had Brock shifting quickly in his seat. His nine-millimetre out and pointed straight at his intruder's lovely head. His hand was rock steady even as his finger lightly stroked the trigger. It would take less than four pounds of pressure to cause the round to explode from the chamber.

"Hello, Brock, fancy meeting you here." Emma's scary, neatly dressed blonde friend smiled, despite having a loaded weapon aimed at her.

Brock let out a deep breath. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he demanded, keeping his voice low, but

knowing Garen would pick up on their conversation. Damn it, did all Emma's friends have some super freaky super powers? How the hell had she snuck up on him? No one ever got through his guard and what about Garen? His buddy should have been covering his six, but not a word of warning had come through the earbud.

"I figured you'd try this step next, being a military he-man and all." She lifted her shoulders in a small shrug. "And since I'm the only one of Emma's friends on your side, I knew you'd need my help." She stuck her hand out. "I'm Briley Evans, by the way." He opened his mouth, but she cut him off. "Yeah, yeah, I know who you are." She waved a hand to dismiss his words.

A naturally suspicious man given his line of work, Brock tried and failed to calculate Briley's angle. "What's in it for you?"

A small secret smile tilted her lovely lips. "A very good friend, and one of the last genuinely nice people on this planet, gets her happily ever after."

"How did you know I'd be here?"

"I saw the way you looked at her tonight. I knew you weren't about to give up, no matter what lame excuses Emma threw at you."

Impressed in spite of himself, Brock nodded. "So you, what...followed me?"

"Don't flatter yourself, he-man. I merely waited for you to show up where Emma was. It's not rocket science."

True, their plan hadn't taken a lot of thought, but Brock at least like to think of himself as original. "And you intend to help me win Emma over?"

"Maybe, I haven't made up my mind completely about you yet." She tapped her index finger against her bottom lip. "Tell me something, he-man. If Emma walked up to you right this minute and said she loved you, what would you do?"

"Get down on my knees and thank God." The response came out without thought, but he didn't need to think it over to recognise the truth. "She's everything to me, and if she ever gives me the chance, I'll spend the rest of my life to making it up to her."

He didn't know what word or phrase he used reached her, but something he'd said set Briley Evans in motion. "Time to saddle up. Tell Tonto to get out of Emma's tree before he falls out." Then she slipped from the truck as quietly as she'd slipped in and sauntered her way to the white fence surrounding her friend's house.

His mouth dropped open. No one had ever been able to track Garen Swifthorse when the other man entered the zone. To have a luscious, curvy blonde pick his partner out from over two hundred feet away blew his mind.

"Tell me the hot chick did *not* just make me," Garen demanded, his voice low and angry.

"I'll be damned, but she did," Brock admitted as he let himself out of the SUV and followed Emma's strange friend to the white gate guarding her flower-filled yard. "What's your next bright idea, chief?" he asked, stepping up to her. "Use a

diamond blade to cut through the glass doors, sneak inside and gas her bedroom?"

"You men really do think too much with your toys and not enough with your head." She pulled a small shiny object out of her red coat pocket. It flashed in the light. He let out of sigh of relief as he followed her.

"That's your big break-in plan. Use a key?" With all the planning and all the equipment they'd brought, the use of an ordinary house key had never occurred to them.

"Lacking the theatrics you love, I'm sure, but it's quicker, quieter and less likely to attract the neighbours' attention. Not to mention waking Emma." With ease of practice, Briley slipped the key into Emma's deadbolt and slowly turned the lock.

They both heard the barely audible click before sharing a smile of triumph. Briley stepped through the doorway first with Brock bringing up the rear. She turned in the entrance to face him.

"I'm guessing you have some place to take her?"

He nodded, not wanting to reveal his hiding place in case Briley changed her mind about helping him.

"Fine, don't tell me. I just need three promises from you. If you can't give me those promises, I'll bring the police down on your head and hide Emma so well and so deep you'll be eighty before you even get a clue what continent she's on."

The narrowed eyes, pursed lips and furrowed brow told him without words how serious Briley felt about this. "Ask."

"Number one, you'll tell her you love her, even if she doesn't believe you. Don't ever give up. Number two, she's to

call me within twenty-four hours, then every day after that. I want to hear from her mouth she's where she wants to be. If not, I'll be coming after her and let me warn you now, he-man, I'm not a puff-ball female you can charm your way around."

After everything he'd seen tonight, Brock believed every word from Briley's mouth. "Number three?"

"Marry Emma before you come back."

Since it meshed with the plans he'd already made, it was easy to give the woman his assurances. "I promise," he said, and stuck his hand out.

"I hope you don't make me regret this." She slipped her much softer hand into his. "You concentrate on getting Emma while I grab a bag and some things she'll need. Should I pack for the beach or mountains?"

"Both," he said, then quietly moved down the long hallway

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Chapter Four

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A rough hand sliding over her mouth jerked Emma awake. Fear had her blood pounding as she clawed at the limb holding her partially trapped.

"Ouch, damn it, Emma, that hurt." Brock's angry voice cut through the fear. "Settle down a damn minute and I'll let you go."

She nodded, and with cautious movements, he slowly removed his hand.

Emma smacked the side of his head with all her might. It felt so good she continued to use her fists on him. "You stupid, arrogant...man. You scared me to death."

"Em, if you don't quit hitting me, I'll find some other way to keep you still. And I'm not talking about my hand over your mouth," he warned, leaning closer until his clean scent washed over her.

She froze as his meaning became clear, along with the hard press of his erection heating her thigh. "Fine. Why the hell are you here?"

With her fight-or-flight response fading, another equally dangerous feeling spread through her body. While she silently cursed her wayward hormones, Brock inched his big body deeper into her personal space.

"We need to talk, Em." He nuzzled her ear through the thick curtain of her hair. "There are things I need to say, and

I can't do that here when your friends might stop by any minute."

Arousal flared as each word sent a whisper of heat against her sensitive skin. It took a few precious seconds for his words to sink in her muddled mind.

She jerked against him. "What do you mean you can't talk here?"

He sighed in resignation as he gracefully lifted his weight from the bed. "I'm taking you out of here and going someplace no one can interrupt us."

Shaking with a mixture of desire and fear, Emma looked at the man she'd once promised to spend the rest of her life with. How could she have not seen that layer of steel behind his affable manner?

"And if I don't want to go with you?" she whispered, pulling her flowered sheets closer to her chest.

The sides of his mouth turned down in a slight frown. "I won't hurt you, but you will be leaving this house with me, make no mistake about that."

Summoning up her pathetic store of courage, Emma lifted her chin and straightened her shoulders. "Then you're going to have to hurt me, because I'm not leaving here without a fight."

Brock turned his head and swore softly—some words weren't even in English. He used both hands to grab his short hair and yank. "Please don't do this, Emma. I promise I just want a chance to talk."

Enticing Emma
by Allie Standifer

"Then we can talk here." Where she could get to a phone and call M. If anyone could make Brock see reason, it would be the tall, dark and lethal former marine.

"Oh no. I know you, baby. I'll turn my back for two seconds, and you'll be on the phone calling those friends of yours."

Damn it, how did he know her so well?

"Are you going to promise to come nicely and not try to escape?" he asked, his tone low and urgent.

"Oh sure, I always offer to cooperate with the criminals kidnapping me," she scoffed and scooted closer to the opposite side of the bed. If she could grab her phone from the night table, it would only take one finger to press M's number on her speed dial.

"Whatever you're thinking of, Emma, stop it. You know I won't hurt you and I'll die before I let someone else touch you. What more do you want for me?" Brock's voice came out frustrated and on edge.

Well, too damn bad if things weren't going his way. He'd had his chance six years ago. She didn't owe him anything, not anymore.

"Put yourself in my shoes, Brock. How would you react if I came traipsing back into your life after all this time, trying to start up where we left off?" If threats didn't sway him, maybe good old logic would. She had to try because Emma had a sinking feeling Brock had reached the end of his tether with her.

"I'd at least have the intelligence to give you the opportunity to have your say before throwing you out on your sweet ass."

His words—angry and harsh, but with a deep layer of truth—resonated with her. Could it be that easy? Just go with him, hear what he had to say then get back to her life, such as it was?

"*If*," she made sure to stress the word, "if I go with you, listen to everything you have to say, you'll let me come back home afterwards?"

She watched in fascination as his fist clenched and unclenched. "If, after you've heard everything I need to say, you still want to leave me, then I'll bring you back here myself. I give you my word."

Emma wouldn't get a better promise than that. One thing she'd always admired about her former fiancé was the strength of his promise. "Fine, let me get dressed and I'll go with you."

A flash of relief crossed his face before he buried it under his normal stoic mask. "Oh no, baby, I'm not letting you out of my sight for a second. You might change your mind and call in the troops."

Frustrated, Emma slid out of the bed, not even glancing at her phone. "I'm supposed to take your word, but you won't take mine?"

"I've got more on the line than you, Em. Come with me now. You're dressed perfect for where we're going." Suddenly, his head tilted to the side as if he listened to

something only he could hear. "Great, we're all set. There's a bag packed and waiting for you in the hallway."

In spite her numerous protests and dragging feet, ten minutes later, Emma sat in the front seat of Brock's massive SUV, wearing her oversized t-shirt, a pair of tiger slippers and nothing else.

The humiliation of being treated like a child burned her pride, and she swore before she sent the smiling man beside her packing, she'd find a way to pay him back.

* * * *

Several hours after leaving Avalon, Brock closed the door on his friend's cabin, grateful beyond words for Tag Kayton's no-questions-asked agreement. It felt good to have a friend at his back without worrying about shrapnel taking them out.

He glanced down at the curvy package in his arms and said a quick prayer of thanks. Most men would assume the hard part was over, but Brock knew his woman better than that. She'd fight him tooth and nail for every inch he'd gain. The easiest, quickest, and not to mention most pleasant way to re-establish their bond would be with sex.

Yeah, some people would call him a bastard for even thinking of taking advantage of Emma asleep, but he'd waited six damn years to have this woman in his arms again. Six years of jacking off to memories of her sweet flavour flooding his tongue and the tight grip of her pussy as she milked him hard.

"There are no rules in love and war." He kept his arms around the precious bundle, holding her tightly to his chest.

Enticing Emma
by Allie Standifer

Then he locked the front door, reset Tag's state of the art security and climbed the narrow wooden steps leading to the large master bedroom.

Carefully, Brock set Emma down on the bed, a smile curving his lips when she complained over the loss of his heat. "Be right back, lover." He pressed a soft kiss to her forehead and headed to the bath to clean up before he thoroughly took advantage of the sleeping beauty in his bed.

He didn't worry about her escaping in the small amount of time it took him to shower and shave. The Emma he'd known generally slept like the dead. If, by some slim chance, she did wake, the door alarms would alert him before she could step one tiny foot out of the house.

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Chapter Five

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Delicious pleasure teased her clit as Emma fought through layers of sleep to consciousness. Deep, masculine groans had her eyes popping wide open. Shock at the sight that filled her sleep-blurred vision had her mouth dropping open as well.

Brock lay on his stomach between her naked spread thighs. His head tucked deep into the vee of her legs. Three fingers speared deep inside her wet passage.

"Brock." The pleasure refused to allow her to keep silent.

Desire-darkened blue eyes lifted, scorching her with the depth of his need and desire. "Don't mind me, baby, I just needed a little before bed snack." Then he raised her hips closer to his devilish mouth, put his lips around her sensitive clit and pulled, hard.

Emma thrashed on the sheets, her body beyond her control, every move and cry orchestrated by the man making a feast out of her pussy. The feel of him, his familiar scent mingling with the scent of her desire flooded her mind with memories and needs she'd long forgotten.

"Please, Brock," she pleaded, reaching down to clasp his head in her shaking hands.

"Please what, baby?" His breath teased her heated flesh while her internal muscles clenched down tight on his busy fingers.

"Let me come, please...oh..." Her voice trailed off as he added a fourth finger to the trio already plundering her needy flesh.

"You're so tight, Em. I have to make sure you can take me." His voice came out tense and strained with the same need crashing through her.

"I can," she promised, not caring if her words were true or not. "I need to feel you, all of you inside me."

Sharp teeth scraped across her bundle of nerves and sent Emma's back bowing off the bed. Everything else in her body shut down to focus on the mind-melting pleasure spreading from her vagina to the rest of her body in shock waves. Her hips rose and fell in a desperate attempt to fuck herself harder on the fingers teasing her with light, shallow thrusts. Emma arched up, seeking her release as heat raced through her like a wild forest fire.

Just when she didn't think her body could take anymore stimulation, Brock twisted his fingers and sent her soaring, tossed up amid the stars, exploding in an orgasm that left her breathless and weak.

"Oh baby, that was sweet. I love drinking your come, knowing I'm the one who pushed you over the edge." His tongue swirled around her quivering clit before he removed his fingers from her body's tight hold.

Brock held his wet hand up for her to see. "I could eat you out for hours, if you'd let me." Keeping his gaze on her, he licked her juices from his fingers. "But you could never wait, could you, baby? You were always begging me to fuck you before I'd even make you come twice. You were desperate for

my cock back then." He rose to his knees like the wild predator he was, his hard erection already covered in protection and thrusting away from his flat tanned stomach.

In teasing motions, Brock used one hand to push back the folds of her slit then rubbed his cock over the throbbing bundle of nerves. "Still want me, baby? Still need me inside you, fucking you as hard and deep as I can?"

"Yes," she cried out, wanting his cock to pierce her hard and fast. "Please, fuck me, Brock."

"Anything you want." He pressed a quick kiss to her lips, and positioned his eager head at the sopping entrance to her body. "First time hard and deep, okay, baby? After that, I'll be able to take my time with you. Eat you out some more, maybe play with that sweet, tight anus."

"Now, now, now," she screamed as his words painted an erotic picture too much for her needy body to handle.

"Now, Emma," he agreed, and with one thrust—as deep and hard as he'd promised—buried his full length inside her welcoming depths. "You feel so good. Even better than I remembered," he panted, a muscle flexing in his cheek. "I don't want to move. I want to stay inside you forever."

The draw of pleasure proved too much for even Brock's iron self-control. He took her in the manner of a man close to the edge, using all his considerable strength to bury himself inside her over and over again.

Neither cared for sweet words or gentle caresses. They were lovers long denied the pleasure of each other, dying for their first taste of long-remembered pleasure.

Enticing Emma
by Allie Standifer

Emma lost herself in her body's needs and desires. The feel of Brock's balls slapping against her ass as he took her with desperation only made her more frantic for him. She lifted her legs and locked them around his waist. While she gripped his wide biceps, her short nails scored his skin as she fought to reach her peak.

"Oh, baby, tell me you're close." He clutched her ass in his wide palms. "Love the way you take me. You squeeze me so tight, like you never want to let me go."

Emma loved the exoticness of the act, the blind need in Brock's eyes when he leant down to suck a hard nipple in his mouth. A quick scrape of his teeth had her breath catching.

"Brock!" she screamed as another wave of pleasure crashed through her. He moved from her breasts to her neck, nipping her skin then laving the small pain with his tongue.

She moaned beneath him, revelling in the sensation of his crisp chest hairs scraping against her bare flesh. His nips and licks drove her mad, made her desperate for anything he could give her.

"You liked that, didn't you, baby? You like a little danger when you fuck." She didn't think it possible, but Brock picked up speed and depth until he became her whole world. Until she couldn't remember a time when Brock's cock hadn't been fucking her with brutal pleasure.

He switched to her neglected breast. "Come with me, baby."

Emma tossed her head. "Can't, it's too much." Her body couldn't come another time. It would destroy her, the pleasure breaking her apart into a million pieces.

"Yes, you can and you will," he growled before setting his teeth into the sensitive flesh of her breast while two fingers swept down and pinched her clit hard. "I've waited too long for this, too long for you. Come for me, Emma, let me feel you explode around my dick."

The pain on the edge of such overwhelming pleasure threw Emma into the hardest climax of her life. She heard her voice screaming from a distance, while her arms and legs clasped Brock's still thrusting body tightly against her. Then she felt his yell of completion as her body climbed to the peak once more and shattered into a mindless sea of satisfaction.

Minutes, or hours, later, satisfaction continued to thrum through Emma's body. Delightful little pulses zinged from her clit, making her vaginal muscles clamp down on Brock's half-hard cock.

They lay replete, entwined in each other's arms, their hearts beating frantically while they tried to catch their breaths. A cool breeze teased their heated flesh as Brock smoothly flipped their positions so she rested on the comfort of his hair dampened chest.

Reality tried to worm its way into her brain, but Emma refused to let it in. Right now, with her ear pressed against Brock's pounding heart and her entire body lax and lazy with fulfilment, she never wanted to pull her head out of the sand.

The sex she'd remembered with Brock six years ago had been great, amazing and mind blowing, but nothing like what they'd just shared. The way he touched her, took her over, completed her had sent her soaring higher than she'd ever

dreamt. Making love to Brock now felt more than magical, it felt right.

Brock roused himself enough to brush the tangle of hair away from her face. "Did I hurt you, Em?" The obvious concern in his voice weakened the already frail wall surrounding her heart.

She rubbed her nose against his chest. "No, of course not." Why pretend? Once, he'd known her body better than any man alive and had been able to melt her with just one touch. Looked like he still held that power.

Before Emma could decide how she felt about it, Brock pulled out of her body with a wet, sucking sound. "Just let me get rid of this and grab another one."

Gently, he lifted her away from his sweaty chest then removed the condom before reaching into the nightstand for a fresh package. Helpless, Emma said nothing as she lay naked beside him and watched with heated interest as his already recovering member received its latex protection.

Task completed, Brock pulled her unresisting body back into his arms as he rested against the thick wood headboard. "Emma, why didn't you ever tell me?"

Here it came—everything she didn't want him to know. Everything that shamed and embarrassed her brought out into the open. But denial was still her best-friend. "Tell you what?"

He gently shook her. "Tell me that you like more than vanilla sex, that you need a bite along with a kiss."

Heat flared over her body as shame washed through her. What kind of woman wanted to be hurt by a man in bed?

Enticing Emma
by Allie Standifer

What did that make her besides a freak? "I don't know what you're talking about." She squirmed against him in a desperate attempt at freedom, but Brock used his superior strength to sit her in the cradle of his naked thighs, her back pressed against his hard chest.

"Don't," he whispered softly. "Don't be embarrassed about needing more, baby. There's nothing to be ashamed of if you like a little pain with your pleasure."

Hearing the truth out loud, in his beloved voice, broke her. Before she could stop them, tears were streaming down her face. "I don't know what's wrong me," she wailed, turning her face into the safety of his neck.

"Shhh, baby, I've got you. Just let it all go." Brock moved them until she sat sideways on his lap, his strong arms holding her tightly. He continued to murmur soothing nonsense while she drenched him with her tears.

Finally, the storm played itself out. Brock used part of the sheet to dry her face. "Better now?" he questioned, his beautiful blue eyes dark with worry.

Not knowing what to say, Emma nodded and hid her face in the familiar curve of his neck.

One big hand stroked up and down her naked back in a gesture meant to comfort instead of arouse. "Emma, I need you to listen too. Even if you walk out this door and never see me again, I want you to understand some things. Can you do that for me?"

She nodded slowly, unsure of what to expect.

He remained quiet for some time, gathering his thoughts Emma assumed, until he let out a long breath. "Emma,

there's nothing wrong with you. If you need that little extra bump during sex to send you over... Well, so what?"

"But, Brock, what kind of woman likes to be hurt during her most intimate time with a man?" She pulled back long enough to stare into those beguiling before laying her head against him again. "It's weird and sick. Normal people do not need pain to get them off."

"Oh baby, you're not sick. You just like things a little different." When she didn't respond, he gently tugged her head from his body and pointed to his upper arms and shoulders. "Does that make me a freak or psychotic?"

Lines of red ran from his shoulders all the way to his elbows, some scratches deep enough to draw blood.

"I did that?" she whispered, horrified at her actions. "Brock, I'm so sorry. Let me get something to clean those up."

Before she bolted off the bed, he grabbed her in his arms. "Emma, I'm not sorry. I love it that I can get you so turned on you go wild. And you know something—when I felt your nails sink into me, my cock exploded. That tiny taste of pain rang my bell harder and deeper than anything I've ever felt. Besides a little bit of pinching and biting are hardly considered weird anymore." He sent her a small conspirator's smile. "If that makes us freaks, so be it. We can be freaky together."

Her gaze moved from his arms to his face, and the acceptance she saw there eased the knot around her heart. "You mean that?" As much as she wanted to believe him, societal taboos still held her back. "I mean, you enjoyed it when I scratched you?"

"Baby," he said, tumbling her from his lap and down to the bed. "I fully intend to need first aid on every part of my body before we're though."

She laughed and, for the first time in her life, felt free to explore her own sexuality. Emma pressed kisses all over his smooth cheeks. "Thank you, Brock. That means everything to me."

"Anything for you, Em, anything."

As he looked down at her, something in his eyes changed. Her gut clenched with dread. She didn't want to talk about reality. Didn't want to face her life and the pain she'd kept buried for six years. For now, she lay wrapped in her lover's embrace, free to tempt and tease him.

When his lips parted, she put one finger over them. "Not now, Brock. I don't want to take my head out of the sand just yet. Let's just enjoy this while we can."

By the stern look on his face, Emma could tell he wanted to argue with her. Instead, he heaved out a breath of defeat. "I could never learn to say no to you, Em."

Before she could stop it, her brain flashed back six years before to a time when the only words Brock could tell her started with 'no'. *No, Emma, I can't marry you. No, Emma, I won't tell you why. No, Emma, you wouldn't understand.* And the one that sliced her soul in half—. *No, Emma, don't bother waiting for me.*

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Chapter Six

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Brock knew his words had upset Emma, but she refused to talk to him. Unfortunately, his body went along with her plans eagerly. But, despite the world-exploding passion between them, he needed something else to break through the barriers his lover put up to keep him out.

On the third day in the cabin, while digging for socks in Tag's drawers, he stumbled over what he hoped to be the perfect accessory in unlocking Emma's heart.

He walked back to the bed and stood gazing down at the woman sleeping so innocently. He must look like a complete sap—his heart in his eyes and the scent of desperation wafting off him. But, aside from the short daily phone calls to Briley, they'd been locked in a world of their own where nothing mattered but sating their desire for each other, losing themselves to pleasure while re-learning the other's body, and finding Emma's limits to pain and pleasure.

They'd experimented and found that while light pain flipped her into overdrive every time, anything more than a light slap or firm pinch shut her down.

His back ached with proof of her sexual abandon, but he wouldn't trade a single scratch or drop of blood for time spent with Emma. He felt branded by her marks and would wear them with pride and love for however long they lasted.

Their temporary Eden wouldn't last much longer, no matter how much both of them wished the rest of the world to hell. Every time he opened his mouth to explain the past, Emma generally found an erotic way to distract him. Her last method... Shivers of pleasure raced over his balls at the memory of his beautiful Emma and a bottle of warm honey.

With the sheet lightly draped over her generous curves, Brock wondered how the hell he'd found the strength to walk away from her in the first place. If he had stayed by her side and faced his fears, he would have the right to wake up to her every morning and drag her into bed every night.

And kids, he thought as emotions welled up in his eyes. They would have had at least one or two kids by now. Little girls with their mother's generous heart and beautiful smile.

"It could still happen." Brock forced the words out of his stiff lips. "We can still have all that together."

That future, those already beloved children, rested solely in the petite hands of the woman sleeping innocently before him. With too much at stake, Brock mentally threw down his last card. If this didn't work... He stopped, unable to complete the thought.

Slowly, he eased his weight down on the bed, careful not to wake her until he had everything ready.

Emma woke to the now familiar feeling of Brock's hands running down her naked flesh while his warm lips teased and nipped their way up her spine.

"Morning, baby," he greeted before playfully biting her shoulder then soothing the wound with his talented tongue.

"Mmmmm, is it morning already?" Inside her head, a clock continued to tick, getting louder and louder as the minutes and hours passed. At first, it had been easy to ignore. Being with Brock, exploring their limits together, had been the centre of her world.

But something inside her knew she couldn't keep the world at bay much longer. Sooner or later, Brock would tire of her tricks and games, then where would she be?

That time hadn't come, at least not yet, she reminded herself as desire swept through her body with each skilful touch of her lover.

"The things you do to me," she whispered, trying to turn and face him, but he held her in place.

"Just stay like that for me, please."

As if she had the strength to tell him no? So Emma lay there on her stomach while Brock licked from her toes to her head.

"Baby, do you trust me?" he finally asked over her shoulder.

"Haven't I trusted every suggestion you've made so far?" she teased, carefully skirting the question.

Silence hummed between them before Brock finally spoke. "You are so beautiful."

The compliment completely threw her off.

"I'm glad you think so, but I know better." And she did. Her stomach puffed out, her hips could only politely be described as birthing hips, and her ass fell in line with the rest of her body.

"No, you really don't. I see you and think *goddess*. There's no hardness to you. I can sink into you and feel you soft and giving beneath me. Surrounding me with your scent and heat. Nothing in this world feels better to me than lying in your arms or wrapping you tightly in mine."

Startled by his declaration, Emma tried to joke her way out of the situation. "And beautiful, thin cover models turn you off?"

Brock met her mocking gaze straight on, eyes blazing. "I'm sure there're men who would kill their own mothers for a night in one of their beds. But not me. I don't want a woman I'm afraid I'll break or who has more muscles than me. I want the woman I have in my arms—my sweet, soft, perfect Emma."

"Oh God, Brock," she cried and turned to face him fully. She captured his lips with her own, devouring their special flavour like the last piece of fudge on the planet. He couldn't keep doing this to her. Saying these things, these perfect things with such honesty in his eyes. Didn't he see how badly it would hurt her once he walked away again?

Tongue thrusting, duelling for dominance, Brock swept her hands down behind her back. "My turn to play a game," he whispered, releasing her mouth.

"Okay." Whatever he wanted so long as he didn't stop kissing her.

Brock's mouth dropped down to cover hers. Lost in the taste and feel of him, it took several seconds before she understood. She couldn't move her hands. They were somehow locked securely behind her back.

She lifted her head, panting for breath, to stare at her lover. "Brock?"

Some emotion passed through his eyes, but was gone before she could catch it.

"It's just a game, baby. You know I'd never hurt you, right?"

"Uh, right," she agreed while trying to twist her arms free. "But really, Brock, tying me up?"

Heat flared in gaze. "There's nothing hotter than a woman tied up, hands and feet, open for the pleasure you can't wait to give her."

She swallowed the lump in her throat. "Uh huh."

"I'm asking you to give me this, baby. Give *us* this. Let me use these handcuffs of Tag's in a whole new way." He did something behind her back and suddenly her hands sprang free.

"You'd enjoy that?" She rubbed needlessly at her wrists. As Brock said, he'd never hurt her, even when it came to mock bondage games.

In answer, he took her freed hands and wrapped them around his throbbing erection. "What do you think?"

He was thick and hot in her grasp, and Emma wanted to sink down and take him in her mouth. To sip and lick every drop of pre-come off his shaft as he fucked her mouth in hard strokes.

Something of what she felt must have shone in her eyes because Brock pulled her hands back. "Oh no, Em. I know that look, and as much as I love having you suck me off, not this time. This time, I want to do it my way, please?"

What else could she say when a man offered to pleasure her senseless? "Yes, Brock."

The smile that broke out across his face felt like sunshine in her soul. Something so simple as her trust could make this warrior happy. Right then, she'd have gladly given him anything he asked.

"Lay down, baby, and spread your legs," he instructed and he moved off the bed and dug in one of the dark oak dresser drawers. He walked back to the bed, two sets of police-type cuffs in one hand while the other held a handful of silk neckties.

Feeling shy in her nudity all of a sudden, Emma closed her eyes and let Brock move her body into whatever picture fit his fantasy. Less than five minutes later, her body spread and open, Brock tapped the tip of her nose.

"Open those gorgeous blue eyes for me, baby."

She complied at once, hearing a deeper need in his voice than a simple command.

He smiled. "How can you get more beautiful every time I look at you? I swear sometimes, at night, I lay awake and watch you sleeping to see if I can pinpoint exactly how you get more beautiful, but as soon as I blink, it's done." The poor man looked honestly confused.

"Brock, my looks haven't changed. It's all in your head, silly man."

"No," He shook his head adamantly. "I swear it's true. Maybe it will be easier if I inspect every inch of your body. I can find a trigger or switch or something."

She laughed at his seriousness. "Brock, you've already gone over every inch of my body. I don't think I have a freckle you haven't seen," she protested.

He wagged his brows comically at her. "Yes, but this time, I can be more precise. I'll use my tongue."

And he did.

Brock started at the bottoms of her feet, his tongue leaving trails of needy desire wherever he went. By the time he reached the back of her knees, Emma was past begging.

"Please, Brock... I can't take anymore," she wheezed out. Her hands bound above her head to the bed, she had no control. She was left open and vulnerable to his every whim and desire.

"You can take more," he promised, lowering his head to lick and suckle the tender skin before moving up her thigh with teasing kisses or stinging bites. "I'll make sure you can take more."

"No, please, I need you," she whimpered, pulling uselessly at the cuffs binding her. True to his protective nature, Brock had wrapped the steel cuffs with cotton and silk to prevent chafing her sensitive skin.

"Do you? Do you really need me?" His mouth hovered right above the juncture of her thighs. He leant down and blew a light, teasing breath over her flaming, swollen flesh.

"Yes," she screamed, fighting against the restraints to get to him. "Fuck me, Brock. Please fuck me."

"Oh I will, I promise, but first, there are some things we need to settle." And, just like that, his lips and hands were

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gone, leaving her turned on, confused and slightly chilled from where his body had once shared heat.

"I'm finally going to have my say, and with you tied up, there's nothing to distract me," he told her, sitting in the room's one chair. A stark, straight back chair that had to be uncomfortable.

"But..." she stumbled, at a loss for words.

"It's time I told you everything. Everything from six years ago, about why I walked away and why I came back. Until I do, we're going no further."

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Chapter Seven

* * * *

Emma looked confused and furious. A dangerous combination on any woman, but his Emma had a devious mind to go along with those looks. Braver men than he would already be running for their lives, but Brock had things he needed to say. He couldn't continue to hide from the world, and he refused to allow Emma to do the same.

"Em," he said, leaning forward to prop his hands on his knees, anything to keep from reaching for her. "I had a lot of dreams when I left you that first time. Dreams about making a difference in the world, helping others and defending my country."

"Brock, I know all that. Why do we have to dredge the past up?" She lay there, looking as regal as royalty and as naked as the day she was born.

He forced his mind away from her mouth-watering curves and back to the conversation he wanted—no, *needed*—to have. "Emma, I really need you to listen to me without interrupting. I've never spoken to anyone about some of the things I'm going to tell you. My shrink knows the majority, but mostly surface stuff."

At his words, her beautiful eyes went wide. "Your shrink?"

Refusing to be embarrassed for his need for counselling, Brock nodded, but turned his head away. "Yeah, it took me a while and almost getting lost in the bottle before I went in

and—" He glanced back at her, noting the light of interest in her eyes and the way she'd finally stopped tugging her restraints. "You promise to let me get it all out?"

She didn't say a word, just nodded.

"Okay." He blew out a hard breath, not sure where to start. "Like, I said I went over there with all these dreams of glory, but I was so wrong. A stupid kid with the body of a man and the ego of a child. I hadn't been there a month when I saw my first dead body. I didn't know the guy well, just someone I ate with, but then he was dead. That's it, no do-over. It freaked me out, and it finally hit home that this wasn't some game we were playing where everyone got to go home at night and start over the next day. People die in battle, real people with families and futures...gone. At first..." He groaned, remembering the naive kid he'd been. "Shit, at first, we'd joke about it. Tell each other what to do if we got hit. Then my buddy, Kurt, did get hit. A roadside bomb went off, killing him and everyone else on the convoy he was escorting. He'd told me what to do, if his turn ever came up, but damn it...it was supposed to be a joke."

Tears threatened his vision as he remembered his friend. "It was no joke. I went through his stuff to pack it up and ran across a picture of his girl. She didn't look anything like you, but I kept thinking, this could be Emma. How could I do this to you? Bring my nightmare back and taint you with it? You were the only thing pure and clean in my life by then. I had some R&R saved up and I took it. I took Kurt's stuff to his family, thanks to my CO pulling some strings, and watched their lives fall apart. By the time I left Kurt's parents' house, I

knew what I had to do. I didn't care if you hated me. Hell, I wanted you to hate me, anything to keep from destroying your life. Anything to prevent you from having to get a box of my belongings and a sympathy note from the government. I loved you too much for that, Emma. I thought the best way to protect you was to walk away."

Brock didn't look at her, just kept his gaze locked slightly above her shoulder. Even with the shame of his confession, his body ached to join her, to sink inside her tight wetness and lose himself all over again. If he hadn't insisted on this damn conversation, he'd be over there fucking her right now.

"Damn idiot," he whispered to himself, all the while knowing he couldn't keep the truth to himself. Not if he wanted to have a real chance at winning Emma back.

"You stupid, selfish, idiotic, man-thinking man!" Emma yelled.

Brock flinched at the level of her ire. "Baby, you have every right to be mad—"

"Brockston Cage, don't you fucking dare to tell what I have a right to feel." She swore and pulled on her bindings. "I can't believe I let you get me into this situation. Damn it, I'm such a fool."

He could handle having his pride walked over. He could even, with deep breathing, handle being called a coward, but nothing ever hit Brock so hard or so low as seeing tears fall from Emma's eyes.

"Please, Em, don't cry. Scream, hit me, anything, but crying," he pleaded, crossing the room to kneel on the bed.

"You stupid jerk. I can't hit you. My arms are tied up, as you very well know." Emma managed to sound affronted and amused at the same time.

A smile started to curve his lips. Brock bit down to keep it from appearing, but a smothered snort from the bed caught his attention.

Emma, in all her curvy, naked glory, was doing her best to prevent another gasp of laughter to escape. Those unique hazel blue eyes watered, not with tears of pain, but of suppressed amusement.

"Oh Em, what am I going to do with you?" he whispered, giving into the temptation and running his hands over her silky skin. "I love you so much, baby. I'll do anything to make the past up to you," he vowed, his gaze caught on the full mounds of her breasts. Their dark rosy tips, hard and pinched, begged for the touch of his lips, tongue and teeth.

"Fuck me, Brock. Right now. We'll deal with everything else later. I need you right now." Those sweet, soft hips lifted with her demand while the shiny blond curls covering his personal heaven gleamed with moisture. "You started this and you will damn well finish it."

Calling on years of self-discipline, Brock looked straight into Emma's desire-darkened eyes. "Are you sure, Em? I don't want to take advantage—"

"Fuck advantage, and fuck me, Brock. I'm tied up, wet and helpless. What more do you want...a freaking sign?" She ended her words in a screech which had to call every canine within a fifty-mile radius.

His Em had changed and he loved every nuance of the differences. Before, Emma would never have demanded he take her. Suggested, hinted and teased, but never would she have come out and insisted.

"Yes, ma'am. I live to serve." Then he pounced.

Emma knew there were things she should be doing besides begging Brock to fill her, but nothing came to mind. She licked her dry lips, desperate for the taste of him flooding her mouth.

In one smooth move, Brock's hard form covered her own smaller frame. "I'm giving up, Em. I'll haunt you until we're eighty."

"Fine, so long as you have a steady supply of Viagra, we'll be good," she quipped and rubbed her quivering clit against the rough crispness of his six-pack abs.

"God, you'll kill me, but I can't think of a better way to go. Loving my Em to my dying day." He nibbled at her lips, licked the sensitive flesh with a rough satin tongue that demanded entrance into her mouth. Emma dropped all her barriers and opened herself as she'd never done with another man. True to form, Brock swept inside like the warrior he was and demanded everything she had.

There would never be another man to take her over completely with just one kiss. Desire pulsed hard with each beat of her heart, wetness seeped between her legs, her breasts ached and her nipples throbbed. Desperate for more, she tangled her tongue with his, immersing herself in his flavour.

They were both breathing heavily when Brock lifted his head.

"Oh fuck, baby, that was good." Briefly, he rested his damp forehead against hers. "I don't think you have to worry about me kicking the bucket at eighty, tonight's going to do me in."

"Not until I come and you get me out of these cuffs." Her eyes narrowed in warning.

"Deal," he promised and went back to feast of luscious flesh laid out before him.

She trembled under his gaze, both alarmed and excited, and started to close her eyes.

"No, watch me," he demanded. Closing his fingers around one taut nipple, he pinched lightly and tugged the sensitive flesh. "Feel good."

"Oh yes." She whimpered as desire streaked through her like flashes of lightning heating her body and sending her close to the edge.

He moved his other hand and fondled both breasts. With a low growl, he leant down and replaced one hand with his hot mouth. Emma cried out at the hot wave of pleasure/pain from his sharp teeth.

"More?"

"Yes."

He switched his mouth to her other breast. Emma froze before his lips touched the puckered nipple. She groaned, tried to lift her legs and cursed when they wouldn't move. "Brock."

"Soon, baby. Want you ready for me." he whispered around her nipple.

"Am ready," she panted back, desperate to feel him inside her.

Her not-so-flat belly tensed as his hand slowly trailed down her flesh. She tried to thrust closer to his taunting fingers.

"What do you need, baby?"

"You."

"Where?" His damned finger slid down, brushed her clit, then slipped away.

"Brock!" she wailed.

"I'll give you whatever you ask for, baby."

"I want to fuck your fingers," she cried out, her face burning with need and arousal.

"Your wish is my command." He leant down and kissed her mouth hungrily, shoving his tongue deep, taking her over. When he pulled back, Emma shuddered with need.

He spread her nether lips, damp with her desire. She wanted him there, touching and tasting her. She watched Brock's jaw harden as he slipped one finger into her grasping cunt.

Emma let out a happy moan.

"Want some more?" Sweat beaded his forehead, but Brock's eyes were glued to the action between her legs.

She worked her hips against him, pushing him to give more. He pulled back only to thrust three fingers back in deeper and harder.

Emma bucked and screamed his name. Pleasure rose up to swamp her again. In the distance, she heard Brock swearing

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then his mouth replaced his hands. He took her, desperation lacing every suck and lick. His hot tongue found and teased her clit, then his lips latched onto the swollen flesh and he sucked. She climaxed again with a shock of pleasure that shook her whole body, but Brock didn't stop.

Emma bucked against the pressure as he slipped his fingers into her. Brock cupped her hip, lifting her tighter to his mouth. With each drugging pull and thrust of his fingers, her orgasm crested over and over again. When she didn't think there was anything left to give him, her body wet and replete, Brock set his teeth on her clit and gently bit down.

Emma screamed and thrashed against her bonds as the universe exploded through and in her. Stars soared past in colourful rainbows before she settled back into her weary body.

"Emma?"

"Umm?" The man had to be crazy if he thought she had the lung capacity to speak.

"Everything okay? Your wrists aren't hurting?"

"No." Weakly, she opened her eyes to find his gaze burning over her, her legs still sprawled open, her glistening curls bare to his touch.

"Fast and hard, Em, okay?" His breath came out in pants as if his control was almost a thing of the past.

Lacking the energy to do anything but nod, Emma moved her head as he slid a condom on and moved over her. After gently lowering onto her, he captured her face with his hands. "I love you, Emma."

She blinked at him, stunned by the words and the sincerity she saw. Emma couldn't explain what she felt, the rightness of being with Brock again, the erotic enjoyment of her naked body pressed against his. Despite the years of anger separating them, despite the lies that had kept them apart, Brock felt like her soul mate, the one being in the entire universe meant to complete her. Just being with him made her feel more alive than the past six years without him. He was the spark, the missing piece of her soul. Brock was what she needed in order to make her life complete. His love filled her in a way nothing else could.

And she could do nothing but love him in return. Even if he walked away again, Emma couldn't prevent her heart from leaping into his hands.

When she opened her mouth to spill her heart, he kissed her. "Not now." He breathed gently against her swollen lips. "For now just let me love you."

With tears filling her eyes, Emma nodded, and he released her hands, freeing her to touch him.

Trailing his lips over the soft column of her neck, he pressed his mouth to the hollow of her throat where her pulse beat radically. His tongue danced around it, the tip teasing her sensitive flesh.

With the heat of his body burning into her, Emma wrapped her hands around the thick shaft and caressed him with tight hard strokes. She rubbed her finger over the red, slit, feeling the drop of liquid dotting the broad head. She massaged the fluid into his skin. Brock moaned and squeezed her breast, his fingers pinching her nipple hard.

"Now Brock, please," she cried, unable to believe her body could crave him again so soon.

"Now," he agreed, using one hand to guide himself into her. She shifted her hips, eager for his entry. And in one hard thrust, Brock embedded himself balls deep within her body.

Like a cord had been cut, Emma watched as Brock lost all sense of control. Rough hands spread her thighs farther apart as he continued to ram his cock home, hard thrust after hard thrust. His hands were everywhere, squeezing her nipples, pinching her breasts and occasionally smacking her lightly.

"Harder," Emma demanded, running her hands up and down his muscled back, determined to take all of him. "Fuck me harder, Brock."

What she wanted, he gave. Lifting her hips with his hands, Brock held her lower body in place while he took her, using every bit of his muscle and strength to give Emma what she demanded.

The only sounds in the room were of flesh hitting flesh and the wet, sucking noise of hard sex. Emma lost herself in the demands of her body, in the feel of Brock's cock pounding into her pussy with everything he had. Her release built, winding tighter and tighter until she feared the explosive pleasure would kill her.

"Let go." Brock heaved over her, sweat dripped from his tanned flesh onto her pale skin. "Come for me, Em...now."

Hearing Brock's demand then feeling his fingers squeezing her over-stimulated clit sent her into orbit. She gasped and arched her body, claspings him as her orgasm exploded, raining spasms of erotic twinges throughout her body. Dimly,

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she heard Brock's shout and felt his come heat the condom inside her.

No one could live with this much pleasure, she thought before succumbing to the temptation of oblivion.

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Chapter Eight

* * * *

Brock looked up from the letter he'd written to watch Emma walk down the stairs. She looked sleep rumped and well loved. And he'd give anything for the right to sweep her in his arms and love her all over again.

But first, she needed to read the letter.

"I didn't mean to wake you," he said nervously, wishing he'd been ten minutes faster, but he couldn't begrudge the time. Those precious ten minutes he'd spent memorising Emma's beautiful face with her halo of blonde hair.

Her pretty brow wrinkled in confusion as she took in the scene while she stood wrapped up in their comforter. The old sanded logs of the walls that had been polished to a high gloss, along with the immaculate wood floor, covered in one giant thick throw rug. The furniture was big, dark and plush, perfect for a man's relaxation. A massive fireplace took up part of one wall with a stack of wood stacked nearby, ready to use. Doors in another wall led to bedrooms or a bathroom, and tucked away across from where he sat, lay a dream kitchen.

Cabinets lined a third wall, filled with books, movies and music, and a large flat screen took up the entire space over the fireplace.

When Emma cleared her throat impatiently, Brock knew he'd been wasting time cataloguing the cabin's contents. He

was afraid to hand her the envelope containing his every nightmare and demon. Could she really accept all of him?

"Brock, I asked you what's going on?" Her foot tapped impatiently against the bare wood floor.

He gestured to the envelope on the table. "I left you a note."

Anger flashed in her eyes as Emma stalked the last few steps between them. "You left me a *note*?" The last word ended in a scream.

Unsure how to calm Emma or why she was getting so upset, Brock backed away. "I didn't want you to think I was—"

"Dumping me again after you've had your fun? A few quick fucks and it's time to hit the road? You bastard." Emma dropped the blanket and let her rage and pain take over. She lashed out with her fists and feet, wanting him to feel a small percent of the agony tearing through her. "I hate you," she screamed in his face while the tears she'd tried to hold back burst like a dam from her eyes.

"Em, no, oh...baby, don't cry." Brock tried to console her, draw her into his arms, but she couldn't let him.

Scraping together the last shreds of her dignity, Emma grabbed a napkin to dry her eyes and wipe her nose. She gathered the comforter around her once more before daring to meet his lying eyes. "We are done. No more, Brock. I can't live through this again." Her heart bled with each word she spoke. "You can't drop back into my life, make me love you again then leave me. I'm not that strong."

Shocked confusion marred his expression. "Emma, what the devil are you talking about?"

She ignored the lost tone of his voice and waved her hand to the table then the two of them. "That letter, you're leaving...all of it."

God, please let him leave quickly like last time. Then I can break down and cry until I pass out.

Two strong hands gripped her head in a tight, but gentle hold. "Emma, listen to me." He dropped one hand to cup her chin and forced her to meet his blazing gaze. "I'm not leaving you." Then he shrugged sheepishly. "Well, I am, but only to get coffee and food. I thought you'd sleep through it and I'd bring you breakfast in bed."

Emma's head spun with his words.
"You...weren't...leaving...me...again?"

Crushing her to his flannel covered chest, Brock swore. "Baby, you couldn't get rid of me with C4 and a platoon of Marines. I'm here for as long as you'll have me."

"But what about the note?" she asked, unable to stifle the bubble of hope rising in her chest.

Releasing her, Brock stepped back to run a hand over his head as he turned away. "That's everything else I couldn't tell you. The things that still give me nightmares, my buddies that didn't make it back. All their stories are in there including why they didn't make it back." He rubbed his nose while staring at the innocent white envelope. "There's a lot I couldn't bring myself to say. My shrink said I could write everything down and give you the letter. So that's what I did."

Brock spun around to face her, desperation carving white lines beside his full lips. "Emma, there's some really bad shit on those pages. Things I never wanted to touch you, but I love you too much to keep secrets. I just pray that letter doesn't kill your feelings for me."

Feeling confident for the first time in days, Emma closed the space separating them. With a gentle touch, she clasped Brock's face in her hands. "Brock, I welcome the chance to fight whatever demons are haunting you. I'm proud to stand by your side. Nothing you or anyone else could say will change my feelings for you. I've been in love with you for years, and I'll continue loving you until the day I die."

"So you forgive me for walking out six years ago?" His voice was hoarse as he asked.

Emma shook her head. "I've thought about that and everything else you've told me. Brock, I don't think it's about forgiveness so much as understanding why you did what you did. So yes, I understand your fears back then, and with understanding, comes trust. Who's to say I wouldn't have run for the same reasons?"

"Marry me, Em. Be my wife, stay and love me forever. Make all my dreams come true." Love, trust and the faint hope of happiness shined in Brock's blue eyes.

When her answer came, it flew straight from her heart. "Yes, I'll marry you and love you forever." How could she not? Brock was everything she'd always dreamt of. Her heart pounded with such fierce joy she wondered if it would jump out of her chest.

He pressed a short, but desire-filled kiss to her lips before pulling away to look at her. With suspicious moisture glinting in his eyes, Brock growled low in his throat and swept Emma into his arms, nearly crushing her in his embrace. But she didn't complain. She stroked and patted, whispering of her love.

Finally, Brock eased his grip then buried his face in the softness of her neck. "How did I ever get so lucky?"

"Oh, I don't know how lucky you are, Brock," she answered in a light teasing tone.

Uneasy he looked up. "What do you mean?"

Innocently, Emma twirled a long piece of her hair. "Olivia and Trinity broke Briley. Four of the Fearful Five are on their way up here now."

Emma wanted to laugh as the colour drained from Brock's face and he had to lean on the table to steady himself.

"Here?" His voice was hoarse.

Emma gave up on teasing him, loving him too much to keep the torment up. "Yes, but I'll protect you from their evil ways. Besides, once they hear we're getting married, they'll stop all plots to have you sold to an Amsterdam bordello."

"What?" he yelled just as four fists started knocking on the cabin door. "Baby, if I didn't love you so much, I'd be out the window, hiding in the nearest tree with my balls safely tucked away."

Emma laughed and patted his strong arm. "Don't worry. We have plenty of time to call off the terrorist threat against you."

Brock shook his head and braced his shoulders before shooting her a look of dread. "Bordello? Terrorist? Baby, are you sure these women are playing with all their marbles?"

She patted his arm then scooted around his big body to unlock the door. "Don't worry," Emma repeated. "At least Bri never tried to have you framed for drug smuggling in Beijing."

Emma swung open the door, a wide smile on her face as she saw her friends. "We're getting married."

"Damn it, we had plane reservations for him," Olivia muttered, looking unhappy that her illegal plans had been aborted.

"Well, there's always Noah," Trinity offered helpfully as the women swarmed the cabin, hugging and fussing over Emma and, to his shock, Brock.

When the four arrivals descended on the kitchen, Emma pulled him aside. "You're theirs now. They'll fight dirty to keep you safe too."

Emma gave Brock a few moments to imagine his enemies or even poker buddies ending up in various horrible scenarios all because four very intelligent and evil women considered him one of their own.

He shuddered, as if shivers raced down his spine. "God help me," he prayed then followed Emma into his lair.

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About the Author

* * * *

Allie Standifer has lived in various countries around the world. The gift of travel has her to accurately describe the scent and feel of far off place and feed her overactive imagination.

Her life has been one of constant adventure. From growing up in Saudi Arabia where her brother tried to sell her to Bedouins (for what amounts to less than \$1.50), it's been non-stop. And she loves every minute of it.

Ideas, plots, characters and conversations keep her company from inside her head and fuel her need to right. And now, they don't tell her to start fired. Tired of everyday stories, Allie's tales have a decidedly paranormal twist to the. They're filled with past lives, chain e-mail sending oracles, mythical creatures, magic, sexy gods and heroines who know exactly what they want and aren't afraid to get it.

Any free time is spent spoiling two nieces and two nephews, pumping them up on sugar and caffeine, buying them very loud toys, then sending them back to their parents. The perfect revenge for all the slights of being the youngest child.

When not writing or contributing to the delinquency of minors, Allie enjoys anything to do with the ocean, reading, trying to outsmart her psycho cat and spending time with her wonder and supportive family.

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* * * *

Allie loves to hear from readers. You can find her contact information, website and author biography at www.total-e-bound.com

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