



Loose Id

G.G.
ROYALE

THE
ADORATION
OF ADDANA

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Chapter One

Addana Carmouche ripped another piece of moldy drywall from the wall and threw it onto the pile in the middle of the room. The temperature probably hung somewhere in the midfifties, but the work had her sweating nevertheless. She ran a gloved hand across her forehead. She'd already worked at this for weeks, and she felt like she never got anywhere. Room after room of flood-damaged house. Tears threatened as they did every day, but she fought them down. She wouldn't give in to despair. Too many people did. Too many people took their lives in this city on a regular basis, when the stress of living post-Katrina proved overwhelming for them.

Addana felt stronger than that. She would be stronger than that for her kids. She spared them a fleeting thought. She didn't even know if their school in Houston had closed yet for the winter holiday. *What's the date, anyway?* She said a silent prayer of thanks to the Catholic school that had taken Jarvis and Rodell on scholarship. The school had definitely opened its heart to the boys, and they liked it more than they had liked school here. The fact that they'd have to give up their new friends and talented teachers there when she finished the house pained her a little, but she wanted her boys home as soon as she could manage it.

Home, if she could call it that anymore. She took a step back from the wall and turned a slow circle. She tried to picture the room as it had looked before the flood: the dining room where she'd served Sunday dinners of baked ham and collard greens. Where Travis and the kids had talked about their days, and she'd shared stories from the clinic where she worked. She tried to remember the way the drapes had hung before the water had covered them and left them to rot, and the way the dining room table—completely unsalvageable and already in one of the ad hoc

dumps down the street—had gleamed under the crystal chandelier. She'd loved that chandelier, rehabbed it herself. She'd found it at an architectural salvage lot, had polished and rehung every crystal. Travis hadn't even helped.

Travis didn't live to see the storm; he'd died two years before in an accident at the boatyard. He hadn't had to live through all of this. He'd been a lucky man in life and, in this, a lucky man in death, but a day didn't pass that Addana didn't wish he stood beside her, his big, rough, comforting hand on her shoulder, an extra pair of legs to help with all the work. She sent up a prayer to him too. She knew he—with God by his side—had something to do with the fact that she'd managed to get her family out of town safely before the flood came, and he'd made sure she could rebuild this house with the money he'd left her. She also hoped that he saw fit to send her someone, eventually, who was as strong as he had been. Someone who could stand beside her in the trials still to come.

As Addana tried to envision how her new dining room would look once she'd finished the renovations, she heard the bell of the Red Cross lunch truck outside, faint but insistent in the stillness of the dead neighborhood. She didn't know why they even bothered coming down here. No one else on the block had returned, and her nearest neighbors now lived three blocks over. Still, gratitude swelled her heart for the moment every day that she could have some interaction with another person.

Addana stripped off her gloves, dropped them on the floor, and headed out to the street. On the porch, she stopped for a moment to survey the block and adjust the ponytail she kept her long black braids up in. She didn't want to look too sloppy at the lunch truck. She checked constantly for new signs of life on her street in Holy Cross. She'd yet to see any. The other houses sat empty, blue tarp roofs starting to grow tattered, the weeds in the yards reaching up beyond the level of the windowsills, the reek of decay coming from within. She glanced toward the Mississippi River, and above the line of the levy, a large cargo ship motored past. At

least in that she could see progress, that something normal went on elsewhere in the world.

Addana turned toward the spot the lunch truck stopped and headed for it. She passed by her trailer, parked in the street, where she slept and cooked. Things could be worse. She'd driven out to check on some friends in Mississippi, and they were sleeping on their cement slab—where their house used to sit—in a tent, still waiting for help nearly four months after the storm. But Addana knew someday normalcy would return there too.

She hoped the Washingtons would come out for lunch today. She enjoyed sitting with them, eating, and discussing the progress of their respective houses. That small interaction gave her enough hope—usually—to get her through the rest of her day.

Sure enough, Tim, Erica, and their two teenage boys, Tyler and Evan, stood there at the truck, accepting their hot lunches in white to-go boxes from the Red Cross worker. Addana waited slightly to the side as the volunteers passed out hot coffee. The aroma caused her to sigh. Thankfully, December's temperatures had remained fairly mild, but a bite of cold still lingered in the air, and a hot beverage would definitely help.

Someone had brought some patio furniture to the corner lot where the truck parked, and a piece of plywood served as a message board for any neighborhood news. So far, no one had posted anything, but Addana checked it anyway. She finally stepped up to the truck, took the meal and coffee with a smile, and then went to join the Washingtons at the makeshift picnic site.

"Afternoon, Mrs. Carmouche," Evan said.

"Evenin'," Addana replied and took her seat. She took the lid off her coffee, poured in sugar and powdered creamer, and replaced the lid. She swirled the coffee around and then took a long drink.

"Plans for the holiday?" Erica asked.

Addana took a deep breath. She didn't answer right away. Instead she opened the Styrofoam container and glanced at the contents. Red beans and rice, and it wasn't even Monday. Or was it? She couldn't remember. Still, could be worse. She took her fork out of its small package and dug into the beans and rice. After one mouthful, she said, "It ain't in the cards. Too much to do. Kids are still in Houston with my mama." She made a mental note to send some presents to them. Which would mean finding an open post office. That could prove difficult. "I'll make it up to them next year," she said, more to herself than anyone.

She hated living apart from her kin—aunts, uncles, cousins—but most of all her mama and children. She didn't want to put them through the pain of separation, but the only thing worse to Addana was living anywhere but Holy Cross. This neighborhood had served as a home to her and her family for generations. She couldn't fathom living elsewhere, and she didn't want to. The fact that her kin seemed so eager to leave this place pained her too.

"We're going to try to make it as normal as possible," Tim said.

Addana looked up at him and blinked her eyes. "I'm sorry. What?"

"Christmas. We're going to make it as normal as possible."

Normal would be nice.

"We even upgraded the generator so we can run some lights," Erica said.

Addana took another bite of her food. "Sounds great." Erica and Tim had had flood insurance on their house and enough money as a result to hire outside help and spend here and there on a few luxuries. Addana didn't. She lived day-to-day off what was left of Travis's life insurance, trying to rebuild her home on a budget thinner than a shoestring.

"Why don't you go to Houston?" Tyler asked.

"Not in the cards," Addana said again, and her lips pulled down slightly into a frown. She couldn't afford the trip or the time it would take to get there and back. But most of all, she couldn't put up with the pressure from her family, trying to convince her that Holy Cross had died, that she would find nothing here in its

future, and that she needed to move on. Addana couldn't listen to any of that. Granted, she did appreciate spending time with people who hadn't lived through the tragedy. People whose lives seemed normal in comparison, who didn't walk around with the weight of the flood on their shoulders, like everyone here did. The flood flavored every human interaction. That wore on Addana at times.

But right now, she couldn't leave. This neighborhood needed her, and she needed this neighborhood.

She finished her beans and rice and then moved on to the small square of frosted sheet cake that sat nestled in one of the depressions in the container. She thought for a moment about her hips, but she certainly needed all the energy she could get, so she ate the cake with her fingers and licked the frosting from them when it was gone. She talked for a few more moments with the Washingtons as they finished eating. Just as they were all about to get up to clear the table, a National Guard truck pulled up.

"I thought their own people would feed them," Addana said to no one in particular. She decided to head back to work. She appreciated the National Guard coming around to help out the police, but they still resembled soldiers too much for her own liking. She hated feeling like a refugee living in a guarded camp. The one soldier climbing out of the truck—huge, tanned, rough—particularly looked like he'd seen a lot in his life. She admired the way he filled out his uniform and how easy he stood, completely comfortable with himself, scanning the neighborhood. As his gaze passed over her, she idly wondered how many people he'd killed. Then she walked away.

Sergeant Aleister Colmes watched the small black woman walk away from the picnic table. She didn't carry a lunch container away with her, so clearly she didn't have someone to feed back wherever she was headed. Colmes figured that meant she stayed here by herself. He didn't like that. The Lower Ninth Ward was no place for a single lady right now, particularly one as petite as her. Hell, he could break

her right over his knee if he wanted to. He didn't want to, of course. He thought for a moment about following and asking her some questions to ascertain her position, but he stopped himself. Maybe later, when he wasn't saddled with the new recruit.

He walked up to the lunch truck and requested two cups of coffee. The private that patrolled with him, Terry Thibodeaux, had promised no place existed in Holy Cross to buy a cup of coffee, and that necessitated getting it from the Red Cross. The lady passing out the food didn't seem to mind and even forced a couple of chocolate chip cookies in wax paper envelopes into his hand.

"Hope you boys are staying safe," she said with that chipper, aren't-I-just-thrilled-to-be-here attitude so many of the volunteers had.

Colmes suppressed a scowl. He didn't do chipper. "Thanks," he said as he took them and turned away from the lunch truck. He scanned the neighborhood. Missile damage, IED damage, flood damage... Not that much of a difference between them, really, and he sure as hell had seen nicer neighborhoods than this in Bagdad. He wondered what it had looked like before the flood. He tried to envision the sagging houses, the overturned cars, the trash, all back where they belonged, kids running in the streets, cars cruising. But he just couldn't do it. He'd seen too much damage in the last few years of his life, not enough *life*. He handed a coffee and some cookies to Thibodeaux, and they sat in the truck, just watching.

"Better than Iraq, eh, Sarge?" the kid asked.

Colmes had served in the army during Desert Storm and in the Guard for the more recent, post-9/11 actions overseas, and he couldn't blame the private for his ignorance; the kid had just finished his basic training when the National Guard had called up their unit for active duty in Louisiana. Active duty was active duty, regardless of whether it was in the deserts of the Middle East, the borders of Texas, or cleaning up after floods. A threat loomed on every horizon.

"This place is dead compared to Iraq," Colmes growled and sipped his coffee. He didn't think it was better at all. In Iraq, people still filled the streets, a promise of life to come and recovery. Markets opened, food vendors walked the promenades,

passing the blown-out carcasses of bombed buses. Here, shit. Only mud and an increasing number of rats, stray dogs, and abandoned boats that had hit the ground when the waters finally receded. This lunch truck—and the few people gathered around it—seemed more out of place than a laughing child in Baghdad did.

“But no sand niggers, just the regular kind.” Thibodeaux chuckled nervously. “Right?”

An African American family sat at the picnic table in the vacant lot. At least Thibodeaux wasn’t one of those assholes who said stuff just loud enough so the victims of his assholiness could hear.

Colmes growled again as he glared sideways at the kid. “Save your racism for a more receptive audience, jackass.” He had to keep himself from crushing the weak paper cup that held his coffee. Instead, he gritted his teeth until his jaw hurt. He’d brought the kid along just to drive, not to offer any type of commentary.

That shut the private up, and the two of them sat drinking their coffee with no further attempt at conversation. Colmes couldn’t wait to get away from this kid. Take him out, he’d thought back at base. Show him the ropes, even if the kid was only working as his driver. Fuck the ropes. He’d like to leave him smack-dab in the middle of some conflict and let the little fucker get some on-the-job training.

“Let’s go,” Colmes said once even the silence had started to wear on him. He wanted *something* to do. If that meant driving around aimlessly, looking for architectural looters and crack addicts using empty houses as dens, then so be it.

Thibodeaux started up the truck, and they headed toward the river. Colmes saw more and more death, destruction, and decay. Nearly four months after the initial flood, patrols still found dead bodies in some of the houses: drowning victims, suicides, people who never got help. Thibodeaux began cruising up and down the streets, taking them in a five-block-long grid, checking everything. Colmes kept his eyes peeled, constantly skimming the wrecked landscape for threats. He didn’t fear suicide bombers or IEDs here, but a lot of people did need help, and some of them had gotten desperate in the early days after the storm. People had shot at the

Guard and the police, and sometimes the police had shot back. Colmes had a hard time thinking of American citizens—in their own neighborhoods no less—as the enemy, but sometimes he just had to.

They passed one house with a trailer parked in front of it, several pipes and wires jury-rigged to supply water, sewer, and electricity to the old Airstream. Definitely not a FEMA-issue trailer. Somebody had come down ahead of the aid and started on his or her own. At the door of the house stood the woman he'd noticed earlier. Thibodeaux slowed the truck slightly, and Colmes raised his hand in a brief wave. His gaze locked with the small woman's, and he could see several emotions play across her face. She watched him without moving at first. What did she think would happen? Colmes wondered. Finally she raised her hand in return. Then a telephone pole passed between them, and the moment of interaction ended. But he had all the information he needed. He could tell by that suspicious look on her face, the hesitation in her response, the state of the house and the trailer that she most definitely lived alone. He shook his head and focused back on the patrol.

Up and down the streets the two of them traveled. Colmes welcomed the silence, but he could tell Thibodeaux itched to talk. Eventually, Colmes sighed. "What is it, Private?"

"I'm not... I was just trying to, you know..."

Colmes guessed the kid referred to his earlier racist comment. "There's no need to kiss my ass, Private. We're both enlisted men, even if I do have twenty...twenty-five years on you."

"Thanks, Sarge."

It would take more than a garbled apology to immediately change Colmes's perception of the brat, but it was a start. Too much intolerance existed in the world for it to leak into their duty here, and he definitely didn't need the perception that any of the Guard harbored ill feelings toward the local residents. "Just keep your lips zipped in the future."

"Sure thing, Sarge."

The radio crackled, and a voice summoned them back to home base. As Thibodeaux drove, Colmes thought about that woman he'd seen. He worried about her, more than he ought to, more than what seemed rational to his seasoned warrior's brain. He didn't think she was an idiot. The very fact that she seemed a little suspicious told him that. He made a vow to himself to check in on her periodically, if she didn't protest anyway. He wouldn't blame her if she felt overly cautious and protective. He probably would in her situation.

Thibodeaux drove over the Industrial Canal bridge and into the Bywater neighborhood. This neighborhood—when compared with Holy Cross—seemed perfectly normal and recovered. Sure, plywood covered a few more windows than logic would dictate, but people walked the streets, and businesses had reopened. Colmes could see life here, life that hadn't yet returned to the Lower Ninth Ward.

He wondered if it ever would.

Chapter Two

Addana's eyes flew open, and she held her breath, waiting for the next sound. She knew she hadn't heard that breaking glass in her dream. No, it came from the house.

Shit.

Everything else around her was so deathly silent—thanks to the complete lack of inhabitants in her neighborhood—that every out-of-the-ordinary sound warranted special attention. She heard some other noises now: paint buckets falling, maybe a ladder or a sawhorse tipping over, and she knew she had to react.

Addana climbed out of bed. She slept in sweats, the nights getting as cold as they did, so she didn't bother dressing. She slipped her work boots onto her bare feet, threw her jacket over herself, and then picked up the Remington 11-87 Compact she kept propped next to the trailer door. Her Uncle Clyde had sent it back with her from Houston. The old trapper had known exactly what would fit her small frame, and that she would need protection. She looked down at her cell phone, sitting on the dining table near the door, but she decided not to make the call. She knew the police rarely wasted their time down here. She'd just have to deal with it herself.

She opened the trailer door slowly and peered toward the house. She could hear scraping and scratching inside. Somebody had definitely found his or her way in.

She climbed down the trailer steps to the buckled sidewalk and paused, hoping whoever was in the house hadn't heard the metal step creak. She didn't want to give herself away before she'd had a good look at them. She took the porch stairs

carefully and crept up toward the front door. She didn't bother locking it; she hadn't invested in enough tools to worry about them getting stolen yet, but now she realized that had been a mistake. She promised herself—once she'd finished this—she'd button up the house better to keep out invaders.

The door stood slightly ajar, just enough for someone to slip in. Addana took a deep breath to steady her nerves and raised the gun. She wondered for a split second if she could actually shoot someone if the situation demanded it. If she did, could she set her mind right with God after? She didn't know. And what would the kids think of her? She worked really hard to keep them out of the violence that sometimes infested this city, and here she stood, no better than a thug, contemplating shooting a trespasser.

She pushed the door farther open with the barrel of her gun. Her mouth went dry. She tried to swallow several times, but she just couldn't manage it. Panic gripped her. What if the intruders already sat in the dark, watching her enter, their own weapons trained on her?

How stupid am I, God? Addana scanned the room in the darkness, fearing she'd see some glowing eyes or the muzzle flash of a gun as she stood there. Nothing.

She walked through the first room into the next. Still nothing.

Then, from the third room in the shotgun house came the scratching and yipping, and something shot out of the darkness toward her.

Panicking, Addana pulled the trigger of the gun, and in the muzzle flash, she saw several feral dogs streak past her toward the front door. In the blindness that followed, Addana could only stand there, cursing herself. She'd succeeded in scaring the shit out of herself and blasting a hole in her wall. Nothing else.

Shaking, she returned to the porch. In the moonlight, she could see the dogs running up the street, barking and howling as they headed away from the river. Addana sat down on the porch steps and rested her gun across her knees. She took a few deep breaths, trying to still her manically beating heart. She realized she

could have killed somebody tonight. What if some transient or young hoodlum had found his way into her house? She'd be cleaning his guts off her wall and explaining something to the police come morning. As she sat there, working to catch her breath and talk herself out of the adrenaline rush she had experienced, headlights turned a corner and headed down her street. She didn't move, just sat there, watching the progress. She wondered what could possibly bring anyone out here at this time of night. Surely they didn't come in response to her shot. No one lived close enough to hear it.

The vehicle rolled slowly, and she realized her heart had started beating faster again. Publisher's Clearing House certainly wouldn't come out here at two or three a.m. to bring her a giant check. Not the police; she hadn't seen them down here in weeks.

Addana gripped her gun, ready to raise it should the need arise. The vehicle rolled to a stop, and a floodlight shone full in her eyes. She raised her hand to block the light. "Hey!" she cried.

She heard, "National Guard, ma'am," the voice deep and gravely. Certainly the bearer of that voice had seen some tough things in his life. Damaging things. Scarring things. "You need to put down your weapon. Slowly."

Addana scowled into the darkness. Treated like a criminal on her own porch. She shook her head, wondering at the state of things.

"I won't ask you again."

"I wasn't shakin' my head no!" Addana said. "Musin', sir. I was musin'!" She lifted the shotgun off her lap and lowered it to the step below her slowly, then raised her hands to show she held nothing else.

The light swiveled out of her eyes, and two men approached her from the darkness. One she recognized. When he saw her, his eyebrows rose. "If it isn't the lunch truck lady."

He'd waved at her a couple of days ago when he'd driven by her house, so he must have known this place belonged to her. Now, looking at him again, she

realized her initial appraisal of him at the lunch truck hadn't been too off the mark. Strong, self-assured, he had no problems confronting someone who held a gun in the dark. He didn't overreact. He didn't even raise his voice as he'd directed her to follow his order. *Not some hot-headed, gun-toting megalomaniac.* Addana realized that she could appreciate having someone that levelheaded on her side in a crisis.

Hell, she wouldn't mind having someone like that by her side on a regular basis.

He stopped in front of her, and even though she sat on the top step of her porch, she still had to look up into his face. He had to stand over six feet five. In his full military gear, he certainly had a breadth to him as well as a height. He held his rifle across his chest as if it had grown there, and the solid, sure weight of his steps told Addana that this was not a man to mess with, despite his direct, even temper. The deep wrinkles surrounding his eyes, and the gray hairs she could see growing through his blond high-and-tight only added to his credibility in her eyes.

The other soldier didn't seem worth noticing. Probably just out of high school if the thinness of his frame or the pimples on his face were any indication.

"Evenin', sir," she said, still holding up her hands. "I was just lookin' after my property. Thought some people'd gotten in. Just dogs, though. Nothin' to worry about." She pointed to the shotgun. "I fired one round at the wall, sir."

He exchanged glances with his partner.

"We're going to need to see some identification and registration on that firearm, ma'am," the other man said, his cracking voice all business.

Addana chuckled. "You don't need no registration on a gun like this in Louisiana."

He glanced at taller man—obviously a superior—and the man nodded.

"Then ID at least," the kid said.

She heard the older man sigh, and he turned a withering gaze on the young soldier. "This is her house, numbnuts. We passed it the other day."

The kid glanced around the neighborhood. “Oh, right. Sorry, ma’am.”

“Don’t worry yourself none,” Addana mumbled, and she finally lowered her hands.

“I’m Sergeant Aleister Colmes; this is Private Thibodeaux.”

“Addana Carmouche,” she said, but didn’t stand, didn’t offer her hand for a shake, and didn’t add anything else. The three of them waited in silence for a moment. Addana let her gaze linger on Colmes, waiting for him to either confirm or deny her initial perceptions of him.

“Well, Miss Carmou—”

“Misses,” she corrected him, and then quickly covered up her hand so he wouldn’t notice the lack of wedding ring there. It had taken her a while to get over Travis’s death, but last summer—right before all this shit had gone down—she had realized she could move on and maybe find another man. She’d taken the ring off. It lay somewhere behind her in the flood-ravaged house. She had yet to locate the jewelry box. She still hadn’t gotten over correcting people with the “misses” though, and right now—exactly why she couldn’t say—she regretted the automatic response.

And did Sergeant Colmes deflate a little when he heard that?

“Just call me Dana,” she told him, hoping that made up for the slip, and it did seem to decrease a few of the lines on his brow.

“Probably not the best thing for you to be out here on your own at night,” Colmes went on, his tone one a father would take when gently correcting a child.

Addana narrowed her eyes. “Ain’t got much of a choice, Sergeant. Things round here are rough, sure, but I gotta do what’s right for my home and my family.”

“Where is your family?”

She paused for a moment. How much information should she give him? Might be okay for someone other than the Washingtons to know her entire situation, and despite the fact he questioned her presence there, she had an inclination to trust

him. "Houston. They're all living with my mama." *What will he do with that information? No one out here to hear me scream...*

Colmes nodded. "Most likely you're gonna get yourself shot rather than shoot any trespassers." His gaze skimmed across her gun, then up her body. Addana felt a slight flush, and she wondered at it. "I have no doubts that you can handle yourself, *Dana*, but I'd rather you didn't have to." He looked up and down the block.

Addana let her own gaze travel with him. She didn't feel threatened. She didn't see that glimmer of mischief that would have lit up in a man's eye, thinking about the possibility of abusing her situation. Instead he took the time to assess her circumstances further.

Not a light to be seen except the glow coming from her trailer and the lights of the National Guard truck. In the distance—probably on the other side of the Industrial Canal—a train whistled a warning into the night. Addana wrapped her arms around herself at a sudden chill that came up off the river. She wished momentarily that Colmes's arms wrapped around her instead, but she shook the idea out of her head. No reason to get herself all worked up over this man when she'd only just met him.

"Do you know when any of your neighbors will return?" he finally asked.

The kid picked at his fingernails.

"Dontcha mean 'if'?" she asked with a bitter chuckle, but then bit it off, hoping she hadn't hurt his feelings. She sighed. "I got nothin' but rumors, Sergeant. And rumors ain't worth much." She stood and pointed across the street. "Supposedly they live in New York City now. Imagine that. Out the Ninth Ward and living it up in Manhattan." She pointed to another house. "Memphis." Another. "Dallas." Another. "One of those FEMA parks north of I-Twelve. They might come back." She pointed to a final house, one that—even in the dark—looked more ramshackle than the others. "Ezra and Dahlia. Both in their nineties. Lived through Betsy, Camille. Didn't live through Katrina. Some volunteers found them a few weeks back."

She sat back down heavily on the step, shaking her head, trying to clear the pain away. She looked up at Colmes through watery eyes, and she could see a little glimmer of sympathy there. She smiled slightly, glad for a connection with someone who didn't counter with his own flood story of woe. He didn't need to one-up her, and she liked him for that.

"Hope you don't mind if we look out for you, then," Colmes said.

Addana shrugged. "We'll both do what needs doin', then." She thought for a moment about inviting them in for a cup of hot chocolate—her nostalgic comfort food—but then stopped herself. Not because she didn't want the men in her trailer, but because she needed to be alone now, to try to start figuring out this mix of feelings that grew inside her. Feelings about Sergeant Colmes.

"Have a good night," Colmes said, and he turned away. The kid followed after.

Something in Addana wanted her to call him back, to continue that connection, to let him comfort her and tell her it would all turn out okay. His rough, deep voice could probably convince her of just about anything. Instead, she called out, "Happy holidays, y'all," trying her best to cut the anguish from her voice.

Colmes stopped and turned. His gaze swept her again, and she could see another emotion on his face. Pained. But he just nodded and said, "Same to you," before heading back to the truck.

Addana watched them drive off, then began dragging her weary body to her trailer. Maybe with him around, she could have a happy holiday. She thought about getting one of those table-top-sized Christmas trees for the trailer, maybe getting a couple of turkey dinners out of the freezer section at the grocery store. Did he have plans here for Christmas?

As she climbed back into bed, she didn't doubt she'd sleep well the last few hours until dawn.

"Shit," Colmes grated out as he climbed back into the truck. Addana'd confirmed all his worries. He couldn't fathom staying away now. She'd have his

protection whether she wanted it or not. And she certainly didn't seem like she wanted it. And what was with that "misses" crap? She sure as hell wasn't married; he'd noticed she'd tried to hide her hand, but not before he'd seen the lack of wedding ring. No man would let her go through all this alone. Divorced? Widowed? He didn't know, but he would find out. Not just because he worried about her, but because he realized that he liked her. He wanted to see her succeed in the face of all the challenges put up in front of her. And she had a lot of them. He smiled slightly to himself. She'd kept her cool with the floodlights on her. She hadn't panicked or started screaming. Very few people could manage that. She had a head on her, that was for sure.

"Shit," he mumbled again, realizing he'd just become more involved than he really wanted. This would go beyond an occasional midnight drive past the house to make sure she was safe.

"Should we call her in, sir?" Thibodeaux asked.

"What?"

"Call her in. Report her."

"Hell no." Colmes glanced at Thibodeaux; he couldn't keep the disgust off his face. "It doesn't have to all be by the book, you know." He waved a hand in the direction of Addana's house. "She's a fucking woman"— *A young, strong woman*—"defending her fucking house. Not an enemy combatant."

"Right," Thibodeaux said, and he pulled the truck into the street.

"Right what?" Even after just preaching about bending the rules, he wouldn't let Thibodeaux get away with too much familiarity.

"Right, *sir*."

Colmes cursed his luck that he'd decided to give the brat another chance. He had yet to see promise in him, but he swore he'd find some glimmer of hope before writing the kid off; he wouldn't be a good role model or sergeant if he didn't. Tonight just proved he had more work to do. Patrol should be a nice, relaxing time of

vigilant reflection. A time when he could figure out what to do about *Mrs. Carmouche*.

“You hungry?”

“What?” Colmes glanced at the kid. It was nearly three a.m., and they still had a few hours ahead of them. The last thing the kid should be thinking about was food.

“I heard there’s this bar just across the Industrial Canal that serves pizza and—”

“Shut it, jerkwad.”

Silence fell, and all Colmes could hear was the engine of the truck. He started to doubt if Thibodeaux even breathed, but he didn’t worry about it too much.

They passed through darkened streets, looming carcasses of boats and cars sometimes blocking the road. Thibodeaux did a decent job circumnavigating the obstacles, and Colmes felt good to find at least one redeeming thing about the kid.

Despite the fact that his mind should stay focused on the job at hand, he kept drifting back to Addana. The way her black braids had fallen around her face, creating a drape of shadow in the lights of the truck. How her dark eyes had shone bright in the evening, hinting at an intelligence and wit that her sometimes clipped and sloppy dialect would lead one to believe didn’t exist. No, Colmes knew that kind of intelligence. He’d seen it in the nomadic women of the Arabian Desert whose husbands had gone off to fight. The women who ran *everything*, including the old men and the trade relations and the marriage offers. He’d also seen it in his mother, who could get up at five every morning, milk the cows, and have a hot breakfast on the table for him before he left for school. Addana was a sly woman, hardworking, determined. She could make herself a home here or in the desert or on the moon if she had to. He’d help her if he could.

If she’d let him.

Colmes stifled a sigh as he realized she was the kind of woman he'd want when he settled down. He could take that kind of woman back to the family farm in Nebraska, and she'd fit right in. She'd handle everything.

Nebraska... Colmes counted the days until retirement. Only a few weeks left. He imagined himself, his duffel filled with the last of his things, opening the door to that big, empty house. Alone. He cringed at the idea. Mom and Dad lived in a retirement community now. His siblings had moved off. Since he had left the army back in the midnineties to help his parents save the ranch from the bank, they all felt—rightly to some extent—it should fall to him. It would be him alone with acres and acres of fields and creaky floorboards and that old furnace his dad had never been able to fix. But he belonged there, right? He'd grown up there, after all.

And Addana clearly loved this place. Even if they did get together, he could never convince her to leave. If that bitch Katrina couldn't prompt change in her life, then falling in love had no chance of it. More's the pity.

Still, a date wouldn't hurt, would it? As long as he was honest and upfront about the fact that he would gone before the end of January.

"Sarge? Look!"

Thibodeaux's voice broke into his thoughts, and immediately he fell into his old habits. Eyes like a hawk, scanning for threats. Body tense. Adrenaline ready if needed.

But the only thing he saw was a wild hog rummaging through some piles of rubbish.

"Can't believe they've made it all the way in here," Thibodeaux said. "We should shoot it. We could dress it and—"

"Leave it alone," Colmes told him, but even he could feel the bite had gone out of his bark. Nostalgia, and facing a future without the Guard, could do that to a man.

Especially a man like him.

* * *

Addana lay on the lumpy bed in her trailer. She couldn't sleep. She wondered if the adrenaline from her earlier encounter was to blame, or if it was—

No, don't even think it, baby.

She wrinkled her nose at the thought. She couldn't possibly—

But her mind didn't listen. It wanted a distraction, and that distraction came in the form of one Sergeant Aleister Colmes. He had to be in his forties—maybe had a good ten years on her—but that didn't stop her from picturing him in those fatigue pants, low on his hips, with nothing above the waist but his dog tags. He clearly took care of himself; he'd have to in his position, but she could tell in the effortless way he'd held himself under all that gear. She wondered if he had any tattoos. If he did, she felt certain they were exotic and had some story to go with them. Something amazing.

Plus—and this had to be more important—she could tell even in those few words they'd exchanged that he had a heart. Not like that jackass private with him. Addana filled in more blanks about Sergeant Colmes with her imagination. Wife or girlfriend? Definitely not. Kids? No, he was a career soldier. He entered young and had never had time for a family. Cock?

Addana stopped herself for a moment. How did a mild attraction and a pondered offering of hot chocolate or a TV dinner result in...*this*?

She could feel the dampness between her legs that showed this attraction had blossomed into something more in the space of an hour or so. Since Colmes and the kid had driven away, her mind had traveled all over the place in her quest for sleep. But as soon as she started thinking about Colmes again...*this*.

Well, no harm in a little fantasy.

Addana didn't question herself any more, and instead let her thoughts return to Colmes's prick. She shivered and pushed her sweats to her hips. A man that size... She licked her fingers, and then ran them down her body to the thatch of black curls covering her sex. She'd already grown damp imagining Colmes, and just

thinking about his cock had her clit hard and poking from beneath its hood. She ran her moistened fingers around it, and with her other hand, pushed up her sweatshirt so she could get to her breasts.

She couldn't deny that she wanted him. Whether it grew from a general loneliness or from a specific attraction to Colmes didn't matter right now. Right now, she didn't feel like exploring the cause. She just wanted to imagine him fucking her, that big, toned body laboring over her, piercing into her. She pinched one of her nipples hard and gasped at the sensation. With her other hand, she dipped into her cunt, covering her fingers in her own juices.

Her fantasy returned to Colmes's cock again. Golden, long, a good circumference. Substantial would be a perfect word to describe it, she figured. But he also knew how to use it, how to torture her in all the best ways. To make her beg for him.

And he'd have stamina from long marches and obstacle courses and survival training. As she fucked herself with her fingers, she imagined him driving into her. He stood a foot and a half taller, and she'd feel dwarfed beneath him, but he'd know how strong she was, that she could take it from him. If her small size wouldn't frighten him, then the fervor with which he'd take her very well could.

She couldn't remember the color of his eyes. In her mind they were a pale blue, like a hazy Louisiana summer sky. And when he fucked her, he wouldn't call her Dana, but her whole name: *Addana*! shouted out for anyone to hear.

She came hard. She pulled her drenched fingers away and turned onto her side.

She didn't fault herself for having a little fantasy here and there. Not a lot else existed to keep her mind off her heartache. And what if this led to love, even if it only lasted a few weeks or months? Didn't she work hard? Didn't she deserve it for herself? Didn't she deserve someone as calm and strong and gentle as Sergeant Colmes?

Dammit, it was about time God cut her some slack. He'd tested her too much these last few years, and though she counted her family's health and her sons' blessings, Addana needed a little something for herself too. She didn't mind if that little something came in the form of a tall, blond soldier.

She decided if she saw Colmes again, she'd ask him out. Maybe they could get lunch from the Red Cross and eat together or something.

With the smell of her own sex heavy in the air of the small trailer, she finally drifted off to sleep just as a little glimpse of sunlight came in through the window.

Chapter Three

Addana could tell that the *thwap-thwap-thwap* didn't just come from crossing the metal grating on the drawbridge. The wonky steering confirmed it. She had a flat. As soon as she got off the St. Claude Bridge, she pulled her Ranger into the parking lot of an abandoned gas station to assess the damage.

She climbed out of the truck and quickly scanned her surroundings, always making sure that she hadn't put herself in a compromising position. She didn't see anything threatening, but as usual, the setting dimmed her spirits a bit.

The roll-down security shutters still covered the front windows of the minimart from when the owner had left at the end of August. The customary X with its arcane numbers and slashes and whatnot—notes from the search and rescue operations—remained too, in bright orange spray paint on the front of the building. The sign advertising the price of gas showed what it had cost August 27. Addana sighed; all these things reminded her of how much further her neighborhood still had to come.

She looked down at the tire. With all the construction and debris all over the place, flat tires had become a monthly—if not at times more frequent—part of living in New Orleans. This one appeared particularly bad. Complete tread separation. She saw a giant framing nail, its head scraped down to a gleaming shine, sticking out. Most likely the culprit.

Addana had started timing herself like the dad in *A Christmas Story*. Eight minutes was her time to beat. She checked the time on her cell phone, then quickly went about taking the jack out of the cab and releasing the spare tire from its perch behind the rear axle. For a moment, she wished she had a huge Christmas tree in

the back of her truck rather than more construction-grade trash bags and tarps. She wished she had Jarvis and Rodell in the cab, shouting encouragement at her as she worked. At least the temperature remained cool enough so as not to punish her. Flat tires in August and September really sucked. She sat down next to the tire and loosened the lug nuts before inserting the jack and raising the truck.

She became lost in the simple process of the work. She actually enjoyed flat tires. She knew the steps, could go through them by rote, her mind free and empty in the process. She got some satisfaction from being completely successful in the small task. If only she could have such accomplishments in the rest of her—

“Excuse me, ma’am.”

Addana knew that deep, gravelly voice, and she didn’t dare look up, thinking that, even with how dark her skin was, he’d surely see the flush that crept up her cheeks. She could feel her face burning. A few days back she’d resolved to ask him out if she saw him again, but she thought she’d have some warning. Instead, he just appeared behind her like a phantom. She took a couple of deep breaths before plastering a smile across her face and finally looking up, up, up into the pale blue gaze of Sergeant Colmes. *I was right about the eyes, at least.* “Afternoon, sir.” She wondered what else she would be right about. She took a deep breath to calm her nerves and hoped he didn’t see the giddiness she worked desperately to hide.

“Need some help there?” he asked and knelt down next to the tire. She couldn’t tear her gaze away from him. This close, in the full sun, he looked even more handsome. A model soldier, like a well-aged poster boy from glorified World War Two propaganda. She’d certainly save her bacon fat for this GI. She finally managed to glance past him to where the private sat in the driver’s seat of the truck, its engine idling. She almost wished he wasn’t there to ruin her time with Colmes.

“I can manage, thank you.” She didn’t mention that by distracting her, he’d ruined her time on this tire. She had to keep herself from scowling for a moment. Bad enough that she had some sort of irrational attraction to him, but then she

realized she didn't care. She wanted him there, looking out for her, as he'd promised he'd do.

She kept working on the wheel, feeling his attention on her, the heat of his body radiating against her. She knew he watched her every movement, not even offering any kind of advice—which would have been totally typical. No, he just watched and waited, and she appreciated that. Eventually, the silence started to feel somewhat awkward. “So, eh, what brings you to New Orleans?” she asked, knowing he'd probably misinterpret what she knew to be awed and bashful silence, and realizing she didn't want to seem too rude.

“Work,” he said, and they both chuckled. She hadn't tried very hard with the question. “What about you?”

“Born, raised...most likely die here. Can't see it any other way.” She spun off the last of the lug nuts and set them carefully on the pavement next to her.

“But your family's in Houston.”

“Only temporarily.” She tried to keep the bitterness out of her voice. “Once I finish the house, I'm gonna bring my boys home.” She stood and pulled off the old tire, then threw it in the back of the truck, her back twinging ever so slightly at the effort. This one couldn't get patched; she'd have to scrounge up the funds for a used replacement.

“You have kids?”

“Two sons.” Thinking about them did bring a smile to her face, and she sure as hell wasn't one of those single women that hid their children away from potential suitors. No. Any man that wanted Addana Carmouche had to have her boys too. She took a moment to glance at his face and check his reaction. She didn't see any disgust there, so Colmes got another point in her book.

She lined up the spare tire and slipped it on the bolts.

He asked after a pause, “And their father?”

“Died.” The word sounded too blunt, even to Addana’s own ears, but she couldn’t sugarcoat it. She didn’t want to. Let him think what he would; she needed to be honest with him from the beginning if this—short though it might be—went anywhere. She started spinning the lug nuts back on, one by one in a star pattern

“Sorry to hear that.”

“Not as sorry as me.” She meant it to sound slightly humorous, but she didn’t get that type of reaction from Colmes. *Oh well*. With that, Addana picked up the lug wrench and tightened the bolts.

“How long?”

“Long enough.” She began lowering the truck.

“So you’d maybe be interested in getting a bite to eat with me. In the interest of looking after you, of course.”

Did he cringe when he asked that? Addana stood, the weight of the jack in her hand. She hoped she didn’t appear too shocked. “Excuse me?” He’d beaten her to the punch. Here she’d been working, trying to find the nerve to do what she’d promised herself, and he’d up and pulled the rug out from beneath her.

“Dinner maybe?” He raised his chin a bit, as if preparing to take a blow to the face, almost inviting her to hit him. The action nearly made her laugh, but she stifled it. He obviously didn’t expect a yes, but Addana felt relief that he harbored some of the same feelings for her that she had for him. She’d spent the last six months preparing to reenter the dating world, to start looking for a man that, though no one could ever replace the father of her boys, could offer her some stability, maybe a little adventure.

“Dinner?” She couldn’t remember that last time she’d gone to dinner. Potlucks at the church sure didn’t count, and this sounded better than her idea of TV dinners or a shared meal at the lunch truck. She pointed with her free hand to the Guard truck. “He gonna be there?”

Colmes turned slowly to look at the private. Then he glanced back at Addana. He smiled slightly. “He will most definitely not be there.”

“All right then.” Addana’s heart fluttered. “But nothing fancy.” She couldn’t believe she’d just agreed to it.

“No, nothing fancy.”

She stuck out her free hand to him—covered in tire dust and the grime of the road—and he took it without a moment’s hesitation. She liked that. It showed he had...something. The touch conveyed a sense of sureness that reconfirmed Addana’s impressions of Colmes.

This was a good man.

A man she could see by her side.

“I’ll pick you up tomorrow night. Around six?”

“I guess you know where I stay at, so I can’t very well say no.”

“Just leave the shotgun at home this time.” He smiled a little bigger, and his pale blue eyes crinkled up at the sides. That look felt dangerous. It might just get Addana to do things she’d regret later.

He dropped her hand and turned back toward the truck.

The private pulled into traffic, and Addana watched them drive away.

She pulled her cell phone out of her pocket to check her time.

Sixteen minutes.

Shit.

* * *

Colmes glanced at Addana as she sat in the passenger seat of the Guard-issue truck. He couldn’t believe he’d followed through with picking her up. He could have easily come up with a work-related excuse, but he hadn’t. Doubts filled his normally well-ordered, machinelike mind. *What was I thinking?* Maybe he could still formulate some excuse. The worst thing about it? What if she thought this could go somewhere? What if he hurt her feelings or broke her heart? He hadn’t yet told her he would leave in less than a month to head home. He shook his head, trying to

clear it. No. *Can't get ahead of myself*. Right now, they were just two people getting a bite to eat. It didn't have to mean any more than that.

But a glance over at the strong, determined woman sitting next to him had him doubting his resolve of a moment ago. He didn't normally indulge in flights of fancy—a warrior's mind didn't allow for it—but he couldn't help himself now. He wondered what she'd feel like against him. Colmes felt himself at odds, torn between an irrational lust and his normal, composed, in-command self. *Must be some kind of midlife crisis*. He liked the sound of that. He could deal with these feelings that seemed to come out of nowhere if he could label them somehow. Sure, she might not be some twenty-two-year-old model, but she had a lithe body, and he felt certain she could do some interesting things with it.

His cock began to swell slightly, and he squashed that particular line of thinking. No use getting her frightened. He concentrated instead on his driving, making sure to keep his eyes off the increasingly tempting woman sitting next to him.

Colmes stopped the truck in front of a building in the Bywater neighborhood that clearly held a dive bar. He groaned at the thought of taking Addana in there. Thibodeaux had said this place was good, but Colmes would have to take his frustration out on the private later. He doubted the promise of great pizza by looking at the outside. He already felt nervous enough as it was. He wiped his sweaty palms down his pants—new blue jeans bought just for this. He didn't have much in the way of civilian clothing.

"This can't be right," he said, reaching to start the vehicle again. "We should find somepl—"

"No," Addana said, and she reached out and put a hand on his thigh to stop him. Colmes looked down at it, amazed at the heat the tiny appendage projected through the fabric covering his skin. She probably had no idea what the touch did to him. "We said nowhere fancy." She took her hand away and gestured toward the front door. Colmes stifled a sigh of relief. "It's great. I'm just happy to be out of the

house...er, trailer.” She opened her own door and climbed down out of the vehicle, not waiting for him. “Besides, I hear they have great pizza here.”

“That’s what I heard too.” He took a few breaths to gain his composure. He certainly couldn’t leave the truck right this second. He fiddled with things on the dash in order to look busy as he talked himself down. Finally his heartbeat and his erection subsided, he climbed out of the truck, and the two went to the front door. Colmes tried to push it open, but it wouldn’t budge.

“Need to be buzzed in,” Addana reached past him and pressed the doorbell. Then she pointed up. “Smile for the camera.”

Colmes glanced up and saw a security camera trained on them. He appreciated those types of precautions. Then he glanced back down at Addana and wondered what ethereal quality this woman possessed that had him wrapped around her little finger. If someone else had realized his mistake and corrected him, he would have felt surly about it. But with her, he just admired the fact that she’d quickly assessed the situation and acted on her gleaned knowledge.

After a moment, the door buzzed, and Colmes pushed it open. Dim lights lit the interior, but it seemed pleasantly warm compared to the December evening outside. To their right, a bar stretched off, and ahead of them stood a few dining tables under a low ceiling. At the back, near the restrooms, someone had put up a large Christmas tree, decorated with empty Pabst Blue Ribbon cans and napkin snowflakes. Colmes thought it was a bit cheesy, but when he saw the smile it brought to Addana’s face, he wanted to personally thank whoever cut those snowflakes out and drank those beers.

“Let’s sit at the bar,” Addana suggested.

He agreed. If their conversation stalled, he could rely on the bartender or other customers to start it up again. Though he didn’t think he would need that. He had so much he wanted to learn about Addana.

They sat on rickety stools, some of which had broken crosspieces or ripped upholstery. Addana didn’t seem to mind. She sat there, smiling at everybody.

“Happy Holidays!” the bartender—an exuberant man with a slight New York accent—said. “Drinks, folks?”

“What do you have on tap?” Colmes asked.

“Ah, nothing,” the bartender replied, giving his biggest grin.

Colmes thought for a moment. What were they sure to have that he could tolerate? “Miller High Life, then.”

The bartender nodded. He looked at Addana. “And for you?”

Colmes waited patiently to hear what she would order. One could learn a lot about a woman from the type of drink she would order in a place like this. He already had high expectations of her, knowing what kind of survival instincts she had.

“I’ll have the same.”

“Comin’ right up.”

Colmes nodded slightly to himself. He approved of her choice. Made things easy on a man who was clearly busy, showed she wasn’t too picky, and it was one of the cheapest beers on the menu.

When the bartender set down the beers, Colmes said, “We want to order a pizza.” He turned to Addana. “What do you like?”

“Everything.”

So he ordered one with the works, and they sat chatting, drinking their beers.

“How did you end up in the Guard?” Addana asked.

“I joined the army right out of high school. Spent quite a few good years there.” He paused. “When it came time for me to reup—back in, oh, ninety-four or ninety-five—my parents asked me not to. They needed my help to get the farm back up. Once we’d taken care of that, I joined the Guard; I’d loved the army, but I thought I’d have more time with my parents and the farm.” He still felt a little resentment toward them for pulling him away from his full-time soldiering, but family came first, and he’d had to do his duty as a son before he could do his duty as a soldier.

“Then 9/11 came, and I’ve been pretty much on active duty since then, first overseas and now here.” Some of his fellow guardsmen—having signed up for the “one weekend a month and two weeks a year” deal constantly complained about leaving home, but Colmes enjoyed it. He felt more at home during active duty.

“I’m almost at retirement,” he continued.

“Really?” Addana took a sip of her beer, and Colmes watched the dark column of her throat work in the weak lighting. He thought about running his tongue along that line, but he tried to dispel it quickly by taking a sip of his own beer.

“January, actually.”

“Oh.” She definitely sounded disappointed. “I thought you’d be staying longer, with the unit.”

“The unit will stay, but they’ll have no use for an old man like me.” He chuckled and eyed her. “I’ll head back to Nebraska. I still have the farm there.”

Addana harrumphed. “I can’t imagine living out in the middle of nowhere, away from church and schools...” She shook her head.

“Well.” *My turn to sound disappointed, I guess.* “I liked the life enough, and it’s something of a family legacy, so...” He shrugged, realizing he didn’t need to make excuses to her, but feeling the need. “I’m tied to that land like you’re tied to your neighborhood, I guess.”

“Home’s the most important thing in *this* world,” she told him as if it was the most sage thing she knew.

He agreed with her. He just didn’t know what home held for him once he left the Guard.

They discussed their families, what he hoped to do with the farm when he left the service, and how long she thought it would take for the neighborhood to get back to the way she wanted.

“I haven’t had a lot of time for, you know, dating,” he admitted as they started in on their second brew.

“Is that what this is?” Addana asked, laughing slightly. “A date?”

“What did you think?”

“I thought you was lookin’ out for me is all. Like you said you would.”

He could hear the teasing in her voice. She knew damn well this was a date. “You do realize I’m paying tonight too, right?”

Addana laughed, and Colmes thought he’d try anything to make her do it again.

Then she touched his arm, and the same electric jolt he’d felt in the car coursed through him. “I’ll just have to get the next one then.”

Colmes couldn’t believe his body reacted so strongly to this woman. He felt like a kid again, his libido a controlling factor in his life as it hadn’t been in decades. She made him feel young, even though he’d never really realized he’d felt old to begin with. He wanted that in his life for as long as he could have it. “So that’s a date then?” he said finally, wanting to jump on the opportunity to see her again.

“Sure. We’ll call that one a date.” She finally took her hand off his arm, and Colmes missed it almost immediately. He thought about reaching out to take her hand, to hold her small one in his big ones on the bartop so he could feel again her energy, but he restrained himself. He didn’t yet know how she’d take it.

The pizza took longer than expected. The bartender—who turned out to be the owner—said that the gas lines still had a lot of water in them, and they couldn’t get their ovens as hot as they’d like. Another reminder of Katrina. But when it finally arrived, both Addana and Colmes agreed that it had been worth the wait.

After dinner, he drove Addana home. Crossing the St. Claude Bridge at night showed an even greater contrast than it did during the day. On the Bywater side, Christmas lights were strung up, street lights functioned, and porch lights lit up the rest of the neighborhood.

On the Holy Cross side, a blanket of darkness.

* * *

Addana couldn't remember the last time she'd spent a few hours with someone who didn't have his own flood stories to tell. He had stories about what he'd experienced after coming here, but his life hadn't been here before. He hadn't lost everything, or even a little bit.

It wasn't as if Addana wanted to dominate the conversations with her own tales of woe. Far from it—she wanted to move forward. She wanted someone in her life that wasn't hung up on the past and the past's destruction.

He parked on the street behind her trailer, and Addana felt momentary sadness at the idea that their evening had to end.

But it didn't. She swallowed and summoned her courage. She knew she was ready; she hoped he felt the same way.

"This is such a cliché, but do you want to come in for coffee?" Addana asked as she climbed out of the truck. She wrapped her arms around herself and watched him, waiting for any sign of a response, but he just sat there, stoic. She couldn't believe she'd just asked him that. She hoped he didn't take it the wrong way. Ah, hell. There was no "wrong way" to take it. Only one way. Did she mean it? Yes, she did. At some point over the course of the evening, she'd decided that she'd welcome Sergeant Colmes into her bed. She wanted his hands on her. She needed to feel a man against her again. Overalls and flannel shirts and swinging a hammer had a way of making her forget she was a woman. Colmes could remind her.

And then she realized. "I don't even have any coffee. I do have hot chocolate."

Did she hear a slight growl before he said, "A mug of hot water is fine by me."

Addana felt certain he meant it as a joke, but it warmed her inside knowing he wanted to spend more time with her.

He pulled on the parking break with such rough finality that Addana flinched. He clearly knew what he wanted out of this.

So did she, she decided, but a little voice yammered in the back of her head, telling her to tread carefully. She'd never had a one-night stand, and she also heard plenty of horror stories about what post-traumatic stress disorder did to soldiers.

He'd served plenty of time overseas—and here. Did he have PTSD? Who knew what his emotional state was under certain circumstances?

Addana didn't let that particular train of thought go any further. She'd always prided herself on what a good judge of character she was. She'd known she wanted to bear Travis's children after only meeting him once, and he'd been a tender husband and a wonderful provider. He'd filled her world with light.

She knew Colmes could offer her something too. Regardless of what he'd gone through, this was a good man, and she needed—wanted?—him now, even if he would leave in less than a month. Addana shivered, and she knew that the cold night didn't cause it.

She closed the truck door, hoping to use the necessary routine of getting to the trailer as an opportunity to catch her breath and still the steadily increasing beat of her heart. As she headed down the sidewalk toward the trailer, she heard Colmes shut his door as well. Addana knew where this would go tonight, and deep down, she believed she could trust him; he'd come here, to her city, to serve its inhabitants, after all. To make sure they could live a safe, happy life after the flood. If anything, she should thank him for that. If he gave her the chance tonight, she would.

Her mind made up, she fumbled with her keys at the door—nervousness replaced with expectation—and Colmes came up behind her. She could feel the heat of him at her back. He placed a hand on her hip, and Addana turned. When she stood on the first step of the trailer, she was still shorter than Colmes, but much closer to his eye level.

He waited there, his eyes burning into her. She swallowed a couple of times, and then regretted the beer and the pizza with the onions and garlic and peppers. “What?” she finally managed. Nerves kept her body tight, her voice weak and reedy.

“We haven't even kissed yet,” he said quietly, and Addana's heart seemed to lodge in her throat. His statement sounded almost old-fashioned, a little boyish, completely anachronistic coming from this seasoned man.

“You gonna do something about that?” She wished she had a mint, but he’d eaten all of the same things she had, so maybe it wouldn’t turn out too bad.

He bent his head slightly to meet her lips, and she straightened toward him. She raised her hands and pressed them to the front of the black wool Eisenhower jacket he wore, feeling the coarse fibers beneath her fingers. He didn’t touch her, didn’t hold her, just waited for her to close those last few centimeters between them, which she finally did.

Addana felt like a teenager as he kissed her. Like a naughty teenager hiding something from her mother, getting kissed for the first time. She hadn’t had a man since Travis died, and like a bolt of August lightning, her need unlocked with this one kiss.

She reached up and grasped at the back of Colmes’s neck and pulled him against her with such ferocity that she could hardly believe it. Finally his hands came up, held her back, and grabbed on. He embraced her as if he feared she would float away. She felt as if she might if he didn’t hold on, such need and desire flooded through her.

She moaned, and he growled, and she could feel the bulge of him against her. He wanted her as much as she wanted him. Neither of them could deny it now. His tongue snaked out, pressing past her lips and slipping inside her, and she welcomed it, tagging and caressing her own against his. Around them, the night hung silent and still, the crisp air cooling their heating bodies. Colmes’s hands held Addana firmly but without pain, allowing her no movement but telling her how much he desired her. The rigidness of his cock trapped between them told her too.

I could do this all night. He’d easily conquered the minor barriers she’d erected.

But she knew this wouldn’t fulfill the both of them. No, she needed him inside, on her bed. She needed him inside *her*.

Finally she pulled her head back and looked Colmes in the eyes again. Her breath came in ragged gasps, heaving her breasts against his hard chest. He had to

know, even through all the layers of their clothes, that her nipples had already formed tight peaks, and not because of the cold. She took another beat, just looking at him, before she said, “Don’t you think it’s time we got off the stoop?”

A wry smile spread across his face. “Oh yeah,” and longing made his voice sound even more like sandpaper over a cactus than usual. Addana loved it, loved what it said about where he’d gone in this world and what he’d done with his life. A seasoned man. A man who, she hoped, knew how to treasure a woman.

He dropped his hands from her back, and Addana felt a momentary shock of coldness and loss, but the heat still flared in his eyes, so she knew that—as soon as she got them inside—he’d hold her again.

She turned, finally found the right key on the ring, and opened the trailer door. They went inside. She didn’t have many belongings anymore, so she had no problem keeping the small space neat and tidy. Colmes followed her in, and he had to stoop ever so slightly so as not to hit his head on the trailer’s low ceiling.

“Do I need to play Little Suzy Homemaker for you, Sergeant?” she asked as she walked backward toward the small bedroom. She didn’t want to take her eyes off him. “Or are you content to get right down to business?” She didn’t know where this Addana—this open, sexual being—had come from, but she reveled in the freedom she provided. Addana didn’t let herself think of remodeling or her family or the stress of living in this world during these days. The only thought filling her head—all-consuming—was how much she longed to feel Colmes against her, pressing into her, fucking her senseless.

She started stripping as she walked, leaving her clothes on the floor as she moved. Colmes watched her and unbuttoned his jacket as he stalked toward her, matching her step for step. Addana butted up against the accordion-fold door that separated the bedroom from the rest of the trailer; she reached behind her and pushed it aside. Before she could moved through it, Colmes had caught her, grabbed her, lifted her up, and carried her into the room. He dropped her on the bed.

Only Addana's bra, underwear, and skirt—now pushed halfway down her thighs—covered her body. She could feel her own moisture soaking her panties, causing the fabric to darken and cling to her. Through the thin material of her bra, her taut, dark nipples stood out, clearly visible, crowning her small breasts. Colmes leaned over the bed, but then stopped.

"I can't make you any promises," he said.

Addana paused for a moment. That hurt to hear, but she needed him to remind her. This man did not live in New Orleans, and she couldn't harbor any naive fantasies that falling in love with her—if that's what he did—would convince him to make some kind of major life changes. So she steeled her resolve to live and love, even if only for a short time—she knew how valuable even that could be. "I ain't lookin' for promises."

"Good." Colmes reached down and undid the clasp of her bra. The two sides slid open, baring her to him. Addana breathed in a shaky breath. She didn't think he could radiate more heat, but the room—even in the middle of winter—felt unbearable. Not the least bit shy, she stripped off the rest of her clothes and lay there, completely exposed, allowing him to drink her in. She saw herself through his eyes: her dark skin, tight, high breasts, the small pooch of a belly—almost like an afterthought—she'd never lost after Rodell's birth. She liked the way she carried her muscle on her small frame. She possessed no shame when it came to her body; she had no reason to.

There she waited as Colmes consumed her with his eyes. She could see the tension at the fly of his blue jeans, and she didn't understand why he put it off, why he stood there looking when he could taste, touch...

"Come on, Sarge," Addana said, hoping she sounded encouraging, alluring.

She heard his sigh as she saw his chest heave. "It's been a while since I've been with a woman," he confessed, and the honesty touched Addana, made her want him even more. She couldn't find anything to hate about him.

"Do you want to talk first?"

He laughed at that, a gritty, scraping sound that nevertheless Addana found endearing. "Talk's the last thing I want, woman."

And it seemed as if the spell broke then and there. He stripped, shrugging off his already unbuttoned jacket, and then the rest of his clothes followed.

Addana watched every move, and when he finally stood before her, all golden and ripped muscles, she felt herself dampen even further. She figured she'd leave a wet spot on the comforter. His cock reared huge for her, straining as if tied to her with a cord, and she wanted nothing more than to taste it, take it in her mouth and in her cunt. Feel it everywhere against her. He bent over and fished a condom out of his wallet. In what seemed like deft, practiced moves, he had himself sheathed in no time.

"It's been a while for me too," she confessed and raised her hands to him, inviting him down to the bed, "so let's get it over with so we can move on to the really hot shit."

Without another moment's hesitation, Colmes was on top of her, his cock nestling into her damp thatch of dark pubic hair. He nudged a few times, and then slid in, slowly.

Addana groaned as he filled her. She thought at first the pressure might be too much, that he had too much size on her, that she'd gone too long without taking someone. But then, once he stilled and gave her a moment to adjust, she realized he fit perfectly. She felt as if God had crafted her specifically for him, as if she were a custom order. He held himself up on his hands, braced on either side of her shoulders, his gaze focused down the length of their bodies to where they met, his prick sliding in and out of her. The look on his face told her everything she wanted to hear without him speaking a word. After another moment stretched the silence around them, he finally began to move, each thrust punctuated with a sharp, short breath from him.

She brought her knees up and locked her ankles against his flexed ass.

Each stroke built inside her, driving her upward. Each spearing thrust had her closer and closer to her climax. He *did* know how to treat her, how to make her crazy with want and need and reward her body for what she did for him.

“So close,” he ground out, and she knew exactly what he meant. Her body felt strung as tight as a guy-wire on a radio tower in a hurricane. At any moment, she could—no, *would*—snap. He only had to—

“Ah God!” She cried out as her orgasm ripped through her. Her back arched, nearly painful, as she rode its waves. She squeezed her eyes shut. Her pussy clenched and unclenched around Colmes’s cock. Her body first went rigid, and then melted like rubber on a hot road. Her breath trickled out of her lips in a long, soft sigh. It had struck her like a lawn chair in a hurricane, and she had to take a second to recover, to realize what had just happened.

Colmes stopped for a moment, kissed her forehead, and brushed a braid away from her face. Her ankles unlocked, and her legs lulled open to the sides. She took a few deep breaths, then opened her eyes.

“Okay?” Colmes asked, and Addana nodded.

Then Colmes started driving into her again, and the last of her senses fled. She reveled in the sensation of being speared on his cock. Reveled in the joy she clearly brought him, and in the promise of his release. Her body submitted to him completely, and one thought drove her mind. She wanted to make him happy. She needed to feel him come, to give her proof that she’d done all he’d wanted her to do.

Finally he stilled and growled, and she could feel him coming inside her. His cock jolted and spasmed, and she held on to him, pressing her body against his, taking everything from him that he would give.

He moved off her and lay next to her on the bed. He wrapped his large arms around Addana and held her.

She couldn’t remember the last time she had felt so beat up and yet so loved—at least physically. If it weren’t for the ravaged world outside her trailer, she could

have gone to sleep perfectly content. But still, even now, her mind flitted back to all the work that needed doing.

“Thank you,” Colmes said, and then softly kissed her lips.

Addana blinked at him, completely stunned by the brief moment of tenderness, and that small gesture pulled her into the moment again. Contentment did settle over her. Her eyes grew heavy, though, and all she could do was smile at him and hope he understood that she too felt grateful.

She prayed he wouldn’t leave. She wanted him to stay here with her, to hold her as she slept, and to wake up beside him in the morning. “Will you stay?”

“Of course.”

Just like that—on top of the comforter, naked in the cool December air and wrapped up in the arms of a man she would surely soon love—she fell asleep.

Chapter Four

Colmes opened his eyes and looked down at the small bundle of naked woman embraced in his arms. The air in the trailer felt a trifle too cool against his skin, so at the risk of waking her, he sat up and found the blankets they'd tossed off the bed last night in their eagerness to fuck. He pulled them over himself and Addana, and then nestled into their warmth, back against her body.

He watched her sleep. Colmes frequently entertained an urge to protect things—part of being a soldier, he thought—but he very rarely wanted to...*cuddle*. Of course, he didn't often get the opportunity to test that desire. Beneath the sheets, he skimmed a hand down her thigh and loved the smoothness of it under his touch. Right now, he imagined he could stay here all day. *Forget my duty?* No, probably not, but the idea tempted him.

Somewhere outside, a rooster crowed. Colmes marveled at how the feral birds had survived the flood. He saw them all the time on the streets, the cockerels strutting down the middle of the road, glaring at his truck as if it stood in their way, usually following an indifferent hen. The crowing reminded him of the farm in Nebraska again, when he'd have to get up at first crow to feed the chickens before breakfast.

Early morning light filtered through the trailer's thin drapes too, telling him dawn had already come. But Colmes didn't need to rush. He had an overnight patrol tonight, so he could sleep his day away here, or in the classroom he treated as his quarters back on the other side of the canal. It didn't matter to him where he slept, though he did want Addana in his arms if he could have her.

He propped his head up on the heel of his hand and looked down at her. He'd never felt this connected to a woman so quickly. He didn't know where the feelings originated, but he didn't want to question them. He'd just have to live with the fact that he could easily grow to love this woman. *Too unreal.*

Her eyes fluttered open, and Colmes lost himself in their dark depths for a moment. Then his soldier's mind kicked in; he didn't want to give too much away. Addana smiled, though, and his resolution broke. He had to smile back, and he knew, to her, it looked goofy.

"Mornin'," she said and rolled onto her side to face him. He lowered his head back down onto the pillow, and they gazed at each other, not saying anything.

Colmes reached out and touched her cheek. "You seem so...breakable," he told her.

Addana snorted. "Nothin' gonna break this girl."

"I know." He smiled. "I think you might be one of the strongest women I've ever met. I couldn't do what you're doing. Being here, by yourself."

"What are you talking about?" Adanna sat up and leaned against the trailer wall.

Colmes couldn't help but look at her breasts as she sat there, the blankets only coming to her waist.

"You've gone all over the world, haven't you? Fought in wars?" She shrugged, and Colmes admired the ease of the motion, how efficiently her skin and muscle and bone appeared to work. He remembered again their brief, fevered bout of lovemaking last night, how she'd taken him effortlessly and kept up with him.

Desire swelled within him again. He wanted her.

But first he needed a shower. And unfortunately, the trailer bathroom would just not hold the two of them. "I'm going to rinse off if that's okay."

"Don't use all the hot water." Addana nestled back down into bed.

Colmes climbed out of bed, and goose bumps broke out across his skin. Addana's eyes burned with hunger, though, and that seemed to dispel some of the chill. He reluctantly left the bedroom and went to the tiny washroom. He barely fit in the small shower cubicle, and again he couldn't help but admire all of the difficulties she put herself through to get what she wanted. He turned on the weak but blessedly hot water. Who knew how long she would have to live here? He hadn't seen anyone else working on her house since he'd been around. She certainly hadn't told any horror stories about contractors or wayward workers, which would be the norm.

He realized that she didn't just live here alone, but she was doing all the work alone too.

"That's ridiculous," he said out loud.

After quickly soaping and rinsing, Colmes turned off the water. He pushed aside the thin shower curtain and grabbed a tiny pink towel off a rack. He tried his best to dry himself off with what seemed like a hand towel to him and then strolled right back into Addana's bedroom.

"Who's the contractor on your renovation?" he asked, wanting her to confirm what he'd figured out. He stood naked at the foot of the bed, his hands on his hips, waiting for a reply.

Addana blinked a couple of times. "What?"

"Your contractor. You have a general contractor that oversees everything, hires the plumbers, the electricians, the roofers. Who's in charge?"

She sat back up and crossed her arms over her breasts. Colmes saw a hard edge enter her gaze. "Sweetheart, I ain't got none of that. I got these two hands." She raised them up for him to see, and for a moment he caught a glimpse of her breasts again. His arousal sparked up through his annoyance at her. "There's no money to spend on help. My daddy worked in construction all his life. I learned a few things here and there. Ain't none of it I can't do with a little patience and God's guidance."

Colmes shook his head. "I appreciate your faith, but God doesn't hang siding, Dana." He tried to imagine her nailing up twelve foot sections of HardiePlank. She might be strong in mind, but that was one thing her little body would not be able to do on its own. He sat on the edge of the bed and touched her leg through the layers of blankets. "I'm going to help you, okay? And you won't say no."

Addana raised an eyebrow. "I don't need your—"

"It isn't charity."

"I can't pay."

"I know."

Colmes thought he saw her eyes turn glassy with tears for a moment. He watched her throat work a few times as she swallowed. Then she said, "God may not be able to hang siding, but he does know when to send me an angel."

She held out her arms to him, and Colmes crawled into them. He clasped her against his naked body, and he could feel some measure of tension leave her.

"I don't have a lot of time here," he reminded her, "but I'll help when I can. We should focus on what you won't be able to do easily on your own."

"I know one thing I can't do on my own."

Addana's hand grasped his cock, and Colmes immediately heated for her. He wanted to sink into her warmth as he had last night, but this time he needed it to last. He needed to make love to her, not just get some quick fuck. He slid in and out of her closed fist a few times, but then pulled back. He climbed under the covers with her, wanting to feel her flesh against his with nothing between them.

He ran his hands up and down her body, enjoying the feel of her soft skin. Her hand found his cock again, and she stroked him. He grew painfully hard, and a groan escaped him. Addana took her hand away for a moment, and he missed it, but then she pushed him onto his back and showered kisses down his chest as her hands trailed along. He knew exactly what she intended, and a thrill coursed through him. He couldn't remember the last time a woman had wrapped her lips

around his cock. She stopped at his navel, licking along the ridges of his muscles, teasing at his belly button. Her hands grasped his hips, and he felt her short nails digging into his skin, causing a delicious ember of pain.

Finally she trailed the last few inches down to his rearing cock and took as much of it as she could in one fell swoop. Colmes nearly fainted at the delicious thrill. The heat of her mouth encased him, and her tongue flicked up and down his length, tripping against the ridge of its head. He moaned and grasped her braids, holding her against him. He couldn't help thrusting into her a few times as she worked him. She wrapped a hand around the base and moved it in counterpoint to her sucking. Small, satisfied noises escaped her, making him all the more aroused. She sounded as if she genuinely enjoyed giving him head. He certainly couldn't deny that he wanted more of it. He enjoyed her ministrations for several moments.

But more than this, he wanted inside her. He pulled her off him and held her face in his hands. Desire blazed in her eyes, and Colmes's heart thudded loudly in his ears.

"Get me a condom," he told her. Addana nodded and climbed off the bed. She found his pants, dug through the pockets, and finally found one. One of the many benefits of military service was that he never went without protection; they made sure of it. Addana came back on the bed and straddled his legs. She licked her lips as her gaze focused on his cock. Colmes sucked in a breath. He didn't want to wait any longer. "Put it on me."

Addana flashed him a wicked smile. She deftly opened the packet and raised the condom to her mouth. She held it in her lips, and then slowly, slowly lowered herself down over his prick. Colmes hissed as he finally felt it against him. She rolled it down over his shaft, and then took one last, long drag back up before leveling her gaze on him again.

"I'm gonna ride you, cowboy," Addana said, and she crawled up his body. She kissed his lips once—merely a light peck—and then positioned herself over his member. She knelt there, her desire and need mapped across her face, and Colmes

wanted to thrust up into her, to take control, to take what he wanted, but he held back. He'd let her play her game, no matter how slow and torturous she made it. She swayed side to side a few times, then began to lower herself. She dipped her pussy just to the tip of his cock, then raised up again. He wished she'd spear herself down on it, but she wouldn't. The next time she lowered herself, she went just a bit farther, but again pulled back.

"My God, woman." Colmes gritted his teeth and looked away, the image of her too much for him.

After a few more teasing strokes of her cunt against his dick, she finally sank all the way down, and a ragged breath ripped from Colmes's lungs. The feel of her seared into him, branding him, and he reached up to grasp her hips to keep her from leaving again. He wanted to experience this grasping heat forever. Her flesh dimpled beneath his fingers, but he didn't let her move. Just held her. Her hands splayed out across his chest, covering his nipples, and he felt them go hard beneath her palms. A woman had never felt so right to him before, so perfectly suited to his cock, to his entire body. He'd never understood the idea of wanting to live inside someone, but here, now, he totally got it.

"You want me to just sit here all day?" Addana asked as she circled her hips slightly, all the movement she could probably manage.

Colmes looked up into her eyes and smiled weakly. "It's just..." He couldn't explain it. A big, strong man like himself completely overwhelmed by the feel of a woman? Right. Next he'd take pottery or something. Finally he forced his hands away, balling them at his sides and letting Addana do what she would.

"That's a boy," she said as she began an excruciating journey up and down his prick, each route causing Colmes to shudder and force himself not to take control. If he grabbed her again and started pounding into her, the entire liaison would be over in a matter of moments, so he let her have her agonizing way with him. His gaze drifted to the joining of their bodies. In the sunlight coming through the trailer

window, he could see her moisture coating him, the evidence of her lust beading on his pubic hairs.

Her pace built as he watched. He still dare not touch her. The feel of her skin beneath his hands could be too much. He wanted this to last. As she worked, her short nails dug into his chest; she seemed to need to hold on, to connect through more than one part of her body. The bed creaked beneath them, and he watched as a bead of sweat dripped down Addana's flat stomach. The air was cool, but she evidently worked hard.

"Grab my tits," she told him, her voice thready. Colmes had to obey. He unclenched his hands and brought them up to her breasts. Her nipples pebbled when his palms brushed them, and a grin spread across her face. Her own hands came up to sandwich his against her body, and the motions of her cunt against his prick grew even more fervent. She couldn't be far off now, could she? Her back arched, and her chin went up. Colmes couldn't see the expression on her face, but from the way she moved, he knew she felt something wonderful. He hoped it resembled even remotely what he felt.

Now her movements came in hurried bouts of bobbing along his length. She took no rest in her actions, but seemed to push herself on and on. Her breath came in ragged gasps, each colored by a little keening wail. Colmes felt his own climax approaching, spurred on by some sympathetic response to Addana. He usually had to work for his own orgasms, to move his lover just so and thrust a particular way, but somehow she'd found exactly what he liked doing what she wanted. He grinned huge, and he gasped in great breaths of air as if he did all the work.

Then he felt Addana's pussy clench around him, and she cried out as her entire body stilled. Her nails dug into the flesh of his hands, still crushed against her breasts. Colmes gritted his teeth, trying to hold on a moment longer. He rode out her spasms as she pumped and jerked around him. He knew every movement her body now made was a reflex, a subconscious motion with no will behind it, but it

still seemed that Addana performed each one for his benefit, meaning to drive him ever on and upward.

He ripped his hands away and pulled Addana down to him. In one well-timed movement, he flipped her on her back—his cock never leaving her cunt—and after only a few more swift thrusts, he came. An animal grunt forced its way out of him, and he couldn't believe that he'd made such a sound. His prick twitched inside the tight confines of Addana's pussy, and his orgasm seemed to go on and on. He squeezed his eyes shut as he sustained the exquisite torment.

When he opened them, he saw Addana gazing up at him, her face as peaceful as he'd ever seen it in the short time he'd known her. He wanted to see that look every morning when he woke up and to know he put it there.

He rolled to the side, slipped off the condom, and threw it in a nearby wastebasket. Then he gathered her small form up in his arms and held her.

* * *

By the time Addana had shooed Colmes out of her trailer, done the dishes from their oh-so-homey breakfast, and cleaned herself up, it was nearly lunch time. Just as she picked up the shovel to start moving piles of rubble from one place to another, she heard the bell on the Red Cross truck. She didn't feel hungry yet, but she certainly wanted to check up on the neighborhood progress, if there was any.

She dropped the shovel, took off her gloves, and shoved them in the pocket of her overalls. She headed up the block and realized she felt a certain lightness in her step that she hadn't known in some time. She knew the reason for it. Without a doubt. Sarge. Just the thought of him warmed her heart...and other parts of her too.

When the lunch truck and picnic table came into sight, Addana went straight to sit down with the Washingtons. Today, she didn't feel that same twinge she normally felt when she met up with them. She didn't begrudge them the fact that they had each other, or that they had more money to spend on the property. She

supposed Colmes had put her in more of a holiday spirit. She felt happy for them and evidently they could tell, or at least Erica could.

“Did you get some good news, baby?” she asked as Addana sat down.

“Oh no.” She tried to downplay the grin on her face. She probably looked like an idiot, but she didn’t care. This idiot felt better about the world than she had in a long time. *If I’d known it was as easy as catching a man...* But it wasn’t just that, was it? She couldn’t have brought home any man. It had to be Colmes. Something about him...

“We’ve got the tree up,” Erica told her. “Why don’t you come by and see it?”

“I’d love to.”

Addana got a cup of coffee from the truck for the journey to the Washingtons’ house. As she and the family of four walked through the neighborhood, Tim pointed out any of the houses he’d heard updates about. Most of the news didn’t sound promising, and sadness started to chip away at Addana’s good spirits. Some of these people, who she’d gone to church with and worked with, she would never see again. Children her sons had played with now went to school in other cities with no thought of returning. Doubt pricked at her.

But then her gaze fell on the Washingtons’ house, and hope swelled within her. On either side of it weeds grew, cars lay on their sides, and roofs fell in, but the Washingtons’ place looked as if the storm had not touched it. The ever-present hum of generators suggested that things weren’t 100 percent back to normal, but it could be ignored when confronted with the strings of lights, inflatable lawn decorations, and the huge red and green wreath on the front door that sang “Christmas.”

Addana stopped in her tracks, and tears sprang to her eyes. She wanted to thank the Washingtons for keeping this neighborhood torch lit, but her words stuck in her throat. Erica must have noticed because she gathered Addana into her arms and hugged her hard as the boys and Tim continued on toward the house.

“I...can’t wait to see it at night,” Addana forced out over the lump in her throat.

“Come in for a cookie and look at the tree,” Erica said as she pulled away from Addana. “You’ll feel better.”

Addana nodded and let Erica lead her into the house. They’d trimmed the tree beautifully—all white lights, red bows, and golden orbs—and piles of presents lay beneath the boughs. Addana sank down onto their brand new, overstuffed sectional and took in the tree. She sipped her coffee as she just looked. Erica came in from the kitchen with a plate of cookies and set them down on the coffee table in front of Addana. Then she sat too.

“If you’d asked me on August 29th if we’d be here, now, I would have laughed in your face,” Erica said, her voice quiet. “God knows I didn’t want to come back, but Tim... He wouldn’t have it any other way.” Erica smiled at Addana. “He loves this neighborhood almost as much as you do, I think.”

Addana flashed her own smile, but tears still blurred her eyes. She had an overwhelming urge to call her kids. What day was it anyway? Addana scanned the room and found an advent calendar propped on an end table. Every window save for one had been opened. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve then. Addana shook her head. Her first Christmas without family ever. She’d go to church, stay for the potluck, but it wouldn’t be the same. Having her children hundreds of miles away made the holiday seem so much more...pointless.

She took one of the decorated sugar cookies off the plate—a perfectly frosted reindeer complete with a red cinnamon candy nose—and bit into it. Normalcy. She needed more of this, but she needed her own brand of it. Addana heard laughter from the other room; clearly Tim and his sons were getting into something. Erica sighed. “It’s a hard road, isn’t it?”

“I’d say ‘you have no idea,’ but I’m pretty sure you do.” Addana ate the rest of her cookie and washed down the crumbs with a last swig of her coffee. Finally she swiped the back of her free hand across her eyes, trying to dispel the last few lingering drops of moisture there.

Erica patted Addana’s knee. “Go see your family for the holiday, Dana.”

But her resolution had returned, and there was no time for trips to Houston. She had to sacrifice now, but it would be for the best in the long run. "I'm stayin' here. Mama's turned into such a nag. She ain't coming back, but I got to get the place ready for my boys. Gonna have them for next school year. Not a lot of time to finish the house." She stood. "You've made yourself a beautiful home. Thanks for refreshin' my memory about why I'm here."

Laughter filled the house again, and Addana let herself out the front door. As she walked back to her place, she took her phone out and called Houston. "Mama? It's Dana. Put my babies on for me, will you?"

Chapter Five

Addana's eyes flew open. A few more gunshots popped in the air outside, and she swore she could smell rubber burning. She didn't bother turning on a light—it would only draw attention—but struggled into her jacket and shoes. She found her cell phone on the trailer's table and called 911 before grabbing her shotgun and heading out into the night. Her heart thudded in her chest. She didn't know what to expect upon exiting. Scratch that, she did sort of know what to expect. Those sounds and those smells suggested a hell of a lot.

She took a moment to catch her breath and try to still her heart. Then she crept around the edge of the trailer. About a block down, a burning car sat in the middle of the road. A large silver SUV parked nearby, and a group of people stood, watching. In the flickering light of the fire, Addana could see someone on the ground too. *Probably been shot.* Addana's instincts did battle. She knew if she stood here and waited, there was little chance they'd catch her, but she also wanted desperately to drive this scum from her neighborhood. As she watched, trying to decide what to do, her grip white-knuckled on her shotgun, the sound of sirens split the air. That seemed to be enough to get the group to scatter. Some threw themselves into the car, and others took off on foot. When they'd cleared the scene, she ran to help whoever was on the ground. She crouched next to him and dropped her shotgun. Blood, glossy black in the firelight, covered his front. He shivered, whether from shock or the cold temperature Addana did not know. She ripped open his clothes, looking for his wounds, not caring about the blood on her hands. She'd never had to concern herself with stuff like this in the clinic where she worked, but she had been trained to deal with it.

The sirens grew louder, and soon a New Orleans Police Department car and a National Guard truck pulled up. Their headlights landed on Addana's patient, and with a gasp she realized he was still nearly a child. Not much older than Tim and Erica's boys. Now with the light on him, she could see to his wounds: three gunshots, one to the thigh, one to the gut, and another to the shoulder. She clicked her tongue as she shredded his clothes to make compresses and tourniquets. She wouldn't be able to keep pressure on all of them. She tied off his leg above the wound, and then tried press down on the other two wounds.

She heard a car door slam. "I hope y'all got an ambulance coming," she said into the night. Radios buzzed and crackled, and people talked in low but firm voices. "SUV, silver, went that way. Would be hard to miss tonight." She pointed down the road without looking up. "Some ran that way too." She pointed again, and then returned her focus to her patient. More sirens picked up, and Addana prayed they meant the ambulance.

The police car pulled out, leaving her in a swath of darkness.

"Dana, you need anything?"

Colmes had come to her call. Addana smiled. "Another set of hands. And find the fucking hoodlums who did this."

"I can do one or the other, baby," he said.

Addana smiled to herself at the endearment. "Go get them then."

Footsteps, then the truck gunned back into life and the tires spun on the gravel-covered road.

She sat again in the darkness, the only light coming from the still-burning car. Her patient didn't talk, and he barely breathed. She hoped she'd acted soon enough. She didn't want to start Christmas with a dead man.

Christmas? Sure, it had to be well after midnight. Christmas morning. "Don't leave your mama on Christmas, child," she said to the wounded teenager beneath her.

Finally the ambulance pulled up, and in a flurry of action, the paramedic and EMT had the wounded man loaded into the back of the car, and they were off. A fire truck came too, though nobody seemed too concerned about the car. There wasn't anything around it worth saving. Still, they put it out with a quick jet of water from the tank truck, and then they too took off.

When the streets had cleared, Addana picked her gun up off the pavement and dragged herself back to the trailer. Blood covered her, and all she could think about was a hot shower. Not caring—who was around to see anyway?—Addana stripped off the blood-soaked clothes and left them in a pile on the ground before even getting into the trailer. She didn't feel like salvaging them. In fact, if she never saw them again, she'd be happy. Goose bumps broke out across her skin in the cold, but she welcomed the sensation. It pushed through her numbness at what had happened.

Once in the trailer, she propped her gun back up next to the door, locked the door behind her, and shuffled into the tiny bathroom. Addana turned on the shower. She wished the pressure were better; she'd have to spend a great deal of time scouring instead of letting the water do the work. She grabbed a washcloth off the rack and stepped into the stream of water. She began scrubbing herself off and watched as the red-tinged water ran down the drain. She prayed that this incident didn't make it onto the news. If it did, surely her mother would hear about it. And if Mama heard about it, the harassing would start all over again to get Addana to leave. Hell, it was people leaving that caused the neighborhood to deteriorate enough that something like this shooting would happen here. Holy Cross had never been perfect, but this... She shuddered under the spray, the heat of the water not quite dispelling the chill of the night.

When the water running down the drain contained no more tint of red, she stepped out, dried off, and then went into her bedroom to find something to wear. She threw on jeans and a sweater. Addana knew she wouldn't be able to sleep right away, if at all. She fixed herself a mug of hot cocoa and sat down at the table,

sipping her drink, but the trailer seemed stifling. She opened the door and stepped outside, taking her mug with her.

She crossed her littered yard to her stoop and sat down on the porch steps. Clutching the cooling mug in her hands, Addana looked to the sky, to the place where she thought the Wise Men would have seen the star guiding them to the Christ Child. Something did glow there. She thought it could be a planet, or maybe even a satellite, but it just as easily could have been a star God placed there just for her tonight. She squeezed her eyes shut. *Dear Lord, please see me through these troubles.* She opened her eyes again and sipped at her hot chocolate. A cool breeze drifted up off the river, cutting right through the sweater she wore, but she didn't mind. The air cleared her mind.

She looked out across her neighborhood, and here and there, she saw the glow of a few more house lights than there were last week. She thought that was the best Christmas present anyone could give her: proof that her world was coming back. As she sat there, headlights cut through the darkness. Addana didn't know who it would be, but her adrenaline had already been used up, her gun was still in the trailer, and after all, it was Christmas. God would look out for her tonight of all nights.

She smiled, though, when the truck parked behind her trailer. Colmes stepped out and walked across the yard to her.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked.

Addana shrugged. "Gettin' some air, clearin' my head." She took another sip of her cocoa. "Did you find them?"

"NOPD apprehended the SUV. I tracked down a couple of the guys that had run. Sat on them until more NOPD could arrest them." Colmes lowered himself onto the step below Addana's and took a deep breath. "You've got some balls on you, woman. You know that, right?"

She smiled into her mug. "I'm a nurse," she told him. "It's in the training. I'd probably have turned tail if I hadn't seen that injured man."

“Well, you probably saved the kid’s life.”

“I know.”

Colmes rested a hand on her knee, and the two sat there in the silence of the evening.

“Merry Christmas,” he said quietly.

“Merry Christmas.”

* * *

Addana’s eyes went back to the sky, and Colmes knew the look that sat heavy on her face, like a wet plaster cast. Events tonight had challenged her faith. His gaze drifted back to the still-smoking bulk of the car down the road. In the darkness, the scene looked like it could have been anywhere: Baghdad, Belgrade, Rwanda... Colmes shook his head. “This change your mind at all?” he asked. He glanced back at Addana.

She shivered a little in the cold night air, but a small smile played across her lips. “What do you mean?”

“About leaving. Getting out.”

The gaze she gave him seemed full of pity, like she felt sorry for him because he didn’t understand. “It’s because people give up that the neighborhood turns out like this. No, this girl is *holdin’* out.”

He admired her tenacity. She was hard to cow. “Come on. You’re shivering.” He stood and offered her his hand. Addana took it and let him pull her to her feet. She pressed against his chest for a moment, and Colmes wrapped his arms around her small form. He breathed in the scent of her, the tang of fear still noticeable under the soap and lotion. He wanted so badly to protect her, to offer her something to make the pain in her life go away. He felt her take a few deep, shaky breaths.

He held her against him as he walked her back to the trailer. At the door, he saw the pile of bloody clothes on the ground, and the sight reminded him again of how much he’d come to care for Addana and how he didn’t want to see anything

happen to her. He wished for a moment that she'd stayed inside and hid, but the woman he was growing to love wouldn't have done that. *Couldn't* have done that. And he probably wouldn't want her so much if she had. He smiled. He should worry about how quickly his feelings had evolved, but right now, he had other things to concern himself with.

Once he got her inside, he turned up the thermostat to get the trailer a little warmer. She sat down on the bench around the small table at the front. Her mug clanked against the laminate when she set it down. Colmes stood, leaning against the counter, watching. Strain pulled at her face.

He sat down on the bench next to her and pressed a kiss to her temple. "What can I do?" he asked.

Addana's gaze landed on him. "Take my mind off this," she said, "and don't talk to me again about leavin'."

He reached his hand out to her, and she took it. He pulled her back through the trailer to the bedroom. "I can't stay long. I've still got to finish patrol.

"It don't matter," Addana said as she began to undress. "I just need a little...affirmation of life right now."

Colmes started undressing himself too, and he felt mildly awed by the fact that he earned this woman's trust so quickly. He had a feeling she didn't give it easily, that she'd been alone more than she ought to have been, but that by her own choice. Warmth spread through him as she revealed her body.

They both stood naked, their gazes on each other. Addana closed the distance between them and let Colmes fold her up in his arms. He rested his chin on the top of her head, and the nearness, the feel of her skin against his, caused his cock to rise in no time. She reached a hand down between them, grasped his thick length, and then began to stroke. Colmes sighed at the feel of it.

"We need to rush this, don't we?" Addana asked.

"Yes," Colmes murmured into her hair.

“Well, I might have just the thing.” Addana pushed away and went to the small, built-in side table next to the bed. She opened a drawer and took something out. Colmes eyebrows raised when he saw it. A vibrator. He didn’t know what she had planned, but his dick leaked a bead of precum at the sight.

Addana lay on the bed and spread her arms, the vibrator clutched in one hand. “Come on,” she said.

Colmes found the condoms he now made sure never to leave without and slipped one on. Then he climbed onto the bed and lowered himself down over Addana. She switched on the vibrator and pushed it between them, running it against her own folds and tapping it against his cock and balls.

“I’m already wet for you,” she told him, and she pulled it away.

Without another moment’s hesitation, Colmes drove into her. He thrilled at the feel of her tight cunt around him. Each movement within her sent a delicious thrill through his entire body.

He watched her face and knew that she experienced the same stimulation he did. But slowly a wicked grin spread across her face. Colmes wondered only for a moment why, and then he felt the vibrator graze across one of his butt cheeks. The sensation caused him to break out in goose bumps, and all of the sudden he knew exactly what she had planned. A prickle of fear coursed through him, but it was tempered by the realization that Addana had a kinky side he had not expected. He wondered what else she’d be open to.

As he thrust into her, she insinuated the vibrator between his cheeks, and all she needed to do was touch it against his asshole. He gritted his teeth, almost afraid to admit how much anticipation filled him to feel it inside him.

But then she pulled it away, still writhing against him, but denying him the stimulation of the vibrator. Her smile faded, but Colmes knew it came from the fact that she’d become wrapped up in the pleasure she experienced, not from some dismay or unhappiness.

Then she seemed to remember where she was and what she was doing. She slipped the vibrator back down, and nudged it against his hole.

With that simple suggestion, she threw him over the edge. As he tensed, his body wracked with his orgasm, she rode him from beneath, bringing herself up in record time to meet him.

She cursed as she came, and then collapsed, the vibrator—still running—falling from her hand onto the floor. Colmes pushed himself up and knelt there for a moment, just looking at her exhausted form. He took a few deep breaths to steady himself. Then he got up and went to the bathroom to clean up. When he returned, Addana had pulled the sheets and blankets over her naked form and fallen asleep. He dressed quietly and turned off the vibrator and lights as he left.

Chapter Six

Addana sat in the weak Christmas morning sunlight and stared at her cell phone. Her eyes felt gritty and raw, and she had that funny feeling in her stomach—almost like apprehension—that came with too little sleep. A cup of hot chocolate, sporting a candy cane as a swizzle stick, sat cooling on the step beside her, her only indication that today was Christmas.

She hugged one arm around herself, feeling the fabric of the uniform jacket Colmes had left her. The events of the night before had ruined her one coat, and he had promised her he'd get another. She swam in his coat, but she welcomed the warmth and of the smell of him that permeated the fabric. She looked back to the spot where she'd left her clothes. Colmes must have packed them up and disposed of them when he left. She wished she could tell him how much that meant to her, that she didn't have to see them or touch them again. He really was proving to be a godsend, and even if they only had a couple of weeks together, she would count her blessings that she'd known him even for so short a time. She just hoped she could find a man like him to fill a more permanent role in her life.

Addana focused again on the phone. She had to call her mother's house. She had to see if her sons liked the presents she sent, to check in with her mother, and to take, like a good martyr, the castigation that was sure to come. She'd never spent a Christmas away from her sons. Even when she'd had to work at the clinic on holidays, she'd made sure she was with them for part of the day, ensured they had a real Christmas dinner and presents and the works. Travis had always been wonderful about making sure holidays seemed like real holidays, even when her work schedule made it difficult. And now...

She flipped open her phone and hit the speed dial for her mother's Houston landline. She reflected now on how hard it had been to program that number in, erasing the one associated with the house just down the block where she had grown up and where she'd always been able to visit when times were hard. If her mother hadn't lived only a short walk away in the weeks and months that she had dealt with Travis's death, she didn't think she would have made it. She wanted her mother down the road again, but since she lived through Betsy, Camille, and Katrina, she'd definitely had enough. Addana couldn't see herself abandoning the neighborhood though.

She held the phone to her ear and waited. Finally it picked up, and a wall of sound that could only be Christmas morning with a whole lot of people in the house met her.

"Merry Christmas. And hello?" her mother said.

Addana took a deep breath. "Hey, Mama."

"Dana!" Her mother opened a door, then closed it. Silence fell. "Merry Christmas, baby."

"Merry Christmas to you."

"It's just too noisy. I had to take the cordless out of the house."

"I could hear it." She stirred her chocolate with the candy cane and watched the brown surface turn into a whirlpool. She thought about losing herself in that, being sucked down, and the image recalled flood waters, broken levies, and death. She pushed the mug away and looked out toward the river instead. "So how are the boys?"

"When I can find them in this mess of people?" Mama sighed. "They're good. I'll pull them out here in a second to talk to you."

"Did the presents arrive on time?"

"Nice postman came late last night with the boxes, so they got under the tree just in time. No postman in New Orleans would have done that."

“Sure they would have.” Her mother harrumphed on the other end of the line. Addana cringed at how bitter her mother seemed. She could have left years ago if she’d wanted, but she used the storm as an excuse. Since she’d been in Houston, her reasons for hating New Orleans seemed to multiply. Addana hoped her mother used it as some kind of coping mechanism; maybe she worked to convince herself that place she missed wasn’t worth going back to.

“So how are things there?”

“You know.”

“You sound tired.” Her mother paused, and plain as day, in her imagination Addana could see the expression on her mother’s face. She always got a look when she tried to figure something out, a very particular look. “Something happen?”

“Nothing to worry about,” Addana said, hoping she sounded convincing.

“No. Something’s different.”

She waited patiently for her mother to move on to another topic. Addana wouldn’t admit to anything.

“It’s a man,” her mother finally said. “You’ve got a man out there, haven’t you?”

Addana shook her head, surprised by how perceptive her mother could be, even over the phone. “Yes, Mama. I met someone. One of the National Guard troops down here.”

“Don’t get too involved. He’s just going to pack up and move on sooner than later.”

She felt guilty at the stab of pain from the truth of that. Colmes had made a point of saying whatever they had between them would only be for the short term, but she could imagine him here, longer. “Let me talk to my boys.”

“I’ve just got to go and find them.”

The wall of sound hit Addana again as her mother headed back inside to find the boys. She heard her sons' voices over the fray, cutting through like bells at the stock exchange.

They fought over the phone, and then they too must have headed outside because the world on the other end of the line grew quiet.

"Mama?" Jarvis said.

"Let me talk to her," Rodell demanded, his voice a touch fainter.

"Merry Christmas," she said, and she had to work hard to keep the hitch out of her voice that would expose her sadness. She wanted her boys to feel as happy as they could on Christmas, even if they weren't together. Addana settled in for a long chat.

* * *

Colmes used his phone card to call his parents in Nebraska. He wanted to head right for bed but knew his mother wouldn't forgive him if he didn't put in his customary Christmas morning phone call.

He had a good picture in his head of what their Christmas morning looked like at the retirement community where they lived. His mother had probably set up her three-foot artificial tree on one of those round decorator tables in their small living room. She'd most likely decorated it with nothing but teddy bears, and teddy bears in various costumes, in baby carriages, and on rocking horses, would sit on the floor around the table and on whatever part of the table wasn't taken up by tree or presents. They'd have a handful of small gifts, shipped there by the children they had spread out all across America.

The entire situation made Colmes sad, really. He always felt torn between family and duty, and he sort of hated the modern world for the way it managed to spread families out and keep them separated. He looked forward to the idea of settling down, even if he did have to give up the service to do it.

The phone rang and rang. He wondered if his mother had turned off her hearing aid, or if she'd run the batteries down and didn't realize it. The staff at the community was generally pretty good about checking in on them, but with the holiday, they might be understaffed.

Then someone picked up, and he heard heavy, wheezing breaths. "Hello?"

The strangled sound of the word certainly made Colmes nervous. "Dad, is that you? What's wrong? You sound awful."

"Oh, no." He took a few more moments to catch his breath. "Richard brought the grandkids for Christmas. We were playing with toy gliders out front. I had to run in to get the phone."

Knowing his brother Richard had gone home for the holidays only made him feel worse. "Well, don't push yourself too hard. Merry Christmas, by the way."

"Same to you. Wish you could have made it up or down or... Where are you again?"

"New Orleans."

"Oh, right. Is it as bad as the news says?"

"Pretty bad."

"Here's your mother." Colmes's father never liked to talk long on the phone. "It's Aleister."

"Merry Christmas, Aleister!" his mother cried. She always had trouble with phone volume, even when her hearing aid functioned. "It's so nice to see Richard and the kids."

Of course, she glossed over Richard's wife, who was Hispanic. They treated her nice enough to her face, but he knew that his parents, deep down, didn't approve. He wondered what they'd think of Addana if he brought her home. He decided he didn't care. The point was moot, anyway, since he couldn't have anything long-term with her.

"We'd love to see you too," his mother continued.

"I'm working, Mom. Maybe next year, when I'm retired."

"Sure, sure." She fell silent for a moment. "Say, do you want to talk to Richard? I'm sure he'd love to say hi to his big brother."

Colmes groaned inwardly. Despite their disapproval of Richard's wife, his parents still held him in high regard. Never mind Colmes's medals or service to his country. His brother had become a dentist with a very successful city practice, something his parents never tired of reminding him about.

"Aleister, how's it hanging, man?"

Richard, on the other hand, didn't let any gauges of success or parental approval sour his relationship with his brother, and Colmes totally appreciated that. Richard would always be his little brother.

He leaned against the wall next to the payphone and settled in for a talk with his brother. Sleep would have to wait a few more minutes.

* * *

Addana walked into the fellowship hall, and the amount of people filling the room surprised her. She couldn't believe so many had come to the Christmas dinner at the church, and most looked as if they meant to help as well as eat. They chopped salad greens, presliced pies for later serving, and set up coffee carafes. She wished she'd come earlier, but after her phone call with Jarvis and Rodell, she'd had a good cry and then had to clean herself up. She didn't want anyone to see the pain on her face today and try to talk to her about it. She wanted to have a nice holiday dinner with her congregation, to feel some joy in their coming together for this day, and to—if it was at all possible—forget her hard work and sorrow for at least a little bit.

Addana looked down at the store-bought pecan pie she held. She had wanted to bake something from scratch, but the oven in the trailer had problems getting up to temperature, and she definitely needed to save her propane. January always felt colder than December did, even if it had snowed last December. She got lost a moment in the memory of Jarvis and Rodell running around in the front yard, trying to collect enough snow to make a snowman. They'd never played in the snow

before, and it coming on Christmas too... If Travis had been alive, it would have been a perfect holiday.

She walked over and set the pie down on the dessert table, offering a few “Merry Christmases” to the volunteers doing the slicing. When she turned away, the pastor’s wife cried out, “Merry Christmas!” and grasped Addana in a hug from which she could not escape. She found herself lost in the fuchsia suit the woman had stretched over her ample figure. The lights on the Christmas tree pin she wore on her lapel blinked right in Addana’s eyes. The woman’s arms felt like steel bands, and she couldn’t push away. She took shallow breaths, trying not to smell the cloying perfume.

Finally, right when she feared she might suffocate, the woman grasped her shoulders and set her upright at arm’s length. Addana tried surreptitiously to take a few deep breaths now that she was free. She wiped her hand across her brow, and then plastered the best smile she could manage on her face.

“Mrs. Lyman.”

“Addana, dear, I’m so glad you decided to join us on this happy day.” She dropped her hands. “I was just telling Tiberius what a strong woman you are. I couldn’t imagine doing what you are doing without a man beside me.”

Same old song, new day. Addana felt her gut sort of sinking.

“We missed you at Bible study on Thursday.”

“I worked late on the house.” She all of the sudden felt the weight of last night’s trials full on her shoulders. Her smile faltered. She glanced around. Had anyone heard what had happened? Did they care? Hell, the boy could have been related to someone in the congregation. The need to know the fate of that boy seized her. What hospital did they take gunshot wounds to, now that Charity had closed? Would they give her information over the phone? Probably not. She had no connection to the victim, anyway.

“Are you okay?” Mrs. Lyman asked, and Addana realized she’d let her attention waver.

“Yes, I’m sorry. I’ll try to come this week. I just have so much work, you know?”

“God understands, but always find time in your day to pray.” Mrs. Lyman turned away, already waving to the next member of the congregation that needed her attention.

Addana took a deep breath, trying to dispel the anxiety and weariness that had descended over her. The sea of people around her seemed to ebb and flow; she heard sounds, but didn’t register speech. *Fatigue got the better of me.* She started for the door, wanting to splash some water on her face or something.

But then he appeared, standing in the entrance flanked by the private he always had with him and an NOPD officer. She had no idea he’d be here; she hadn’t invited him, knowing he had all-night patrol the previous night and thinking he’d spend the holiday sleeping. Just the sight of Colmes standing there, strong and commanding, shot adrenaline through her system. She remembered how he’d fucked her last night. He used her so well that, even now, a spark of heat lit in the bottom of her stomach. She wanted him, and the thought of it reinvigorated her.

She smiled, and when he noticed her, she could see some of the tension ease out of his body too, evidenced in a certain softening of his features. He quickened his pace across the floor to her, leaving the other two men behind him.

When they met in the middle of the floor, he hugged her. Addana heard the world go silent around her. She wondered if the congregation actually hushed up when they witnessed the affection or if it was just the stillness of her mind that came from being in Colmes’s arms. She could feel his warmth through her clothes, and there was definitely a firmness about his groin that betrayed his feelings for her. He let her go far too soon, and then brushed a braid out of her face.

“I’m glad to see you here,” he said, his voice low.

“I didn’t know you were coming.” Addana’s cheeks felt hot.

“We met your pastor at a community outreach meeting the other day, and he invited us over.” He leaned in slightly closer and whispered, “I want you now.”

Addana nodded. "Me too," she said quietly, "but how?"

Colmes straightened, took her hand, and led her back toward the entrance. As he passed the private, he said, "I've got something in the truck I've got to show Mrs. Carmouche here. It relates to the events of last night."

"Sure thing, Sarge," the private said, and Colmes dragged Addana into the building's hallway. Rather than head out toward the parking lot, though, he led her down the darkened corridor toward where the Sunday school classrooms and makeshift volunteer quarters lay. Colmes peered into room after room through the glass panels in the door until finally he stopped at one, opened the door, and pulled Addana inside.

The small room clearly waited for its next occupant. A narrow cot with plain white sheets and a folded army surplus blanket sat shoved against one corner of the room. There was also a small pressboard chest of drawers and a matching desk with a molded plastic seat like the ones found in classrooms. As the door closed, Colmes gathered Addana up in his arms and crushed his lips to hers. She stumbled back until she hit the wall, and he followed after, never releasing his lip-lock on her. Addana ran her hands up and down his strong back, glorying in the feel of his muscles.

His hands grazed down her hips and started pulling up the length of her skirt. Addana felt it skim up her skin; even that sensation banked the fires within her. She wrapped her arms around his neck as Colmes's hands finally caressed the bare skin of her thighs, and then he placed one hand on the small of her back and the other dipped between her legs. He pulled away the fabric of her panties. Addana moaned into him as his fingers tripped across her already engorged clit.

He lifted her against him as he played her body like an instrument. Addana wrapped one of her legs around his, holding more of her body against him, wanting as much connection as possible. But after only a few moments, Colmes pushed her away and knelt in front of her. He pulled her skirt and panties down. Her clothing pooled at her ankles, and Colmes leaned into her. His hands now grasped her hips,

his fingers dimpling the flesh there. She felt trapped between him and the cold, solid wall at her back, and with that feeling of confinement came one of security. She felt safe and cared for as his hot breath bathed her pussy and his tongue slipped between her folds. She loved the feel of him against her, but she wanted more. Before long, he'd send her over the edge; she wanted him inside her when that happened.

Addana wriggled away from him. "Sheathe up, baby," she told him, and then watched as he undid his zipper, dropped his pants, and revealed his huge member to her. She grinned, and her mouth watered, along with other parts of her anatomy. From his pocket came a foil pack, which he carefully opened, and then he rolled the condom down along his shaft.

He rose, and before giving Colmes time to do anything else, Addana threw herself into his arms, wrapped both legs around his hips, and brought herself down on his prick. They wouldn't have a lot of time. How would it look if Pastor Lyman was saying grace over the meal when Colmes and Addana walked in, clearly flushed from sex?

She knew she wouldn't have any trouble getting herself off on his hot, rigid length. And Colmes gripped her ass, holding her secure and moving her in just the right ways. Their panting synchronized. She listened to the sounds of their bodies uniting as she rode him, her eyes half closed, her head resting against the wall at her back.

She traveled away on waves of sensation, the dirty, ruined world around her drifting far, far off into the distance. Her existence narrowed to the point of cock in cunt, and then, when she could hardly stand it anymore, exploded out from there. Addana cried out before she could stop herself.

Colmes thrust into her a few more times, and then he came too, his fingers gripping her tight enough to probably leave bruises.

He held her against the wall a moment longer, his forehead on her shoulder. Their breathing came in ragged gasps.

Addana met his eyes, and a sense of complete safety and security came over her. It surprised her. She didn't think she needed a man to feel that way, but even in the short time they'd been together, he'd proved he'd always be there for her. No matter what.

She embraced him tighter, burying her head against his chest as he held her up.

"Okay?" Colmes asked.

She lifted her head away and nodded.

He finally lowered her to her shaky legs, and then he re-dressed her, adjusting her clothes and wiping the smears of her lipstick from her face. He took the condom off, tied it in a knot, and then dropped it in the wastepaper basket near the desk which, luckily, already had a few coffee cups and crumpled newspaper pages in it. He put his clothes back on, and Addana straightened them and double-checked his appearance for him.

When they made it back into the dining room, people had already lined up for their dinners. Colmes and Addana slipped into the back of the line; no one seemed to notice.

Chapter Seven

Fireworks exploded upriver, casting their colorful sparks across the Central Business District of New Orleans, reflecting in the water of the Mississippi, and falling down over the French Quarter. The corresponding booms and crackles took several moments to travel down river to where Colmes and Addana stood on the levy, surrounded by a few other Holy Cross residents, watching the New Year's Eve extravaganza.

Colmes kissed the top of Addana's head as he held her. They'd had a blissful stretch of days together, time he wouldn't trade for anything. The house had come a long way in the space of a week; he'd been able to look after her when she awoke in the middle of the night, scared; and the sex... Well, he'd never had better. But he'd finally received his orders. In only a couple of days, he'd be off again, going through his final exit meetings, debriefings, and what not. And then...

He turned her around, the need to confront her now overwhelming. He wasn't one to make New Year's resolutions, but right now he would make her a promise. He looked down into her dark eyes, watched for a moment the reflections of the fireworks going off all around them. He took a deep breath, trying to still his heart. In all his years, Colmes had never come *this close* to committing himself to a woman, but now that he'd found Addana, he didn't want to let her go.

"Come with me," he said. "Come live with me on the farm. I'll promise to make a home for you and the boys. I've got a huge house. I want you to come help me make it a home."

He'd seen a flicker of hope and joy in her face for only a moment, but then the determination he'd grown so accustomed to quickly replaced it. His heart sank at

the expression. Her jaw set, but her gaze still held a little softness for him, a slight glimmer of love.

“Oh, baby.” She shook her head. “I ain’t moving to Houston. I ain’t moving to Nebraska. I’m staying *here*. This is my home. I love that you asked me. I love that you would make sacrifices for me and my boys. But I can’t. I have to stay here. I have to see this place alive again.” She reached up and touched his cheek. Colmes closed his eyes and felt the roughness of her work-hardened fingers against his skin. He didn’t want to imagine her by herself again here, or worse, moving on to find some other man while he stewed in the giant house up north, alone.

“Addana—”

“No.” She stepped away from him.

He dropped his arms to his sides, feeling more powerless than he ever had. People didn’t refuse him. People snapped to attention and said, “Sir, yes, sir!” without batting an eye. Would he have to get used to refusal in civilian life? “What if I made it an order?” he asked quietly.

Her laugh sounded a little forced, but her slight smile appeared genuine. “I wish it were as easy as all that.”

Behind her, the grand finale of the New Orleans New Year’s Eve fireworks exploded into the sky, dazzling him. He stared at it, unable to meet Addana’s eyes after her rejection. He sighed. He didn’t know why he expected a different answer. He’d hoped they had more than this fling between them, but in reality, he’d known all along that her heart first belonged to the city, and then to him—if at all.

She grasped one of his hands in both of hers. “I love you, Aleister.”

He didn’t realize how easy it would be to say. “I love you too.” Suddenly it seemed as if that was all that mattered. Even if they couldn’t be together, he loved her. “I’ll visit.” Fatalistic whispers sneaked into his head, though, ones that threatened, should he hold a torch for this woman, he’d die a lonely man. But Colmes knew time hardened him—he’d gone through it before—and that maybe, after a few years, he’d be able to find another woman.

But when he looked down again into Addana's large, dark eyes, he knew he didn't want another woman. He wanted her. "I'll make this... We'll make this work."

She didn't say anything, just smiled a little wider. She squeezed his hand, and then began pulling him down the embankment.

"This will be our last night together," Colmes said as he followed her.

"Then let's make the most of it."

* * *

Addana worked hard to fight the tears that burned at her eyes as she headed back to her house. She didn't want to tell Colmes no. She wanted him to stay with her, but they'd both agreed, at the beginning of all this, they'd end it when the time came. Neither could work in the other's real world. This was just some type of holiday dream, Addana decided. A beautiful blessing to lighten her heart in troubled times. She would hold the experience close for a long time and remember Colmes on cold nights when she found herself alone.

Addana watched the houses as she walked, wishing they were full of the warmth and bright lights she remembered from New Year's Eves past. Instead, they sat dark and empty. She let herself feel the bittersweet melancholy that came with thinking Colmes would leave in a few days. She knew he had no control over it, that his exit activities, whatever they were, took him away from here on the orders of his superiors. She'd known that from the beginning.

Yet she'd still allowed herself to grow to love him. Her face heated at the realization that she'd even admitted it. But then her heart warmed because he'd said it back. Giddiness overtook, and Addana felt as if she'd been told "I love you" for the first time ever. She wanted to announce it to the world, but she held her tongue.

The light of her trailer shone not far off now. She couldn't wait to get Colmes inside. She wished she had something more...decadent to offer him than the tiny room at the back with its plain but serviceable decor. Certainly he'd re-inspired her

plans to rebuild the master suite in the house. A shame he'd never get the chance to use it.

Addana thought of all the kinky things she'd never get to do with him. Bathing together—though not that kinky—was one thing she definitely wished she could have experienced. One person could barely fit in the trailer's bathroom; two in there was out of the question. She also wished she could have gotten into scarves or maybe some nice silk ropes with him, but nothing in the trailer's bedroom seemed strong enough to tie off to.

Oh well. A final sweet bout of lovemaking tonight would be all they could share, and Addana would enjoy it, just as she'd enjoyed every time they'd come together so far.

She climbed the first two stairs of the trailer and turned to Colmes. They stood face-to-face this way. "Let's make the most of it," she said again, and she leaned forward to kiss him. His arms wrapped around her, and Addana felt as if a giant constrictor had lovingly enveloped her. His lips met hers, and the touch lit a fire within her. She melted against him, feeling the strength of his body, its hardness, against hers. She wanted to live inside that muscle and bone, to forever be a part of him, but the tether to this neighborhood pulled her away.

Addana kissed him as if this could very well be her last kiss ever. She tried to convey every confused feeling to him through it, to force her thoughts and dreams out of her through the conduit of their mouths. To make him understand her love, her complexities, her dedications.

Probably none of that came through, but she had other ways to show him too.

She pulled back from the kiss with a gasp, then turned and unlocked the trailer door.

They went inside, and as soon as the door closed, both began to undress. Layers of wool and flannel and denim fell to the narrow floor, leaving not so much a trail but a mound leading to the bedroom. Standing next to the bed, he removed the last of his clothes, and Addana couldn't help but feel amazed all over again at the

glory that was Colmes's body. Her pussy dampened in anticipation. Of course, she'd been wet since that kiss on the steps.

She raked her gaze over his body to map and memorize each inch of it. He stood there, feet slightly apart, cock already erect, and let her look. She wanted to take her time now, to put off just a little their joining so that she could save an image of him in her head forever. She noticed scars she'd never seen before, and questions filled her mind. Did he get them in childhood or in his many years fighting wars? She wanted to know the story that went with each one. She wanted to lie in his arms as she touched them and listened to him talk. But they didn't have time for that now and probably never would. Instead, she needed to give him one last memorable night before they parted for good.

Addana took a deep breath. She wanted to do something special for him. Something that he would always remember.

"Lie down," she said, her voice full of more confidence than she realized she felt. She knew what she wanted to do for him. Colmes obeyed, lying down on the bed, covering most of the narrow surface with his body. Addana walked around the bed and went to the bedside table, where she pulled out her vibrator. She would have to improvise "kinky" tonight. Her heart pounded, the vibrations thrumming through her feeling as if a freight train passed outside. Nervousness clashed with the thrilling promise of what was to come.

"I wish we had more time," she said, her gaze traveling up and down Colmes's form. She wanted to do so much to him.

"We can..."

Addana shook her head. "Don't start that again."

She set the vibrator on the edge of the bed and knelt over Colmes. She leaned down, and without waiting for another response, took his prick into her mouth. He gasped.

Just as Addana had taken her time looking at him earlier, now she did the same. She traced every vein and line with her tongue, tasted all the places separately, learning their unique flavors. She remembered all of this too.

For a moment, her thoughts flashed to Travis. She'd never taken the opportunity to learn him like this. She never thought she would need to—he'd promised they'd be together forever—but he'd been so violently ripped from her life that she regretted not taking more time. She wouldn't make that same mistake again.

She sucked and dragged, and Colmes sounded appreciative. His small encouragements made her wetter. He reached down and fondled one of her tits, rubbing his palm against the hardened tip and causing Addana to add her own small moans to the sounds in the room. Finally she backed off, not wanting to wait any longer to feel herself speared on his length.

She lowered herself down onto it, and nearly had herself fully impaled, when Colmes said, "Wait!"

"No, baby. Tonight, I don't want nothin' between us. Are you okay with that?"

Addana watched his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed, and then he nodded. She slid the last few spans down his shaft and then paused. She closed her eyes, focusing on the juncture of their bodies. Then she began to move, raising up to the point where he nearly slipped out, then lowering herself again, feeling the fullness that came from such a large prick. Colmes reached up to grab her hips, but she pushed his hands away. She reached up and played with her own nipples. "Are you enjoying the show?" she asked.

He nodded, a small grin on his face, and folded his hands behind his head.

"Good. No touching now."

After a few more strokes, she pulled off him completely. Colmes looked confused as she repositioned herself, crouching, her hips slightly more forward. Then realization seemed to dawn across his face. Addana remembered how good

he'd felt inside her cunt as she worked herself back down over Colmes's prick, but this time, she took him into her ass.

She'd played there a few times with her vibrator or fingers, but she'd never taken a man there.

For Colmes, though, she wanted to, and that desire kept her open for him as the burn of his entry scorched through her channel.

She gritted her teeth as she took him—down, down—until she felt the tickle of his pubic hairs against her crack. She stayed there for a moment, catching her breath, adjusting to the new feeling of being stretched. She knew she had to feel relaxed and aroused for it to work. She grabbed the vibrator and turned it on. She ran it down her stomach to the thatch of black curls covering her sex.

“How does it feel?” Colmes asked, sounding nearly breathless.

Addana tapped the humming toy against her clit a few times, and she felt her muscles start to relax. “Good,” she said and realized that it did in fact feel good. She circled her hips at first, to become accustomed to the slight feel. Then she started riding him, slowly. She slipped the vibe between them and drove it into her vacant pussy.

Colmes nearly cried out. “I can feel it through you!” he said, and his eyes squeezed tight. “It’s almost too much.”

Addana fucked herself with the vib and fucked Colmes with her ass. He pulled his hands out from behind his head. She knew he wanted to grab her, but he stopped himself. His knuckles glowed white with tension as he fisted his hands in the air above his head.

Sensations she had never experienced coursed through her. She couldn't hold herself back. She thrust and pushed and ground with more fervor until her orgasm ripped through her.

At almost the exact same time, Colmes came. She could feel his hot seed spurting into her tight channel, coating the insides.

She pulled the vib out and collapsed onto his chest. Hot tears pricked at her eyes. She knew this would be their last time together. She'd miss him, she realized. More than she wanted to.

His cock slipped out of her, leaving a trail of warm cum behind.

Addana needed to stay awake as she lay there, wanted to talk, to find some compromise, but her weariness overcame her, and she couldn't keep her eyes open. As she drifted off, she heard Colmes tell her, "Happy New Year."

She snuggled up against him, feeling safe. Feeling at home.

The next morning, when Addana awoke, Colmes had already left. He'd neatly folded her clothes for her and placed them on the table by the door.

She could find no note saying good-bye.

Chapter Eight

January passed without event or word from Sergeant Colmes. Most of February did too. Mardi Gras arrived, milder than expected. It seemed to promise a pleasant stint of weather for Lent and Easter.

As Addana swept the new laminate flooring in her house, she swore she could hear marching bands and Fat Tuesday revelry coming through the walls. Now *this* is a sliver of normalcy, she thought. She danced with her broom a little before sweeping the last of the sawdust into a dustpan and picking it up. Her gaze surveyed the room. It looked perfect. Not a thing out of place: decorations up and bedding down on the two tidy twin beds. Plenty for Jarvis and Rodell to mess up when they finally came home.

She left and closed the door to her boys' bedroom. She'd worked hard to get it done so they could come stay over spring break. Sure, they would go back to Houston to finish the school year, but even a little time with them seemed priceless. Plus she wanted to show them the home they'd have again when they returned permanently at summer. A real home.

Addana felt better than she had in weeks. Colmes's brisk and solid dismissal had hurt, but she knew it was unfair to expect anything else from him. They'd promised not to promise anything, after all. And despite everything, the image of him she held in her mind, so she could look at him whenever she closed her eyes, still warmed her heart.

She dumped the dustpan in a contractor clean-up bag in the hallway and then headed toward the front of the house. Time for lunch, she thought. She'd managed to finish her bedroom, the boys' bedroom, and one bathroom they could all share,

but the kitchen—which definitely needed the most work—she had barely started. She had forty days to do it now; she definitely wouldn't give up construction work for Lent.

The sun dazzled Addana as she came out on the steps, and she had to stop for a moment to adjust. As she did, she heard the deep thrumming of one of the huge pickup trucks with four doors and a diesel engine. When she glanced down the street, she could see it coming, a massive green thing crouching over the road like a predator. It towed a big trailer too, the kind the people kept classic cars in that they were too afraid to actually drive from show to show.

Addana cocked her head to the side. She figured some developer must have bought a house on the block, and this was the contractor coming to start work. The trailer probably held tools, drywall, that sort of thing. She shrugged it off and started across the yard to the trailer. As she did, the truck pulled up even to her Ranger and stopped in the middle of the street. Sun glinting off the front window kept her from seeing the driver, but she didn't much care. A developer flipping a house would still mean neighbors in the long run, even if they weren't the same ones from before.

The engine cut off, and she heard the door to the truck open and close. Her foot landed on the bottom stair of the trailer.

"Addana."

She didn't stop. She could convince herself she imagined it, right? After all, it made no sense to hear that voice—

"Dana. Stop."

This time, her hand still on the trailer door, she halted and turned.

Aleister Colmes stood there in carpenter's pants and a flannel shirt. His blond hair had grown out from its strict high-and-tight and fell in short waves around his forehead and ears. And his icy blue eyes held a ridiculous amount of warmth and love.

"You didn't leave me a note saying good-bye," Addana managed, her words hitching with the sobs she couldn't quite keep down.

"That's because I wasn't leaving." He closed the distance between them and wrapped her in his arms. Her forehead rested on his shoulder as she let the crying have its way with her. "I just had some business to take care of. And I didn't want you to talk me out of my decision. You would have tried, you know."

She nodded, loving the feel of the flannel shirt against her skin as she moved.

"I made a New Year's resolution that night, that I wouldn't let you get away. I sold the farm, Dana. I've come to make this my home. With you."

Addana's tears soaked into his shirt. She didn't know what to say, but she wished he could feel her heart right now; that would tell him everything he needed to know. It hurt with the amount of love she possessed for him. She ran her sleeve over her eyes and under her nose, and then smiled up at him. "Thank you."

"Now, I've had a long drive. Can I get a shower, and then we'll have a real talk?"

"Of course." She stepped down off the trailer stairs. Colmes moved to go in, but she grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the house instead. "You don't have to use that one anymore. I finished the master suite."

"Really?" He sounded impressed. Addana didn't have to tell him she'd hired a plumber for some of the work. It had definitely been worth the splurge, though. She led him onto the porch and through the living room, dining room, and unfinished kitchen. They passed the door to the boys' room and small room that would eventually be the hall bath, and then Addana opened the door to her suite.

She'd wanted to make it an oasis, but keep it simple, uncluttered. Living in the trailer had made her truly appreciate empty space in a room, since the trailer had none of it. She'd chosen a calming taupe for the walls, but made it pop with accents in turquoise and black.

She had, however, yet to find a bed she liked, so her mattress sat on the floor.

She didn't give Colmes time to take any of it in, though, because she really wanted to show him the master bath.

"Holy smoke," he said when she opened the door.

She had to admit that it did look like something on the cover of a design magazine, and it had all the bells and whistles, including teak benches and multiple showerheads in the tile-lined shower.

Which gave Addana an idea. She turned and began unbuttoning Colmes's shirt.

"What are you doing?"

"You said you wanted a shower. I'm gonna make sure that happens."

A huge grin split Colmes's face. "I can't believe I stayed away from you for so long."

"Don't ever let that happen again," Addana said as she pushed his shirt open.

He grabbed her and pressed her to him and took her mouth in a violent kiss. When they broke apart, he looked into her misty eyes. "I won't. That's a promise."

Addana's sobs pushed up out of her again as she buried herself against his hard chest.

She knew he would keep that promise.

 THE END 

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G. G. Royale

G.G. Royale grew up in a small town on the Central Coast of California. She started writing erotica while in college. Her inspiration came from reading a copy of Anais Nin's *Little Birds* while traveling abroad.

She began working as an editor of erotic romance in 2004 with Liquid Silver Books. In 2006, she moved to Loose Id, LLC, where she still works.

Currently, she lives in the Deep South. Ms. Royale has had many short stories published under various names. She is definitely looking forward to 2011!