



SAMHAIN

DENISE A. AGNEW

HOT PURSUIT

It's make or break time...

Hot Zone, Book 5

Betrayal seems to follow Lucy Creed wherever she goes. With visions of her military-issue boyfriend kissing another woman dancing in her head, she stomps into a local bar, ready, willing and—hell, yeah—able to hook up for New Year's Eve.

The first man who brings her inner wild thing to attention is one delicious hunk with “perfect one-night stand” stamped all over him. He also turns out to be the all-grown-up version of a young man she blew off in high school. And damn it, he's the one thing she's sworn off: military.

In Major Vic Moore's mind, Lucy is the one that got away. Now that she's popped up on his radar, the temptation to let their mutual desire burn is too intense to ignore. It also sends up red flags—he's fresh from a relationship that almost ruined his career.

Yet their scorching chemistry is too strong to ignore, and Vic finds himself going all out to change her well-entrenched ideas about military men. But as their secrets spill out, the weight of the past may be too much for their fragile trust to bear.

Warning: This title contains a hot military man guaranteed to melt the ice around even the most frozen heart.

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Hot Pursuit

Denise A. Agnew

Dedication

To my husband Terry, who always encourages and supports me no matter what.

To all the ladies of the Wednesday night discussion group for giving me plenty of laughs, encouragement, and unending support. You are the best.

Chapter One

New Year's Eve. Three hours to midnight. Clarksville, Wyoming.

Lucy Creed walked into Dixie's Den with the full intention of finding a one-night stand.

In military terms, this would be a single engagement. A hot pursuit. She wouldn't be denied satisfaction.

She stood at the entrance just inside the double doors, bombarded by music from the old-fashioned jukebox. A country singer wailed a pitiful melody of love lost and love found. The steel guitar twanged. The man's voice throbbled low with sorrow and mimicked the pain in her chest. Her heart twinged along with him.

No. Don't go there. You're here to scratch an itch. To forget that scum bucket, low-down, dirty dog Mendoza.

Now that had all the makings of a song. Low-Down, Dirty Dog.

She'd move on to staid men in business suits, accountants or maybe men who worked in the high-tech industry. Just no more soldiers, sailors or marines.

God, that sounds so bad.

It made her sound and feel like a military hanger-on. A groupie who liked military men for the alpha male mystique. Like the women who wanted to get laid by a Navy SEAL because they figured the men were all studs. Sure, she respected the military for what they represented, and she'd run into a lot of people in the military who didn't fit the stereotype of alpha male. At the same time, she had to wonder at her rotten luck with military men. What *was* that all about anyway?

Lucy didn't care if her closest friends, Freddie, Marisa and Neena were married to military or ex-military. She wasn't doing military again even if he looked like a god.

Chatter echoed all around her, the place packed and the room decorated for New Year's Eve from one end to the next. The large bar area smelled like peppermint, alcohol and the piney nuance of the real eight-foot Christmas tree in the corner. Old-fashioned decorations gave a Victorian air to the tree.

Low lights gave the bar and restaurant intimacy, and yellow and silver streamers hanging from the ceiling twirled and bounced shiny sparkles around the room.

Laughter broke out occasionally, especially at one big round booth in the back. Six women who could have been sextuplets giggled like girls at a birthday party in grade school. They wore party hats over their

cascades of long blonde hair and she instantly was reminded of Felicia DeAnza. Blonde. Buxom. Gorgeous Felicia.

The woman she didn't want to hate, but had to.

"Good riddance, Mendoza. You and Felicia deserve each other," she said out loud. She glanced at the women again. "Honestly. Six blonde women at one table?"

Surely one of those gigglers was a bottle blonde.

She glanced around to see if anyone had heard her mumblings. No one cared. The crowd seemed to have grown by twenty people since she'd walked inside. It was early but the place rocked. Good. She hoped there were a lot of men here. Eligible. Hot. Yeah, hot as hell would be a real bonus.

Determination motivated each step as she sauntered through the crowd that spilled over from the bar into the restaurant. Dixie's Den had opened a month ago, a country-and-western theme predominate in the decorations that were sprinkled throughout the bar and restaurant areas. She wanted to wash the memory of her ex right out of her hair by christening the place with a new man. Huh. Christening wasn't exactly the right word for what she needed.

Mindless, wonderful, screaming sin sex.

Anything less...well, she'd had less. She wanted more for a change.

A man who'd treat her like a princess and make love to her like he never wanted to let her go.

As she gazed around, she didn't expect to see what she did. A room full of cowboy hats, most of them on the heads of older men averaging age sixty and their going-grey wives. Okay, so maybe this wasn't the best place on a New Year's Eve to forget about a two-timing asshole. Then some of the men wearing cowboy hats in the back turned, and several were young. Too young. Maybe barely legal. No. She didn't want or need that complication.

She spotted a man sitting on a stool at the bar, a long-necked beer bottle in his right hand. And oh, my, my, my. He would photograph well. She could have used him in this year's charity calendar arranged by her friend, Neena. A brunette with flowing long hair headed for him. She wore a tight white T-shirt, butt-skimming mini-skirt and teeter-totter screw-me shoes. She clasped his forearm and leaned close to whisper.

She saw his eyes go wide for a half second, then laughter burst over his face. A low, deep toe-curling laugh that sent sensual vibrations all through Lucy. *Holy macaroni*. The man shook his head and said something to the woman. The woman's body language held regret as she pouted and sauntered away, looking stinking drunk and ready to fall off her too-tall shoes.

Lucy's mouth went dry as she took a closer look at the guy. He seemed familiar somehow, but she didn't know from where. The room seemed twice as loud and her vision twice as clear. Though he sat at a slight angle away from her, she could see the breadth of his wide shoulders stretching an emerald green sweater that looked soft and touchable. The sweater managed to enhance his muscles without appearing too

tight. He cupped his hands behind his neck. Muscles rippled. His biceps and forearms bunched with sculpted muscles, but he wasn't a body builder in an overdone way. No. He was perfectly symmetrical. Powerful. The man screamed of sex and that primitive, knee-buckling, unable-to-control attraction that hammered a female over the head and made everything inside her return to the cave. This was the kind of man a woman could get crazy with, lose inhibitions and forget her own name.

Jeans curved over long legs consisting of hard thighs and calves and ending in sensible all-weather black boots. She'd bet on a stack of bibles he had a world-class butt. She'd love to photograph him with or without clothes.

Her active imagine went into overdrive. *Without clothes. Oh, yeah.* Would his chest have a hint of hair, or would it be smooth? She liked chests with hair and never understood the trend toward a man waxing his chest.

Instinct drew her forward one step. Two. Soon her boots moved across the room with confident strides. She sensed a couple of men at the bar checking her out, and she worked it, allowing their blatant appreciation to expand her confidence as she walked. She moved with major attitude. Tough and with the slightest swagger.

The man she'd ogled swiveled the bar stool and looked straight at her. Her breath caught. Thick, dark lashes framed piercing brown eyes. Black hair cut short waved close against his head. His features were cut sharply, as if heaven had designed him with a rough hand. He had a long nose, broad but well-sculpted mouth and an almost cruel look that probably scared the hell out of the enemy. He was so—well, he was so not beautiful. Just all...man. Primal female response stood up and noticed. Her body flushed, heated with total awareness of him as a male. Her hormones screamed for attention.

His face lit up with recognition. The dark eyes softened with warmth, the mouth curved into a smile. "Lucy? Lucy Creed?"

His voice was deep, mellow, with an underlying edge of steel.

She blinked. "I'm sorry. I don't..."

He stood, and her five foot six inches had nothing on over six feet of hard muscle. The sweater stretched over his chest a little and his front looked as fantastic as his back had.

He sauntered toward her, beer bottle forgotten on the counter. When he stood near, his woody, leather scent caught her attention. A brown bomber jacket was slung over the back of the barstool. *Mmmm. Leather.*

"You don't remember me, do you?" That damned voice had mellow qualities, a deceiving softness with an underlying rumble of pure passion.

There was a familiar something about him she couldn't put her finger upon. "No. Should I?"

He grinned and her body responded with a flash of heat. "Last time you saw me I was at our senior party. At Jennifer Calvin's house over on Ridgeway."

“I still don’t remember.”

His grin widened. “I sat next to you in chemistry and we had English lit together.”

She frowned, embarrassed that she couldn’t remember him.

“I was short.” He tilted his head to the side. “Skinny. Ugly as sin. I hear I’m still ugly, but at least I took care of the short and skinny.”

Oh. Holy. God. Recognition slammed her at the same time as embarrassment. “You’re not Victor Moore? No way.”

“Way.” He grinned again. “People call me Vic now.”

Her heart thumped in her breast, bouncing around like a caged beast. “You’ve grown up.”

Duh. That was an understatement.

The breathless sound in her voice couldn’t be helped. She was more than pleasantly surprised by the way he’d filled out. The man had ripped and totally lip-smacking good attitude all over him. Some women liked pretty boys, but she didn’t. There was nothing pretty about Victor. He was one hundred percent prime male cut. Masculine. Rough. She felt it on a feral level she couldn’t control and hadn’t even known she possessed until this moment.

“Don’t worry about not recognizing me. No one does.” Once more his gaze traveled the length of her, and a heat wave followed. “You, on the other hand, are unforgettable.”

While there was nothing insulting about his perusal, the heat in his eyes couldn’t be missed. That no-holds-barred admiration set off a fire alarm of arousal low in her stomach. Never forget her? She’d been rounder with a waist-length tangle of black hair that wouldn’t cooperate no matter what she did.

“My hair was platinum for the last few years.” She shrugged, not sure why she was telling him this. “I let it go back to black.” She touched the ultra short strands that stuck out this way and that. “I’m so different from high school. I’m thinner, taller...”

“I like your hair black. Just as I remember it.” His eyes caressed her face, his voice going softer, lower. “You *are* thinner.” Concern clouded his eyes a moment. “You all right?”

Okay, how did she say this without seeming totally pitiful? “I’ve had a little stress and just didn’t eat enough. I’m stuffing myself lately to make up for it.”

A heart-breaker smile returned. “Good.”

Silence dropped between them for a moment before she finally said, “The boy I remember stuttered, tripped over things—”

“Was a total klutz. Yeah, I know.” His lopsided grin also sparkled in his eyes with genuine good humor. “Sometimes I still stutter. Depends on the situation. I’m more confident now.”

His eyes held an edge, as if he might remember what happened all those years ago.

“You’re remembering it too,” he said as heat returned to his gaze.

She didn’t know whether to laugh or not. “It was...awkward.”

He shrugged. “We were kids.” Once more his gaze danced over her, the appreciation intensifying. “We could try again. At midnight.”

Her face flamed, and she was mad at herself for reacting this way. After all, she’d come in here hoping to find a hook-up. But not with someone she knew, no matter how long ago. Doubt wore away at the stone-clad resolve she’d had walking into the place.

His gaze sobered. “Something wrong?”

“No. I’m just surprised to see you here.”

“No more surprised than me.” He glanced around the room. “Are you with someone?”

Damn his grin. It was going to eat her up and spit her out. Arousal burned low in her body. “I am now.”

“Would you like a drink?”

“Sure. I’m here to party.”

She headed to the bar with him and ordered a zinfandel.

“Let’s find a booth.” His matter-of-fact statement didn’t give her a chance to say no.

She trailed behind him through the crowd to the last booth available way in the back. She couldn’t help it. She checked out his butt. *Yep*. Just as she suspected. *World class*.

She ogled until they reached the booth. The sides were high on the round-shaped red leather booth, and the intimacy it implied sent her thoughts into overdrive. Despite the loud music, the booth muted the full blast of sound. She imagined possibilities she shouldn’t be thinking. She slid into the booth after him, but didn’t crowd.

He took another swig of his beer. “Why are you alone tonight?”

His question took her off-guard. She expected other small talk. Just enough to lead her right to the bottom line.

Sex.

Oh, God. Was she considering trying to seduce geeky Victor? Correction, Vic. Stud muffin, hunk beyond her dreams Vic. Mouth-watering—

Enough.

When she stayed silent, he said, “Now answer my question. Why are you alone tonight?”

“I’m enjoying the holiday by myself. What are you doing here alone?”

His smile couldn’t cover the pain that flickered through his eyes. “It’s a long story.”

She leaned on the table. “You don’t have family in Clarksville?”

“Not anymore. My parents live in Colorado Springs now. My brother is in California. Most of the rest of my family lives in Denver.”

“Yet you came to Clarksville for the holidays?”

He stared at the beer bottle with an intensity that bordered on furious, as if the bottle had pissed him off. “Yeah. My girlfriend...ex-girlfriend lives up here.”

She waited. What could she say to that? Ex-girlfriend? She didn’t dare ask, at least not right away. How personal could she presume to be?

His gaze returned to hers as the old-fashioned jukebox changed to a Kenny Chesney song Lucy hadn’t heard in forever.

He seemed okay with leaving information hanging, but before she could speak, he said, “I’m thinking it’s a good thing I came here alone. I get to spend time with you.”

Heat spiraled from her stomach straight into her face. Her brain didn’t catch up with her mouth. She didn’t know what to say or how to say it. “Thank you. It’s always good to see friends.”

Lame. So lame.

For godssake she was a grown woman but her reaction was so high school. Where had her sophistication gone?

Probably right out the door with her mind the moment she’d seen Vic.

He leaned back in the booth and eyed her. “If I remember right, there was nothing friendly about our relationship in high school.”

Oh, man. She chewed on her lower lip. “I was hoping you’d forgotten that.”

His scrubbed at his chin with a big, tanned hand. A very masculine but gorgeous hand. “Not a chance. I think I was scared of girls for six months after that.”

She winced. “Like you said, we were just kids. Teenagers are so dumb sometimes.”

Teasing entered his eyes. “You feel guilty about it.”

“How can you tell?”

“Your eyes give away everything. You’d make a terrible poker player.”

“Good thing I hate poker.” She contemplated the rosy-red color in her wine glass. “I’m sorry I was such a brat in high school. Miss Tryin’ To Get And Stay Popular.”

“You weren’t that bad.”

“Yes, I was. I sold out. I compromised my integrity by going for popularity over—” Lucy couldn’t say it. What she’d done haunted her sometimes. “I bought into the crap, Vic. The stupid cheerleader stereotype instead of thinking about who I really was. Instead of being who I should have been.”

Guilt like hers didn’t go away quickly, even though she’d reminded him that teenagers often did rash things—very rash things. It had been more than fifteen years ago that she’d seen Vic, yet the memory of the last time she’d talked to him was fresh in her mind. Her so-called friends, two cheerleaders who threw their weight around on a regular basis, talked her into approaching geeky Victor and asking him on a date. No girl dated Vic the Dip, as the cheerleaders had called him. Vic the Geek Wad, as the football players had called him.

“If I hadn’t been trying to stay popular...” She shook her head again. “Stupid. Stupid.”

“What motivated you to do what those cheerleaders said?” Apparently he didn’t plan to let her off the hook.

God, did she want to explain this? Kenny Chesney sang something mellow and slow, and people swayed on the small dance floor. The shadowy booth though, made her feel a million miles from everyone.

She jolted back to reality. More than guilt propelled her to answer. Vic deserved to understand what had motivated her to humiliate him. Maybe if she admitted the truth and the whole truth, she’d feel better and could banish the guilt forever.

After a large gulp of wine for courage, she ’fessed up. “It was sheer dumb luck I became a cheerleader. We were new in town and my brother had just made the varsity football team. I wasn’t unpopular exactly, but I was greedy for more visibility. When my parents encouraged me to try out for cheerleading, I was scared spitless. I didn’t think I’d make it. I told them I wanted to try out for the flag team instead. They weren’t satisfied with flag team. When I made it, I was so damned happy in a way because I was validated, you know. It was instant-popularity time. Instant. I never had so many friends right away. In San Francisco I wasn’t exactly popular. It was a big school, and I was a small fish. Little Clarksville was a whole ’nother game.”

“Uh-huh. And once you were in a smaller high school and had left all your friends behind, it was a good chance to fit in.”

Her gaze snagged on Vic’s fingers as they slipped around the sweaty beer bottle. She knew his touch would be electrifying. A tiny thrill went through her, and she had to jerk her attention back to the subject.

“Exactly.” She rubbed the back of her neck. “Dad and Mom loved it when I became a cheerleader. Their kids had made their mark on the high school. With Dad the football coach, and Mom involved with school...” What else could she say about it?

“So how did Ann and Carolyn convince you to ask me out?” he asked.

“They dared me. They said you were...”

“Yeah?”

Oh, hell. He wasn’t giving up on this. He wanted the whole damned story right now. “They said you were probably a virgin, and they thought that was an anomaly. They said you might be gay.”

Vic grunted. “Uh, no. As you found out, I’m not gay.”

Oh, she’d found out all right. “Ann and Carolyn told me that I needed to drive you to a secluded place and seduce you. They said that if I didn’t, they’d make sure my senior year was a living hell. Plus, I think I was secretly thrilled someone was lusting after me. That you acted as if you liked me.” She laughed softly. “Not sure why you did though. I was a little bitch.”

She saw his chest rise and fall with a deep breath. His arm lay on the table near hers. “Nah, you weren’t that bad. Besides, you realized I wasn’t such a bad guy and you actually liked me.”

Heat crawled into her face. “Yes.”

“And that’s when I finally got up the nerve to kiss the most beautiful girl in the world and discovered you didn’t mind it.” He said the last part with a silly grin.

She giggled as the memory of their sloppy kiss returned. “Oh, yeah. Loved it.”

His dark eyes challenged her, drew her closer. Nearer to a fire. “I was a horrible kisser, but it was damned heaven touching you.”

Yeah, an awful kiss. She’d never forget it though. How could anyone forget a kiss rife with that much fear and angst on her part, and outright teenage horniness on his?

“And contrary to what I’d heard about most teenage boys, you weren’t an octopus who couldn’t keep his hands off me. You were such a gentleman.”

He lifted the beer bottle in a salute. “My daddy brought me up right.”

“Mine didn’t.”

He frowned. “Were they trying to keep up with the Jones’s?”

“Yes. That meant their kids should too.” She blinked, her eyes burning with sudden tears that didn’t make sense. She’d never told anyone this, any of the stuff she’d explained to Vic. It felt like a release a long time in the making. “I’m really sorry that I bought into everything in high school. The whole popularity garbage. I hurt you and that wasn’t cool.”

His smile was forgiving. “We all do stupid shit when we’re teenagers. I know you’re not that kind of person now. I’m over it.”

Was he? Then perhaps she should be too. She sighed, the release in her heart and mind a warmth she would never forget.

“Do your parents still live here?” he asked.

“No, they’re spending early retirement on a series of cruises. They think my photography career is bogus. They hope I’ll come to my senses someday and do something worthwhile. My brother is a doctor, and that makes them proud. He’s a chiropractor, and yet they really wish he’d been a surgeon.”

He leaned in closer and trailed one finger over her cheek in a tender caress. “So after we *didn’t* have unsatisfying teenage sex in my car, you took the tape recording of our conversation and our kiss to your cheerleader friends.”

Why did he have to remind her of the details? The awful details. “Yes.”

Ann and Carolyn had slipped the tape to a friend, who had made sure it accidentally leaked out on the intercom system. Not all of the conversation. But that silly, awkward, terrible kiss...oh, man.

Administration halted it and heads rolled. She’d never forget the embarrassment. “My parents grounded me for three months. No car. No dates.” Dark memories surfaced. “Every idiot boy in school thought I was an easy lay after that.” She tried a smile but failed. “But your reputation did a spiral upward.

All those boys thinking you'd *got some*." She covered her face for a moment. "I ruined my senior year by going along with that stupid stunt. For putting you through that."

He reached for her hand, held it against his thigh, a gentle and consoling touch. "Sometimes stupid takes a long time to forget. I just wanted to clear the air. We don't need to dwell on it."

Deep inside an ache burned. Two aches actually. One held huge remorse for what had happened that night. The other for thinking that a one -night stand could ever remove the stain of heartache. Did she think sleeping with some guy she didn't know would wipe away the anger she felt for Danny Mendoza's betrayal with Felicia? She'd contemplated sleeping with Vic to wipe away bad feelings, but now old memories brought up her own betrayal of Vic as a teen.

She felt like the greatest heel in the universe. She made penitence for it the only way that felt right. She took a plunge.

Lucy kissed him.

Chapter Two

Lucy fell into heaven.

Vic had apparently learned a lot over the years about kissing. Oh, yes. He smelled like over six feet of hot pheromones. Leather, musk. Man. Tough and tender.

Her inhibitions crumbled as her body melted against his, soaking in the delicious need that opened inside her. He accepted her kiss without reservation. One hand came up to cup her face while the other kept possession of her hand. His mouth was hot, gentle. As his arms came around her and drew her into his muscular frame, she felt twenty kinds of protected. All that strength turned her on, drew her higher and hotter than anything she'd experienced before in a first kiss. Exceptional power cradled her close, as if he held an item so precious to him he couldn't bear to part with it. She was swamped by the excitement, overtaken, her defenses destroyed. The powerful protection she experienced in this moment made no sense when she'd only just met him...again. Still, her body accepted it. Her mind following along as if he'd given her a drug. As if his hard, masculine body was a fortress made for her alone. Restaurant sounds faded around them. Liquid heat invaded her veins and gave life to the steady ache that had burned inside her since she'd seen him tonight. She didn't grip him or hold him, but allowed Vic's warmth to lure her into a languorous warmth and comfort.

She melted and the kiss turned deeper, to show the appreciation her body and mind felt. When his tongue tasted her, she welcomed the intimacy, brought him into her with a shocking acceptance. His tongue swept over hers, no longer teasing. He wanted. He took.

Yet he gave so much more.

She shivered, overwhelmed by the delicious sensations, the excitement that sprang upward and filled every inch of her.

She drew back at the same time he did. They touched foreheads, eyes closed. She shivered, but not with cold. In an instant she was aware of her body's reactions to his kiss. Her breasts felt rounder, fuller, her nipples tight. She was achy and hot between the legs, wanting his touch, his fullness inside her. Lucy's imagination exploded in a second. She wanted to know what he'd look like naked.

Oh, man. She had it bad.

Lucy could think of one word. "Wow."

"Yeah." His voice sounded raw, and almost stunned.

Breaking out of her mesmerized state, she gently disengaged herself from his arms.

She almost told him she had a proposal for him. Almost broke right down and said what she'd planned to say to a perfect stranger tonight.

Sleep with me tonight. Or in a rougher way, *Have wild monkey hanging-from-the-rafters blow-the-lights-out sex.*

She'd found the perfect man for it.

His eyes were bright with the fever, the same fever she felt. She couldn't deny that he wanted her.

"Sorry," he said. "I got carried away. A bar isn't the place to do this."

She shrugged, self-consciousness finding her. "You're right. Not the place."

Silence hung there. Balanced. Almost tipped over. The strain of keeping quiet made her want to scream.

"Hope that made up for all the crap in high school," she said.

A smile cracked that hard, I-want-sex expression. "No. I don't think it does."

Her mouth flopped open. "What?"

Kenny had stopped singing in the background, and some sweet-sounding young thing trilled about hard times in the old town tonight. Lucy's brain snagged on the tune at the same time she tried to wrap her thoughts around what Vic had said.

Once more a sparkle entered his dark eyes. "I'm teasing you."

She released a short, hard breath, followed by a half laugh. "Brat."

He clapped his hand over his heart. "Ow. That hurt. But I've been hurt worse."

Insight jumped her. She sipped her wine and chose her words wisely. "By your ex-girlfriend?"

His gaze flew up to hers. Regret and maybe the tiniest bit of fear resided there. "Yeah."

"Tonight?"

"No. A while before that."

"Ouch. I'm sorry." Something inside her softened and reached out. "That sucks."

"Is that why you walked in here alone? Don't you have any friends in town? A party to go to?"

Damn, he'd turned it back to her, and her throat felt tight. Her thoughts scrambled. "My friends are having a big party. They invited me. I'm not there because my rat-bastard boyfriend decided to be a rat bastard."

He frowned, and this time, he looked like he could eat lead. "What did he do?"

The fierce roughness in his voice made her feel shielded, a sensation she'd never experienced with any man before. Did she want to become this personal? Did she want him to hear this?

She found herself talking. "Danny Mendoza. He used to work in the stationery store next to my studio. He's in the Army Reserves and he was called up." She shrugged. "He was...is a nice enough guy."

"And?" he asked when she paused.

Her breath caught with emotion, anger superseding sadness. “I’ve been corresponding with him for a year by email. We had some pretty intense discussions and have a lot in common. A lot of...attraction. He came back from Iraq and asked me to meet him for a date Christmas Eve. He said that he has some really strong feelings for me. We had dinner, had a great time. He told me I was special and that he wanted to get to know me better. He had a lot of things to do this week and said he couldn’t see me again until tonight. I decided to surprise him with a late Christmas gift. A book he’d wanted. I went over to his apartment early to surprise him. Instead, I’m the one who got the surprise.”

She paused, half-expecting him to say he knew where this one would head. Vic’s chagrin showed in his expression—he understood, but he wouldn’t interrupt her story.

Her tight throat returned, but another slow sip of wine smoothed the words. “Timing couldn’t have been better. I parked in front of the apartment building and saw him coming out of his place with another woman I know in town. Felicia. They went straight into a lip lock. I watched in shock. I guess I shouldn’t have been shocked. He didn’t promise me a damn thing in his emails. We just...I thought we connected. He insinuated...” She shrugged again. “Anyway, it’s pathetic. I called him on my cell phone and told him I’d seen him kissing the woman. He told me that he didn’t know what I was upset about. That I’d blown it all out of proportion, that one little kiss didn’t mean anything. He told me to come over tonight anyway. Some people would say I overreacted. I don’t think I did. I told him I wouldn’t be seeing him on New Year’s Eve or any other night.”

“And here you are.”

“Exactly.”

He stayed silent for a short time, then said, “You didn’t overreact.” He shook his head slowly and snorted softly. “He’s being an ass wipe. He could have been with you tonight.”

Flattered, but not taking his praise seriously, Lucy groaned. “I was such a damned fool.”

“I dunno. Doesn’t sound like you did anything foolish. If he led you on and made you think he had more feelings for you than he did, that’s on his head.”

She’d never heard a man this articulate on relationships, short of Dr. Phil.

“You couldn’t see your friends tonight? Tell them what happened and go to the party?” Vic asked.

She could have. That was the shame of it. “I have a lot of nosy friends.”

“Anybody I’d know?”

“Eve Carmichael-O’Callahan, Freddie Bodine-Wallace, Marisa Clyde-Sullivan, Neena Williamson-Gilroy.”

His eyebrows sprang up. “Lots of hyphenated names.”

She tilted her head to the side and said sheepishly, “They don’t all hyphenate their names, but I thought if I gave both names it would ring a bell.”

“Sullivan? Would her husband happen to be Jake Sullivan? He’s in the army?”

“Yep, that’s the one. Eve’s husband is in the Reserves, Freddie’s and Marisa’s husbands are in Special Forces. Neena’s husband used to be in the military. Anyway, they would have filled me with wine and reasons why Danny is a turd. But I didn’t want them worrying about me on New Year’s Eve, and I didn’t want to talk about him tonight.”

“All of this is ironic as hell.” He scrubbed his hand over his chin again. “Jake and I’ve worked together before. We were both at Fort Carson several years back. I’ve been in and out of Iraq and Afghanistan for quite some time.”

Military? Vic was in the military too? She almost groaned out loud. She’d been all ready to make a move, hoping this guy wouldn’t have any scruples about one night of heated, no-strings sex. Honestly, how many guys would?

Now he’d ruined it by telling her he was in the military. Her heart sank.

An idea dawned on Lucy. “Are you in Special Forces too?”

“No. I’m an infantry officer in the army.”

“Oh.”

He chuckled. “There’s a lot packed in that word.”

She gave him a lopsided smile. “Yes, there is.” To steer things away from her for a moment, she continued with, “Rank?”

He grinned. “Is this a test?”

“Yep.”

Vic moved closer to the table, eliminating that safe barrier between them. His body heat seemed to reach out for her. She wanted him nearer, and that made her own barriers continue to crumble even as she fought her growing attraction to him.

“I’m a major heading for lieutenant colonel.”

“You’re pretty young for a lieutenant colonel, aren’t you?”

“Thirty-two is on the young side, yeah.”

She sighed. “Wow.”

He crossed his arms and leaned on the table. “You don’t sound impressed.”

She grinned. The devilish twinkle in his eyes gave him away. “Should I be?”

“Nah. I know too many men and women who get to my rank who think they’re all that.”

She appreciated his honesty, damn it. Lucy sighed. “Like Danny.”

“Danny is a lieutenant colonel?”

“No. He’s a major. Something in logistics. I don’t understand it.”

He laughed. “Uh-huh. Is he older than me?”

“Closing in on forty.”

He made her smile again, enjoying the endless banter. Either that or the wine had been spiked with hard liquor. She couldn't recall feeling this giddy in a long time. Once more his gaze did a cruise over her body and reminded her that Vic liked what he saw. Whether her mind wanted to be flattered or not, her body was.

"I should have known you were in the military," she said, her voice filled with mild disgust. "You all seem to have this thing with your walk. Confident. Upright. In command. I could go on with the adjectives and adverbs from here to eternity. My friends' husbands are all great men and great husbands. But the rest of you..." She shrugged as bad memories swamped her. "You're all the same."

His mouth tightened, and he leaned in closer. "We're *not* all the same."

His eyes narrowed, and she saw something flicker through them that looked rough and angry. It caught her by surprise.

She rubbed the back of her neck and took another sip of wine to quell the urge to scream. "I'm a magnet for all the jerks in the military. I'm moving on to quiet, easy-going, staid businessmen."

A sardonic smile covered his mouth, barely removing the caution in his eyes. "I know a businessman who cheated on his wife five times before she caught him. Nothing staid about that."

She half-expected him to leave and never see him again, and the thought made her ache. Maybe it was for the better though, if he did leave her be. Okay, so he had the command part down pat, and his slight chastisement had the effect he probably wanted. She smarted a little. *This wasn't supposed to get personal. Oh, well. Just roll with it. He's military. You aren't getting involved. You're talking with an old acquaintance and that's all it is.*

"Why do I get the feeling that you don't like the military because of this ass-wipe who dumped you for this other woman?" he asked.

She swallowed hard. "He made me so mad." Her fists clenched. "I really, really thought he believed I'm special." She sighed, regret filling her. "It's more complicated than Danny. Before Danny I knew another military guy who was hot and women came on to him constantly. Kind of like that woman who touched your arm right before we said hello."

He snorted. "Clara? She's the bar owner's daughter, and she's harmless. Flirts with every guy and doesn't mean it. Even if she did, I'd never take her up on it. So what about this other guy before Danny?"

She nodded. "Women flirted with him right and left. He'd tell me but insisted he never did anything about it. I figured out that he loved the attention and that he was cheating on me. Three times. We dated six months and he was having sex with three other women at the same time. After a year, I decided I'd take a chance on Danny because he sounded so sweet and sincere and during our date we connected. Or at least I felt we did. He said he hadn't felt like this about a woman before. I felt more secure and ready to take a chance on him." Anger boiled up and she barely kept it out of her voice. "Then he proved that it was all a lie."

He covered her fist where it lay on her thigh. “I know the feeling.”

“Hating the military?”

“No. Feeling betrayed.”

Lucy decided she wouldn't let this one-sided confession continue. “Fess up. What did your ex-girlfriend do to you?”

If Lucy Creed shifted a single inch closer, Vic didn't think he could restrain himself.

He'd have to kiss her again.

Fuck. Who was he kidding? She'd kissed him. Slipped her warm, sinfully sexy mouth over his and claimed him until he'd almost fired off like a virgin.

Sitting next to Lucy in a secluded booth while Jace Everett's *Bad Things* spun out over the jukebox made him crazy. Did he want to do bad things with her?

Hell yeah.

He had a hard time believing that tonight of all nights he'd run into her. Talk about good luck. Or bad, if this all went south. He sensed more to this story than just hating the military because of one jerk. She wasn't providing the whole story. At the same time, after Shelly's betrayal, he'd vowed to have nothing to do with women for months. Years. Fuck. A lifetime. Shelly had screwed him seven ways to Sunday, and he'd be paying for it for a few months. Now Lucy had walked in and turned all his resolutions to avoid women into gelatin.

Vic stared at his old high school friend, or enemy if he held grudges. He wondered how more than fifteen years had gone by without him seeing her again. Nah, she couldn't be his enemy. He wanted her too damn much. Wanted her with an ache that surprised him. His cock didn't care how amazed he was. Vic's body had reacted to her the second he turned on the bar stool and saw her marching toward him like an avenging angel.

For a second her black hair, short and spiky, had thrown him off. He'd thought he was imagining things. After all, the young woman he remembered had long black hair, a black so inky it almost glowed with blue highlights. Her lush mouth and small nose were the same. Her pale, pale skin always appeared seashell fragile back then, and it still did. Her face was slimmer, her body less round and more on the coltish side. Still, she had curves in all the right places. Rounded breasts, small waist, a pretty ass.

And her clothes. They surprised the hell out of him. She wore a stretchy red top that slicked along her body and her black mini-skirt clung to her butt without looking vaguely obscene. Her black hose skimmed down over mile-long legs, and her funky black boots looked ready for a visit in the snow. She was still about five five—not tall, not short. Yeah, her legs were plenty lengthy enough to wrap around his hips while he rode her. And damn he wanted to ride her hard.

He hadn't expected, nor did he understand why seeing her right after Shelly's betrayal could do this to him. Sex he could find if that's all he wanted. But that kiss—hell that had screwed his dearly held delusions. When he'd walked in the bar this evening, he'd wanted nothing to do with a woman. A few minutes later the sexiest female in his fantasies walked in and he was a friggin' goner.

He'd stared at her so long she blushed. God, even those stormy blue eyes flashed, berating him and turning him on at the same time. If he had his way tonight, she'd be in his bed. Under him. Next to him. However he could seduce her.

Kissing her had been heaven and hell. Her body against him had promised softness, comfort, a hot place to find refuge for his stone-hard cock. Could he look at her as simply a quick and dirty fuck? He had to. It wasn't like he'd be in town much longer, and long-term relationships weren't an option in his line of work. At least not in his mind.

"Vic?" her liquid-soft voice asked, breaking him out of his sexual fantasy.

"What?" He asked the question softly, forgetting her original question.

"What did your ex-girlfriend do?"

He released her hand, the one so close to his thigh. Damn. He could refuse to answer, but how fair would that be after she'd confessed so much to him? He wanted to drag her boyfriend across the floor and use his face for a mop.

"Shelly Cannell. She's a fellow soldier. A medic. I met her in Afghanistan about two months ago and she also bandaged me up recently."

Her eyes widened. "You were hurt?"

He flexed his still-sore leg under the table. "Yeah. Shrapnel wounds in my left thigh."

"How long ago?"

"A month." He felt compelled to say, "I'll be heading back to work soon."

She nodded, her eyes unreadable for a moment. "Off to God knows where."

He grinned, the ironic twist on her lips filled with sarcasm. "I'm going to Fort Carson. Then I'll be ready to ship out on another tour if necessary."

"I'm glad you're okay."

Those sky-lit eyes clouded. She squeezed his forearm, and her hand looked small and pale against his sweater. Her fingernails weren't polished, but they were long and pretty. What surprised him was the depth of concern he felt coming from her.

On impulse, he placed his hand over hers. "Thanks for caring."

She nodded again. "So this Shelly. How involved were you?"

He released her hand, and she drew it away.

Here it comes. The confession.

"We'd dated off and on for a couple of months."

“I take it the relationship was serious?”

He shrugged. “It was getting there.”

“What happened?”

“She decided to charge me with sexual harassment.”

He could see her eyes change, and she seemed to shrink back from him a little. *Damn it.* He didn’t want her afraid of him. He knew she’d keep asking questions, so he resolved to tell her without making it more complicated or making her work for the answers.

“I see,” she said, her tone cautious. “Why did she do that?”

He sighed. “One night we were about to have sex. The first night we were going to have sex. She told me that she was bi-sexual, but said she didn’t tell me because she was afraid I’d tell her commander. The don’t-ask, don’t-tell policy.”

“I told her I didn’t want to see her any more. Not because she was bisexual, but because she didn’t trust me and thought it was okay to lie to me by omission. She got mad as hell and decided it was time for payback. Got the JAG involved and it took some time to straighten things out.”

“JAG?”

“Judge Advocate General.”

“Oh, right. But it was your word against hers.” Her eyes clouded with uncertainty. “Did the charges stick?”

He shook his head, old anger welling up. “No. Before things could go any further, I guess she regretted it. She told them we’d had a lover’s argument, and she’d lied to get back at me.”

Lucy’s eyes still held the stain of suspicion, and he couldn’t say he blamed her. After all, she didn’t know him that well. “What a mess.”

“A monumental cluster fuck of massive proportions. Didn’t matter that I was vindicated.” He took a deep swig of his beer, suddenly wishing it were something stronger. “It screwed with my reputation. It’s going to take some time to get all shiny again.”

“I’m sorry.” Her fingers pressed his forearm again, then released him.

“Don’t be. I’m not permanently damaged.”

She smiled, and those soft-looking lips tempted. God, when she’d kissed him earlier the heat had seared him down through all levels. This woman affected him more fiercely than Shelly had.

“She called me on the phone today and wanted me to meet up with her for New Year’s Eve. I told her hell no,” he said. “That woman is walking trouble.”

One of Lucy’s eyebrows lifted. She swallowed, as if unsure she should say what she was thinking. “You didn’t tell the military that she was bi-sexual? You could have used that as ammunition for your side.”

He winched. "I could have, but I didn't want to play dirty. If I could get my name clean by another method, I was willing to try it. She gave JAG the quarreling lovers answer and that doomed her. They're in the process of kicking her out of the military right now for lying about the sexual harassment."

Lucy sat there for a moment, apparently processing it all. He didn't know what conclusion she'd come to, but he'd rather be honest with her straight up.

"Would you have dated her if she had told you right away and admitted she was bi-sexual?"

What could he say, but the truth? "I don't have anything against people who are bi-sexual. That's their business. I'd just rather be with a woman who's into men." A warm grin slid over her mouth. God, he wanted to kiss her again. He leaned closer, hoping the opportunity would appear soon. "A woman like you."

She chuckled softly. "Tonight I was really hoping when I first saw you..."

She bit her lower lip for a second, drawing soft flesh between her teeth in a way that made his body yearn.

"Yeah?"

"You might want to be my date tonight." There was an edge of bashfulness in her statement. "But that's all changed now."

He grunted, anger starting to overrun patience. "Because I'm in the military or because you don't trust me? Come on, Lucy. When I date a woman, I don't cheat on her. I'm a one-woman man. Let's just call this old friends catching up."

Would she be willing to break her no-military rule for one night? He didn't know what he thought of that. At the same time, his body was responding to hers in an off-the-chart explosion of pure sexual need.

"What about your boyfriend?" he asked.

"He's history." More doubt filled her face. "Unless you're worried I'll be as crappy a date as I was when we were kids. I must rank right up there with the worst date you ever had."

Her uncertainty worried him. As time went on, her ready-for-sex attitude seemed to be wearing thin. Maybe she wasn't as sure about this adventure as she pretended to be.

"Believe it or not, no, you're not the worst date I ever had. I went to West Point and a girl there threw up on my shoes after drinking too much."

Lucy laughed, then clapped her hand over her mouth. "Look, I really am sorry what Ann and Carolyn did, but it was my responsibility. I should have stood up to them and said no. I'm sorry that I went along with it. You didn't deserve that."

He shook his head and took a big swig of his beer, then put the empty bottle on the table. "If I'd gone with my instincts, I would have realized you didn't honestly want to go out with me. I was a complete mess."

"You were a really nice boy. The nicest I knew."

“Thanks, but girls don’t always go for nice. They want the alpha male.”

“They don’t necessarily want to *marry* the alpha male.”

“Maybe, but in high school it’s more about hormones than thinking through things. At least for a lot of kids. When you asked me out, I wasn’t using my brain.” Vic’s gaze took her in, all traces of good humor erased. He was all for laying the facts on the table, and now was the time to do it. “I was seventeen, I’d never been on a date before, and you were the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. Temptation was too great.”

“We really did a number on you, didn’t we?”

He leaned toward her. They sat closer than he realized. This close her warm scent teased his senses. He swam in those feelings, wanting to touch her. Less primal needs told Vic to keep his hands off.

Screw it.

“Dance with me,” he said.

Chapter Three

Dance?

Lucy didn't know what to say. Her body pinged with excitement at his suggestion, and while it also scared her in a primal way, dancing with him sounded like heaven.

"Sure." She winked at him. "How much trouble can we get into dancing?"

The wicked gleam in his eyes insinuated he could think of a few ways to get them into trouble. "It's only eleven. There's time yet."

She flushed, allowing the possibilities to wash through her imagination. He smiled and slid from the booth. She moved to the edge of the seat, and he offered his hand. Heat tingled all the way down her body as his big palm enveloped hers. Oh, yes. It was way too much and yet not enough. *Go ahead. One dance. A little companionship. You aren't getting involved.*

The music had switched—someone had entered a different melody on the jukebox, a seriously different tune that throbbed, that imitated lovemaking with an exotic beat. This wasn't a country song that spoke of broken hearts and lust in the dark. This song swirled, the singer's soprano liquid sensuality. Drums pulsed, the music exotic as Lucy imagined a belly dancer working her hips. She shook her head.

Sure, the song was sexy, sure the dancers now swayed in a more languorous fashion. The whole thing screamed sexy. Or maybe the way this man drew her to his chest as they found a spot on the dance floor made her dream of possibilities.

Vic's body burned against hers, pressing so that her breasts brushed lightly once. Twice. Settled against his body. She caught his glance and dared to linger. Undeniable wanting smoldered his eyes, told her he understood every secret she'd ever had and would have. It scared the crap out of her.

"Do you come here often?" she asked, well aware this was an old line. But God, she had to speak before her body combusted. Anything to take her mind off the sensations bombarding her.

He grinned. "No. Remember, I'm from out of town."

Her cheeks went pink. "Oh. Right. Why did you come into town originally?"

"I wanted to get away for a while and I always liked this town." His hand slid up her back, sending a riot of arousal burning inside her. "Do you come here often?"

She laughed softly. "No, but I might start. After all, if I can find a guy like you every time I come in here, it might be worth it."

His eyes narrowed, and she felt the heat in that stare go all the way to her toes. “There isn’t anyone else like me. They broke the mold. Fortunately.”

Lucy giggled, and the girly sound took her off-guard. She didn’t laugh like this. Something about him though, did this to her. Her arm lay along his shoulder, her hand almost touching his neck. His hand and arm braced her waist and made certain full-body contact continued. She couldn’t escape his circle of influence and why would she?

Music poured into her veins, drugged her as their bodies caught a rhythm and swayed. “You’re a very modest man.”

“I know what I can do, and I never pretend that I can do anything I can’t.”

She pursed her lips. “Hmm. Now that’s pretty extraordinary for the military men I’ve met.”

“Well, give me some time. I’ll prove to you it’s true.”

As his body moved against hers, she melted into the feelings. She wanted to be inside the moment, to savor it in case it never came again. Yet the crowd made it harder, made the bump and grind, the sensual movements, the intimacy an impossible dream. To do this, to perhaps seduce him once and for all, she needed to believe what she felt, to understand why this crazy attraction affected her far more than any other relationship. Time got away from them. They returned to their table at one point and conversation flowed as they talked about the town and how it had changed over the years since high school and where their lives had taken them. Before she knew it, they were on the dance floor again and Vic held her so gently for a slow song. One slow dance after another blended until she could hardly remember how long they’d danced.

His hand smoothed down her back again and his arm drew her closer. She closed her eyes. Feeling him against her would prove easier with her sight blocked. As hard chest pressed her breasts, her nipples tightened into achy points. Muscle to softness, heat to cool, he contrasted her in so many ways. She didn’t want to feel small in his arms, but she did. Her conviction that he’d protect her against anything returned. She had no evidence for it, no understanding of how she knew it was true. Maybe it wasn’t the feminist thing to admit, but it just was. The primal idea thrilled Lucy, stole her breath, brought her closer to the edge. Arousal shot through her, warming her between the legs until it built into a liquid desire she ached to extinguish.

“Do you date much?” Lucy had to know, a weird possessiveness coming over her.

“No. Like I said earlier, I’ve been in the sandbox for so long, it wasn’t practical.”

“The sandbox. Is that what they call the desert?”

“Yep.”

“You met Shelly though.”

His gaze caught and held hers. “That’s all in the past now. I’m going to do my best to forget her. Want to help me?”

The sensual drug pouring into her belly demanded attention. “Very much.”

His arousal brushed her stomach, and she knew denying that she wanted him wouldn't work. Yeah, he was in the military—so what she hadn't wanted when she came into this bar. Yeah, she'd met him again after all these years. It didn't matter. Her body ached with longing, desired him with a burning pitch that rose with every touch. They were close, not plastered together, but each tentative movement, each sway of their hips, reminded her why she'd come here tonight. Why her body wanted his in no uncertain terms.

Lucy glanced up and caught his gaze, loving that his thoughts ran as wildly as hers. Vic's eyes went half-mast, and that look caused every hormone inside her to sit up and take notice.

He whispered into her ear, "Do you want to get out of here? Talk somewhere quiet?"

Talk. Well, that was a euphemism, a polite way of saying what he wanted to do. What she wanted to do. "Yes."

Before they could move, Vic's head snapped up as if he'd felt something, some danger. He stopped dancing, but kept his arm around her.

He whispered in her ear again. "There's a guy coming our way across the room. He's staring at me like he wants to kill me. Is that the rat bastard?"

Apprehension made her spin out of his arms to look. Vic's right arm slipped around her middle in a possessive, protective shield. Damn it. Danny, big, tall Danny with a battle-hardened look on his craggy face, headed right for them. Other dancers parted before the storm to get out of his way.

Lucy said the only thing that popped to mind. "Oh, crap."

"You!" Danny said in a loud, slightly slurred voice. "You stay away from Lucy!"

She couldn't believe that he'd walked in here like this, staggering a little and belligerent. "You have some nerve." Her voice was deadly serious and royally pissed. "Go back to Felicia and get out of my life."

Suddenly, she recognized the wildness in his eyes and the stench of heavy liquor hit her nose. He was steaming drunk.

Before she could blink, Vic eased around until he stood in front of her. She didn't have time to protest or even think as Danny's big fist headed for Vic's face.

Vic was lightning, his arm coming up to block Danny's punch. Danny swung again, Vic blocked. Lucy jumped back to avoid the fray and caught a glance at her ex-boyfriend.

Danny's face was a mottled red, his eyes bloodshot. "She's mine!"

Vic stood at the ready, feet slightly apart, arms at his side. Tension held his shoulders taut. "She doesn't belong to anyone."

She had enough time to be flabbergasted—two men were fighting over her.

Three bouncers headed right for Danny and grabbed him from behind. Vic held his hands up and backed away. He wasn't fighting Danny, he was simply protecting himself from getting smashed in the face. Gasps and exclamations echoed around Lucy, then claps. People were clapping because of a fight? Then it occurred to her they'd clapped because of Vic's quick thinking to deflect Danny's hits. Lucy

admired the fact he hadn't busted Danny in the face. The bouncers continued to drag Danny outside. She heard someone say the police were on the way.

Vic turned to her, his arm encircling her waist as he eased her off the dance floor to stand in a secluded spot. "You okay? You're shaking."

"Me?" She realized her hands trembled, her body wracked with fine tremors. "I'm fine. Just adrenalin, I guess. What in the world did he think he was doing? I never thought in a million years he'd do anything like that. I've never seen him drunk."

"Maybe you don't know as much about him as you thought."

As she gazed into Vic's eyes, she realized she didn't know as much about this man as she thought either.

Maybe that was the point. The time for pretending had left the building a long time ago. "In high school I was wrong about you. Tonight, when I realized who you were, I was wrong about you. When I walked in here tonight..." She took a deep breath for bravery. "I planned to find a hook-up. I wanted pure, unemotional sex and that's something I've *never* done before. I saw you and you blew me away. You're different than you were in high school."

"Am I?"

"Yes. Mature, confident." Dare she admit it out loud? She allowed her gaze to do a blatant once over that took in his whole body with ravenous admiration. "Hot."

He chuckled softly. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"You aren't the same woman either." When she didn't answer he said, "Do you still want the unemotional sex?"

She swallowed hard. "Yes." Her not-getting-involved-with-military-types rule flushed right down the toilet. There couldn't be emotions in this, in the short time they'd renewed their acquaintance. "Yes."

All the way to her house, Lucy reflected on the night. Vic insisted on following her home. His SUV following her to her neighborhood did make her feel safer on a crazy night like this.

Cops had interviewed them at the bar and had taken Danny to sleep off a drunk. The bar owner and Vic could have filed charges against Danny but declined. As a result, Lucy found one more thing about Vic to admire. With all the commotion, midnight came and went without the sensual kiss she'd wanted.

Lucy had made a decision she hoped she wouldn't regret bringing him here. Confusion certainly clouded this, the conviction that she'd been so sure not to make a mistake with a military man again. And here she was.

Maybe making that same mistake once more.

Her street was quiet with no traffic. The older neighborhood held houses built in the early twentieth century. Tree-lined, the area still had traces of snow on the sidewalk, and some Christmas lights lingered on homes nearby. She pulled into her driveway and drove around back to her detached garage. She had too much junk in her garage to park in there, so she braved scraping snow off in the winter and heating her car when temperatures dropped. Vic parked behind her and climbed out. Her heart started a new tattoo, an excitement of what might happen. She walked up to him, his features hard to see even though neighborhood lights kept the area from being pitch dark.

“Look,” he said, “if you want me to leave, I understand after everything that happened. If you think you want to patch things up with your old boyfriend, we can talk tomorrow or—”

“No.” She didn’t want to change the plan. “I’m not going back to him.”

She thought he hesitated for a split second, then he nodded. “Okay. I missed my kiss at midnight.”

Her belly swirled with excitement at the thought. At the very least, she wanted that kiss. She laughed softly. “You got it.”

Lucy let them in through the back door and flipped on a light immediately as they entered the utility room. They took off their coats, hung them there, and then removed their boots.

“Can I get you something to drink?” she asked as they walked into her little kitchen.

“I’m good.” His smile was soft, appreciative.

“Come into the living room.” She led the way, snapping on soft lighting from mission-style lamps. “Please have a seat.”

He snagged her around the waist and tugged her to him. He groaned softly, his eyes burning. “Midnight’s come and gone. How about that kiss?”

His eagerness sent her arousal higher, and reminded her of what they planned. A mixture of excitement and fear sang through her veins. Not fear of him—never that. Fear of the wisdom of her decision. A one-night stand?

“I’ve never...” She trailed off, embarrassment surging upward.

“Kissed at midnight?” His eyes sparked with amusement.

“No, I mean, that’s not what I meant.”

Understanding filled his eyes. “You’ve never had unemotional sex?”

She swallowed hard around the truth. “No.”

He leaned in closer, eyes hot. His breath whispering over her ear. “I’ll make you a deal then. One I would’ve made anyway. One midnight kiss. After that, if you want to stop we will. Any time tonight you want to stop—any time at all, just tell me.”

Wow. This man, well, this man kept saying the right thing. Doing the right thing. How could a woman resist that?

He tasted her lips softly, with a quick and feather-light approach that made her moan. A second later he pulled back, his arms still around her waist.

That's all?

Lucy had seen the desperation in him, the lust. He proved it by pressing a delicate kiss to her forehead, then her cheeks, and then the side of her neck. Sensation whirled inside her like a snowstorm.

Satisfaction filled his eyes as he drew back from her. "I'm glad you walked in that bar tonight."

"Even if it was to find a one-night-stand?"

He kissed the other side of her neck. He sighed. "Yep. I'm glad it's me. The thought of any other man having you tonight..." He shook his head.

God, if he said one more thing like that, she'd have to kiss him again.

"Because you would miss out?" she asked.

He laughed. "Yeah. And I don't trust another man to keep you safe."

"You'd be jealous?" She asked the question in pure amazement.

"Yep."

Moist heat tingled between her thighs. "Oh. Um...that's a little old fashioned isn't it? I can take care of myself."

"Yeah." His fingers pushed into her hair. "But it's a part of me that's always been there. To protect. I was the geek who wouldn't squish bugs and hated to dissect frogs."

Her eyebrows practically shot to the ceiling. "Really? I totally figured you for the Bunsen-burner type."

Vic grunted, then he laughed. "I hate to burst your bubble, but I wasn't the angel you thought I was either."

Now she was surprised and intrigued. "What? What did you do?"

"Later. I'll tell you later."

With delicate simplicity, he tasted her mouth. Sensation piled on sensation, better than her imaginings. Thoughts vanished under an instant flash of need. As his arms brought her closer with a gentle tug, she melted. Lips moved, tasted, a kiss that fell away from gentle and moved straight into heaven. She thought maybe she'd forgotten this heat, forgotten what it felt like for a man to hold her with such honest need. Maybe she'd never experienced this before, but only a facsimile. She participated, oh, she did. Her hands couldn't stop exploring, learning his shoulders, his arms, feeling the strength. Vic palmed her back with strokes that explored, slid down to just above her butt. He skirted the edge but wouldn't go over. His tongue slipped inside, stroking and learning hers with an intimacy that shouldn't have surprised but still shocked. No man had made love to her like this. Subtle but seeking, controlled but fiery.

This was lovemaking. Falling into a trance where nothing but sensation had a place. Don't stop. Don't ever stop.

He drew back slowly, his chest rising and falling. His warm breath puffed over her mouth, his eyes burning, wanting, telling her more than words could.

“Do you want me to go?” he asked.

She trembled with a growing desire that threatened to burst. She shook with it, overwhelmed.

“No. Don’t go.”

With a grin that screamed satisfaction and gentle humor, he said softly in her ear. “It’s crass, but I’ve gotta ask, honey. Birth control? I have one condom, but...”

But? A hot flush filled her center. Just thinking about making love to him once set her on fire. Reckless, needy, combustible fire. More than once...oh, holy mother of...

“Honey?” he asked again, and that soft, deep velvet in his voice added fuel to her fire.

“I have a whole pack of condoms in the bedside table.”

Once more, that fallen angel smile emerged. Talking be damned. She needed more, wanted more.

Right. Now.

Lucy dove into another kiss, intending to never come up for air. From that second on, as if someone had given them permission, they caught fire. She drew back long enough to pull her top over her head. It flew across the living room. Before he could move, she reached for her short leather skirt and eased the zipper down in back. With hands that shook, she slipped the skirt over her hips and down her legs. It dropped at her feet. She kicked the skirt aside. And basked in his admiration.

Chapter Four

Jesus, H.—

Vic swallowed hard. Heat slammed him at a hundred miles per hour as he took in the pure beauty before him. Lucy wasn't perfect, at least not in a model sense, but his heart and his body didn't give a rat's ass. He loved what he saw.

His pants had gotten too fuckin' tight, but he couldn't move, paralyzed by the sight of her. His hands flexed as he wanted to rush forward to grab her up, kiss her like crazy, thrust his tongue into every sweet corner of her mouth

Slow down, Cochise. Savor her. Now is not the time to explode like a fuckin' high school boy.

His attention slid down her body, taking in her details, imagination rioting as he visualized what he'd do to each part of her. Her shoulders were small, her arms long and slim, her breasts cupped and lifted by a bra of black lace with some silvery threads running through it. With each of her breaths, those mounds lifted. But he wanted to be the one lifting them, smoothing his fingers over soft flesh, drawing each of them upward to sip at her nipples.

The rest of her skin, down over her smooth, flat belly, was a pale that belonged to Irish heritage, a delicate white that seemed so fragile he feared to touch it. Matching G-string panties barely covered her thatch, and he licked his lips as he took inventory. Her hips were rounded, but not broad, her legs were long. In his mind's eye he imagined dropping to his knees in front of her, sliding those panties down. He'd press his face to her, draw in a breath of her perfume, lick through her wet softness. All the while she'd moan, she'd tremble as he took his time and tasted her secrets.

His hands clenched again, his body so tight with anticipation he didn't know if he could do slow. Hell, at this rate he was shaking inside as if he'd never had a woman before.

Or just *this* woman before. The woman he'd wanted in his dreams for as long as he could remember.

Before he could move, she walked toward him. He felt like a statue, trapped by her beauty, unable to act despite wanting her so damned much.

She reached for the hem of his sweater and eased it past his stomach, up his chest, until he was forced to lift his arms. He took control away and drew it over his head. It fell on the couch next to him. She gazed at him like a child in wonder, her eyes big, her body inching closer. His breath came faster, harder as she reached out and palmed his chest. Her lips parted, and he caught sight of her tongue. He almost groaned. God, he remembered that tongue, how it felt against his.

“Oh, my.” Her voice went breathy, soft.

She smoothed her warm hands over his chest, her small fingers tangling for a second in chest hair. Down, down, she brushed over his stomach so close to his belt buckle. She glanced down. She had to see his erection. He closed his eyes, gloried in sensation. When she unbuttoned his belt buckle, he opened his eyes. Lucy had dropped to her knees and worked on his button and then zipper. It wouldn't cooperate.

He groaned. “Let me get that.”

Vic made short work of the button and zipper, then stood waiting for her response. Her eyelids went half-mast, and he knew that look instinctively. She wasn't a virgin, but she hadn't approached a man like this, hadn't tried to be this assertive when it came to sex. Eight months of celibacy worked on his patience. One part of him wanted to grab her up, kiss her until she went limp with compliance, then throw her over his shoulder and carry her off. It brimmed in his blood, screamed for him to do just that.

Lucy stared at Vic's glorious torso and his open pants and thought she'd die. She'd never seen a more beautiful man. His wide shoulders and powerful arms turned her on. His chest, finely sculpted, was sprinkled with dark hair that trailed down his six-pack down into his pants. His white briefs peeked out of his jeans, and she licked her lips. She had to be looking at him like he was dessert. God, she hoped he was dessert. She was so damned hungry. Her body literally throbbed. More than that, his gaze burned steady upon her, clear, staggering desire telegraphed in his expression.

He held his hand out to her, and before she could speak, he asked, “Bedroom?”

“Down the hall, last door on the left.”

He lifted her into his arms. A little gasp escaped her throat. Her arm slipped around his neck. “Whoa.”

In the low light, Lucy could still see his grin. “Whoa?”

“I'm...impressed.” She gave her silly side full reign while her libido fired into super-hot action. “Muscles. You have so many damn muscles.”

He chuckled as he walked down the dimly lit hall. “The army requires that I work out.”

“It looks wonderful on you. Me...I've been lucky lately if I get any weight lifting in.” *God, don't babble. You're acting like a nervous teenager.* Okay, so maybe she was nervous.

He grunted softly, a sound so ruthlessly virile it stirred her blood. “You're beautiful. I've never seen anyone so damned beautiful.”

She wanted to claim that he flattered her, but the hot, soft way he said it sounded completely sincere. Her nipples felt tight and achy beneath the bra—she couldn't wait to get out of it, to feel his body against hers, to learn each inch of his glorious form. Wet heat filled her center. His skin was warm, silk over steel. She slid her palm up the back of his neck. A night light in the hallway illuminated the bedroom enough to show them in soft relief.

“Remember, if you want to stop, tell me.” As he drew her into his arms, Vic’s slightly gruff voice puffed near her ear.

“I don’t want to stop.”

He kissed her ear, his voice a rough growl. “Good.”

Shivers of delight coursed over her body, and she shook with excitement. This was really happening. Now. Perhaps it should have felt wrong to make love like this, but something inside her said this coming together should have occurred ages ago. They had a second chance to connect, to find what they’d been denied when very young. They hadn’t discovered sex at an immature age, and now the pieces were coming together.

Vic cupped her face, and in those eyes she saw such gentleness mixed with sexual need. How could a man be this exciting, this alpha, and still possess tenderness inside him?

Without another word, he urged her to the bed. They rolled over the plush royal blue velvet quilt, passion taking them to higher and higher levels. He cupped her bottom, squeezing gently. Vic rolled and came up on top. He pressed his erection to her sweet spot. She groaned, her breath stolen by pleasure. Her excitement burned high, and she didn’t think it would take much. She gasped, fingers clenching his shoulders.

He kissed her forehead. “Like that?”

“Do I like it? God, yes.”

He chuckled softly, his breath coming quickly. “Me too.”

His rhythm stayed steady, each stroke bringing her higher. She arched, trying to match his movements as her body sang. Twisting, she tried to reach her peak, but it remained out of reach.

Vic fumbled with the front closure on her bra. He snapped it open, and he gazed at her breasts with obvious heat. “Jesus, you’re beautiful.”

She’d never considered her thirty-four C chest good or bad, but the hunger in his eyes said he craved what he saw. When his tongue licked one nipple, then the other, she squirmed and groaned. He grazed on her breasts, tasting, licking, drawing them into his mouth. Vic suckled, swirled his tongue over her flesh. She’d never experienced so much pleasure she could barely stand it. Slowly, he traveled down until his lips traced over her quivering stomach, heading toward the source of her frustration. Her clit throbbed, her body aching to reach a completion. She wanted it, ached for it.

“Vic.” She gasped, terrified he’d stop.

“Shhh,” his deep voice rasped, a velvet and steel voice that promised and teased. “Easy, baby.”

Baby. The feminist in her demanded he stop calling her that. The woman writhing beneath the hot stroke of his tongue melted under the sexual nuance in his voice and wanted him to keep saying it. Groaning it as he fucked her. Just the image flashing through her head sent wild need scrambling through her body.

He touched already highly-sensitized flesh. Her heartbeat hammered, her breath coming quickly. Please, she couldn't stand this anymore. She wanted—

His tongue touched her through her panties. *Oh. Oh God* “Vic.”

He glanced up, and their gazes locked in the dimness. “Want me to stop?”

“No.” *Never.*

He slipped his fingers into her panties and with one quick movement they snapped right off her hips, and he tossed them aside. He didn't apologize. He didn't look sorry.

Holy—

He'd just ripped her panties off. Heat shot through her center, and a rush of moisture between her legs said it all. Her cheeks flushed, her heart pounded. A litany ran through her head.

Now, Vic. Now.

His eyes glittered with hunger, and he dipped his head. For long moments he tasted her, licking with soft attention around her wetness. And she was so very aroused. As if he knew her desperation, he swept his touch over her clit. She gasped, moaned as he stimulated her with long, slow licks and fast, hot brushes. Clutching at the sheets, she gasped, panted, begged for relief. She spread her thighs wider, lifted her hips, bucked under the never-ending delicious torture.

Lucy almost cursed him. Instead, when he moaned against her flesh and stuck his tongue inside her, she came apart. She screamed. A long, high, whimpering sound as her body writhed in sweet fulfillment. As she tumbled from the peak, he slid two fingers deep into her sensitive flesh. She gasped as he moved his fingers back and forth inside her. He settled his tongue on her clit, fluttered gently as he caressed her inside. Before she could say one word in utter amazement, she climaxed again. Heat surged up from her pulsing center and spread up through her chest and face in a glorious pleasure. She whimpered in bone-melting ecstasy.

“Lucy, I can't wait any longer. I want you.” His voice asked for fulfillment, the guttural, husky quality sending a delicious thrill through her.

As she came down from the fire, he moved to the bed beside her. She reached for the bedside drawer. After fishing out the condom box and handing it to him, she waited. The box tore, he made quick work of it, and before she knew it he had returned to her.

She knew this time would be quick and dirty, a testament to pure sexual desire. Later, perhaps much later, they'd slow it way down.

Vic lowered his hips between her thighs as he braced above her on his forearms. He kissed her as his cock head touched her aroused center. With steady but gentle deliberation, he pushed within. His thickness spread her wide and deep until he touched something inside her that set off a firestorm of sensation. She whimpered with delight, caught up in a new sensation. No man before Vic had ever fit her like this, filled her so tightly, so full and deep. Lucy wriggled and groaned softly. He didn't move, held in place with a

patience she hadn't expected. It was so good, so right, so much more than anything she'd experienced before this moment.

"God, you feel so good," he said. "Oh, yeah." Vic's breathing came faster, his voice thick with an unguarded emotion that made her arousal grow higher.

She clutched at his shoulders, arched her hips, and he moved in reaction. He sucked a breath inward as she moved once more, trying to urge him into motion. He refused, spreading her legs wider and settling deeper into her core. Once more he kissed her and stirred his hips against her, moving his cock with short, urgent thrusts. The pleasure astonished her, made her cry out as first one nudge then the other threatened to detonate her with nothing more than a harder thrust. Still, he wouldn't. Vic's relentless movements stayed slow and careful, teasing her into a frenzy.

Lucy tore her mouth from his as pleasure multiplied. Almost without warning orgasm swallowed her whole and a sharp cry left her throat.

She opened her eyes and caught his feral stare, eyes almost as dark as midnight, the darkness in the room unable to hide his urgent expression. He closed his eyes as he moved into a faster rhythm, control snapped and all bets were off. The thrust and drag of him inside her surged to her womb, made it impossible to find any bearings. And she didn't want to. Lucy tumbled as he thrust harder and demanded a finish for them both. She clutched him, gripped him so hard it could have hurt. Vic picked up speed as their bodies writhed against one another. Orgasm rose, moved higher, drew her into the clouds where it burst over her with sharp intensity.

Vic managed to stop but just barely.

He wanted to see her expression, and in the dim light he caught her. Her eyes were closed, pure bliss evident as her pussy clenched and released him in strong, muscular rhythms. He wanted to see her, feel her coming on him again. Determined, he held back the driving primal need to explode. He pushed up on his palms, the better to thrust. Vic increased the pace, thrusting harder, moving until his body pounded, exertion tightening his muscles. Desperate sounds, breathy, urgent murmurs left her throat. He powered into her until soft screams of pleasure left her throat. She trembled around him, and that was it. He burst, shuddering, growls of fierce orgasm ripping him apart.

Chapter Five

Vic sank upon Lucy only for a second, then quickly pulled from her and rolled to the side. He left her and headed to the bathroom. When he returned a short time later, feeling pleasure still pinging in his muscles, she'd pulled covers up to her chin and huddled under them like a lost waif. The sight of her staring at the ceiling gave him a sinking feeling. Maybe she already regretted the sex. He didn't expect to care so much, but damned if he didn't. He slid into the bed and didn't waste any time drawing her into his arms. She stiffened as he slid his hand down her back and kissed her forehead. A shiver slid up and down her body. She burrowed closer and the sensation of her warm palm on his chest felt so damn good. He kissed her forehead, loving the silky softness.

"You okay?" Another concern belted him. "Was I too rough?"

She laughed softly. "I'm better than okay. And no, you weren't rough. You were...we were eager." The words came out stilted, as if she might feel embarrassed by what she'd said.

Her palm slid up his chest again as he rolled onto his back and took her with him. The feeling of her soft body against his made him crazy. He wanted to make love again, and that surprised him. It wasn't like he was nineteen again. His palm slid over her back, wanting to generate the heat inside her that would bring her higher than before.

She shifted out of his arms until she sat beside him. He almost groaned. She sat cross-legged. He couldn't keep his gaze off that soft pussy with the tangle of dark hair. He wanted to be inside there once more, shoving deep, fucking her until she broke over him in a wave and he felt her clenching tight. He blinked and forced his gaze up to her waist and then her breasts where his attention snagged once more. When he finally managed to look at her face, she was staring back with a pensive look. Not a glare, not a grin. Her quiet worried him.

"You don't like to cuddle?" he dared to ask.

Lucy swallowed hard. "I love to cuddle. But..."

How could she say it? What did she want to say? This beautiful—no scratch that—hunk of rugged man had her tied in knots. She would never have guessed in a million years that when she went looking for a one-night stand she'd come up with old acquaintance Victor Moore and he'd be in the dreaded military. No way. Seemed like the night had more than one surprise in store. The sex, no frills, down-and-dirty action had blown her away. The vulnerable part of her ached, wanting more of the same and yet she was

terrified to tell him what she honestly thought. After all, this was a one-night stand. No frills, no guarantee of a happily-ever-after.

The way he looked at her though, made her blood run hot. He looked her over with such blatant admiration and desire, she couldn't believe it. Instead of falling asleep or seeming uninterested, he wanted to cuddle. This was too much. Too good to be true. She could still be honest.

"It was fantastic, Vic. I...well, I'll be honest. I've never had sex that good before."

His eyes widened, and a big smile crossed his mouth. "I'm glad to hear it."

She didn't want to think about how many women might have enjoyed his body. From head to toe, he was the most gorgeous man flesh she'd ever seen. Her gaze snagged on his cock, which stayed half-erect. His strong thighs, calves and big feet went well with everything else about him. Big and yet gentle. As she looked, that cock grew erect again. Fully, happily ready to do the deed. She swallowed hard once more. *My, my, my.* She wanted more and fully intended to experience it before she walked away. Lucy didn't intend though, to let small talk ruin the mood.

Moving closer, she leaned over and wrapped her hand around his cock. She drew upward to feel the strength behind his steel. Without hesitation, she closed her mouth over the tip of his cock and sucked.

He gasped and his eyes closed. "Holy Christ."

She smiled, then set to work. Lucy worked him, drawing her hand up and down from base to tip, her mouth acting as a constant tantalizer, tongue swirling, flirting with his flesh. He tasted musky and delicious and she wanted more. She gloried in his reaction. The man didn't mind showing his true appreciation. He gasped, he groaned and clutched at the sheets.

Then he proceeded to curse. Slowly. Precisely. Gritting each word through his teeth as she was spurred into torturing him.

He growled. "Fuck."

She licked his tip.

His hips surged upward. "Jesus, honey."

She sucked him into her mouth all the way to her throat.

Vic's body started to tremble, and she knew she had him.

He groaned. "God!"

She wanted it all, wanted to make him forget this was for one night. She pursued his needs relentlessly, hotly, unwilling to go halfway. Her body followed in kind, growing wetter and aching for him inside her.

"Wait," he gasped.

He flipped her onto her back. Vic feasted on her, tasting her earlobes, her neck, her cheeks and chin. His movements went slowly, a relentless itinerary of her body. He kissed the hollow of her throat, then paraded across her breasts with sensual attention. By the time he'd mapped her belly and settled between

her legs, she thought she'd scream. With hot kisses, he painted her pussy lips with one delicate stroke and then another until she writhed like a madwoman needing release.

"Please, Vic." She gasped as he flicked his tongue over her clit. "I want you."

He reached for a condom he'd tossed on the bed. He tore it open and in record time sheathed himself with protection. He urged her to get on her hands and knees. She'd never cared for this position, but then her previous two lovers—her only lovers before Vic—hadn't been interested whether she enjoyed a good time or not. Perhaps this time...

With slow deliberation, he sank one finger deep inside her. He tested her, moaned softly when he realized she was wet and ready. He centered, then pushed. Lucy couldn't hold back a soft sound of approval as that thick cock spread her open. He'd driven her to the wild edge, hanging her by a thread, and relief was in sight. Then, slower than she expected, he made love to her. The rhythm was primitive, a back and forth that drove her to the top of a long climb. Every touch promised more, and as she pushed back against him, her body took over from her mind. No going back. No waiting. She came with a startled cry, amazed by the force and quickness of her release.

"Oh, yeah." His low, guttural expression fired up her arousal.

But he wouldn't let her down. Vic caressed her back, her shoulders. His breathing was harsh as he gave her everything and came with a harsh shout. His entire body shuddered as he came and came and finally held her close, his heavy body draping over hers.

They didn't fall asleep. They lay with Vic spooned behind her, his body hot and reminding her that one-night-stand sex wasn't supposed to be this good. She didn't know how long they lay there without a word.

He trailed his fingers down her stomach and over her mound, and his touch found her clit with unerring accuracy. She couldn't hold back a sigh of pleasure as she parted her legs enough to allow him full access. As he teased her clit into a sweet, throbbing point, orgasm teased her. She couldn't get there. She writhed, she moaned.

"Vic." The word came out in breath frustration. "Please."

She heard him fumbling with a condom wrapper, and seconds later his cock found home deep inside her. He pumped slow and deep, the motion sliding along super sensitive areas that screamed for more attention. He gave it. For long moments they moved with a simple dance, a dance the promised and delivered. With gathering force, the beat grew until they couldn't sustain waiting any longer. Her body clenched and released over his with small, exquisite spasms. She shivered, and with another thrust, he growled softly, quaked, and went still.

She panted. "Insatiable?"

He grunted. "God, yes. With you I guess I am."

She groaned and sat up. The clock read three am. They'd been at it for almost three hours. She smiled with satisfaction.

"That was..." What could she say? "Nothing's ever happened to me quite like this."

"A one-night stand?"

It dawned on her that she didn't want this to be for one night, but they hadn't agreed to more. They hadn't said that after tonight they'd see each other again. "Never for this long. I mean..."

"You've never had sex this long or you've never had a one-night stand before?"

"Yes to both. Most men I know can't...you know. Do it this many times in such a short time."

"Like I told you, I'm not like any guy you've known."

Humor laced his voice, and a soft, slight arrogance that surprised her. So maybe he wasn't Mr. Perfect after all. "You know you're good in bed?"

"A few women have said so."

"So have you slept with a lot of women?"

He didn't speak at first, but his body stiffened. He released her and propped up on one elbow. She turned to face him. In the low light he was a god, a rugged, rough god on par with any lover she'd imagined in her dreams.

"Depends on what you mean by a lot? Have you slept with a lot of men?"

Lucy hadn't expected that comeback. "You answer the question first."

He sighed, his mouth quirking up at the corners. "Six women."

Her mouth opened and spoke before her brain engaged. "Six?"

Vic snorted. "Is there something wrong with the fact I've slept with six women?"

"No, of course not."

"Uh-huh." He didn't sound quite like he believed her. "That's not a lot of women considering the number of women who've asked me to sleep with them."

Holy crap. Her mouth popped open. Women *would* throw themselves at him. *Of course they would.* Vic had a charisma that lacked obnoxious arrogance but screamed double-digit confidence. A walk that said don't-mess-with-me, a body sculpted by the gods, and rugged good looks that would make angels faint. She'd known other men with similar qualities, but none of them drew her like this man did. None of them made her warm, happy, feel protected and understood like Vic did. She still didn't believe her good luck.

"How many have asked you to sleep with them?"

He made a small, exasperated noise. "Several. It started while I was at West Point. There were women throwing themselves at us like we might have some superpower sex or something. One guy called it the Warrior Syndrome. Women who get horny over men they consider heroes or someday heroes. It turns some women on. They smell testosterone and it switches on their ovaries."

His blunt talk, so different from the seduction, from the hot but gentle persuasion, gave her pause.

Is that what she'd done? Wanting a sexual release but falling into the trap of being turned on by a lie? Did he think she was like those women? "You guys were being used as sex machines."

"Yep."

"What did you think of the women?"

"I didn't pay much attention to it. I was too busy trying to study."

"And you never had sex with any of them?"

"I didn't say that."

Oh.

In some ridiculous way she'd built him up in her mind on short acquaintance, made him less human, less real. Maybe she'd been looking for a hero that didn't exist.

She pulled the covers up to her chin, suddenly cold. "Am I number six?"

He rolled onto his back and covered his eyes with his forearm. "Yes."

They sank into quiet for a moment, awkwardness she suspected started when she'd begun questioning him. But why shouldn't she ask questions and Vic answer? Didn't she have a right to know if she was making another monumental mistake with a military man?

That tiny suspicion-o-meter went off in her head and started to wear away at her confidence in the situation.

"So how many men have you slept with?" he asked after the silence.

She drew in a breath, knowing she had to confess. "Three. You're number three. Number one was my boyfriend in college. Two was the military guy who ran around with other women."

"Not Danny?"

"No. We hadn't gotten that far yet."

"Yet you fell into bed with me after we'd known each other again for a short time."

She looked at him sharply, but there wasn't any coolness or condemnation in his tone. Just facts.

"Yes."

Vic sat up, his gaze serious. "I feel a chill in here."

She shivered. "It is cold, isn't it?"

He sighed. "Do you want me to go?"

Startled by the question, she considered it. That's all this was supposed to be, right? A hot pursuit of sex for one blazing night?

When she didn't answer, doubt riding her hard, he made the decision for her. "I'll head out."

"But..."

He got off the bed and headed for the bathroom. When the door closed, her female brain asked the obvious question. What the hell had just happened? Didn't she want him to stay? Was he insulting she

hadn't answered immediately? Or maybe she hadn't answered right away because she wasn't sure about him staying. She flopped back on the bed. Oh, God. Inside an ache started, one filled with confusion. What did she want now that the earth-shaking sex was over? The man was a stud and a half. She snapped on the bedside lamp. Yet he was far more than that. He was—

When the bathroom door opened, she'd already pulled the covers up around her chin again.

He searched the area for his clothes.

Say it, damn it. Before he gets away. "Do you have to leave?"

Jeans back on, he stood bare-chested and hands on hips. A sad smile touched his mouth. "No, I don't. But here's the thing...you didn't answer right away. You're not sure about what we did. You need some time to think this whole thing over. You need to decide if the fact I'm in the military bothers you. Or if the fact that other women have come onto me bothers you. Maybe there's a little part of you that believes the sexual harassment charge."

Her mouth opened, but again nothing came out.

Lucy swallowed, her mind racing with questions. Only one would emerge. "Are you...what are you doing all this weekend?"

He shrugged. "I have a room over at the Beckworth Inn. Since my plans were changed last night, I'm kind of unsure what to do next. I planned on being here at least a week more, then back to Colorado Springs."

"Oh." *Oh? Is that all I can say?* "You hadn't planned on seeing Marisa and Jake?"

"I planned to call them sometime this weekend. They knew I was coming in to town."

When silence stretched, she slipped from the bed and rummaged in the closet for her robe. In the meantime, he pulled his sweater over that amazing chest. He returned to the utility room for his leather jacket and boots. She followed him to the door.

"Well, then," she said when they stood at the door.

He smiled. "Yeah. Look, I'll be at the inn, so you know where to find me." Vic cupped her face. He kissed her softly, without any of the passion. "Wait. Got pen and paper? I'll give you my cell number."

She grabbed a notepad from a kitchen drawer and jotted down his cell number.

"Call me if you decide what you want," he said.

He drew back and started to open the door. She clasped his forearm. "What do you want, Vic?"

His gaze searched her face. "To give you time. You're confused, and hell, maybe I'm confused too. I thought Shelly cared about me and then she hosed up my life with lies, and you thought that jerk cared about you. One thing I do know. Last thing I want is to make you uncomfortable. Even if I'm in the military, I'm not like the ass wipe who didn't have the brains to realize he was damned lucky you wrote him while he was at war. I know if you wrote me, I'd sure as hell fight tooth and nail to make sure I came back to you." He shrugged. "But I'm through with women who aren't sincere. Who don't know what they

want.” His eyes darkened. “I think I learned something about myself tonight. Maybe I don’t want one-night stands anymore.”

After he closed the door and left, she locked it and then slumped on the couch, her mind a bundle of contradictions. It had been a few hours of hot, incredible sex. Why did it have to become clouded with feelings? She felt connected to him at a level she wouldn’t have expected from such a short acquaintance, as if by letting him leave she’d lost a genuine chance for happiness. She wanted to be with a man who mattered. Who cared about people’s feelings, who had honor and integrity.

She headed back to bed a short time later and burrowed under the covers. Vic’s scent was on the sheets, and she loved it. She buried her face in the pillows, rolled from one side to the other as she experienced vivid recall of his body deep in hers, pounding out a bone-melting orgasm. She sighed. Confusion was a bitch. She hated confusion, and damned if she wasn’t baffled. Damn the man. He’d given her no ultimatums. He’d only asked for clarification and she couldn’t give him an answer. Perhaps he was right. Maybe the one-night stand needed to stay that way, a pleasant—hell, freaking fantastic memory to hold on to if her nights ever turned colder.

As she drifted into a restless sleep, a nightmare arose. Vic walked off into a sunset, never to be seen again, her opportunity to know something special blown to high hell.

Chapter Six

“Sounds like you had an interesting New Year’s Eve,” Neena said as she stood across from Lucy at Neena’s Breakfast Bar Sunday morning.

Lucy sighed as she slumped down on a barstool. She’d told Neena the whole story about Vic, including the part where his ex-girlfriend had dragged his name through the dirt. “I can’t believe that woman did that to him.”

Neena shook her head and took a sip of tomato juice, then rubbed her four-months-pregnant stomach. Her russet hair fell in a long, semi-wavy stream over her breasts. Her green eyes sparkled with genuine warmth and subtle amusement. Her oval face was never too made up. “Well, well. I never thought…” She shrugged. “Here I thought you and Danny would be all snuggled up somewhere for the weekend. Now you’re telling me that you did the two-backed beast with another military guy instead?”

Bleary eyed from not sleeping well Friday and Saturday night, Lucy stared at her half-full coffee cup. “Yup.”

“He’s good friends with Jake?”

“Well, he didn’t say friend. I guess they know each other.”

Neena laughed and stretched. Even pregnant and wearing a purple sweater hugging her rounding tummy, Neena had a glow about her, a kind of happiness Lucy feared she’d never know.

“Speaking of rascally men, where’s your husband?” Lucy asked.

“Dunno. He’s always tinkering with this place.” Neena glanced around the old house. “I have a hard time believing that this place is so pretty now. It took a lot of hard work.” The contentment on her face spoke volumes. “But I don’t regret a minute of it.”

“It’s beautiful. And you guys deserve it. You worked hard. Now you’ve got a little one on the way.”

Lucy tasted her coffee again, wishing she’d eaten more for breakfast. Her stomach grumbled and rolled a bit. Maybe it was punishment for New Year’s Eve’s sexual excess.

Neena shook her head again. “So Vic was this geek in high school.”

“A-number one. No glasses, but this big nose, big ears, gangly. Skinny. Dorky as hell. Yet he was the sweetest boy.”

Neena’s inquisitive expression widened to an evil grin. “Never underestimate a geek. Eve did that with Sean, and boy, did I underestimate Mitch.”

Eve had discovered when she saw Sean decked out in military uniform and packing a weapon, that the computer nerd was gorgeous as hell. Mitch had startled Neena by saving her skin during a robbery, while she saved his.

Lucy pushed her coffee away, confusion still twisting her up. “It was a mistake hooking up with Vic.”

Neena’s eyebrows lifted. “Honestly? Are you sure?”

“I’m not doing the military thing anymore.”

Neena nodded. “That’s what Marisa once said,”

True. Jake had come into Marisa’s life during a rescue in the Mexican jungle. Marisa had barely recovered from the death of her fiancé when Jake found a way into her reluctant heart.

“I’m not Marisa.”

Neena threw her a half-smile. “Your record with crappy military men is truly amazing.”

Lucy glanced around, not sure she wanted Mitch to hear this conversation. He’d been outside the isolated house shoveling snow when Lucy had arrived. While Lucy liked Mitch very much and had enjoyed photographing him for the Clarksville charity calendar two years ago, he had that something—whatever it was—that held him apart from other men. A watchfulness. She guessed being in a war could do that to a man. She’d seen it in Freddie’s husband, Keith Wallace, an Army Special Forces man, and fellow Special Ops soldier Jake Sullivan. They all possessed an extraordinary ingredient that made military men different from Joe Blow down the street. She didn’t want to like it, but seemed drawn to it every time. And her friends were very happily married to their big, tough military dudes. She couldn’t fault the guys for making her good buddies happy women.

“You ladies talking about me again?” Mitch sauntered from the utility room into the kitchen. A wide grin on his mouth said he found it amusing rather than irritating.

He was over six feet of tensile strength with piercing brown eyes that never missed anything. His collar-length dark hair and rugged features assured that he’d never be called a pretty boy.

“Of course we are.” Neena went into her husband’s arms and the two shared a short and yet tender kiss.

Mitch kept his arm around his wife’s waist. “Okay, since you weren’t really talking about me, who were you talking about?”

Keeping a straight face, Lucy said, “A friend of Jake’s. Well, a guy he knows anyway.”

“What’s this guy’s name?” Mitch released Neena and came around the counter.

His curiosity surprised her a little, but she answered after she finished a sip of coffee. “I ran into him on New Year’s Eve.”

Mitch threw her an even more curious look, his eyes narrowed. “So that’s where you were. We thought you were with Danny.”

Neena cleared his throat. “Mitch, that’s a long and personal story.”

“What did Danny do?” Mitch asked.

Lucy couldn't hide her surprise as she swung toward Mitch. “How did you know he did something?”

Mitch reached for a peanut-butter cookie on a platter. He took a bite and chewed. “Never liked the guy.”

“You met him once,” Neena said. “For about two seconds.”

Mitch shrugged. “With some guys, that's all it takes.”

Neena sighed. “Well, in any case, it isn't any of our business.”

Lucy sighed. “It's okay.” She laughed softly. “Besides, I have to have someone to complain to.” She gave Mitch the short version of the tale.

Mitch finished munching the cookie, a big frown forming on his handsome face. “Damn.”

Lucy then gave Mitch a brief and sanitized version of how she met Vic. Mitch nodded. “I have a call to make. Be right back.”

Mitch disappeared into a back room, and Lucy winced. “What's he going to do?”

“Nosy business.” Neena poured another cup of decaf coffee for herself and offered a refill to Lucy. “He's concerned, so he's contacting Jake about Vic.”

If she hadn't found Mitch's protective friendship valuable, she would have been annoyed at him. Still... “What if Vic finds out Mitch checked on him?”

Neena came around the counter and patted Lucy on the arm. “Vic will probably understand. If he didn't, you may not want to be with a guy like that.” She winked. “But you're acting guilty about your time with him. Why is that?”

“Well, I was supposed to have feelings for Danny.” Lucy pushed aside her coffee cup and snatched a cookie to munch. “When I met Vic, all those feelings, other than complete annoyance and disappointment seemed to disappear. Vic and I have a...something I didn't expect.”

Neena sank onto the barstool next to her. One eyebrow lifted. “A connection?”

“Yeah. A connection. It took me off-guard.”

Neena grinned as if she had a secret. “You know how I met Mitch.”

Lucy frowned as she remembered that Mitch and Neena had survived a café robbery. “Yes. You were both very lucky you weren't killed.”

“We were. He was wearing that ghastly Hawaiian shirt so he could paint, and I'd judged him before I even met him. When he held me in his arms and I felt all those muscles, and when I realized what a fantastic man he is—well, all bets were off. Isn't that what you did with Vic?”

Lucy smiled. “Yes, but we weren't thrown together by violence. Our time together just happened.”

“I can understand you being cautious, especially after hearing that he was accused of sexual harassment.”

Lucy sighed. “But don't discount him because he's in the military?”

“Well, with your track record...”

Lucy groaned. “I know. Jake is always going on those special spook-type deployments and so is Keith. They’re gone a lot. Would you be able to stand it if Mitch was still in the military and gone all the time?”

Neena pushed back her hair and leaned one elbow on the counter. “I guess I wouldn’t know until I had the experience. But I love Mitch with everything inside me. I’d face down a herd of wild animals for him. So, yeah. I’d have married him if he’d still been in the military.”

Mitch strode back into the room and slipped his hands onto her shoulders. He kissed the side of her neck. “I love you too, darlin’. No chance of wild animals attacking me in Clarksville.”

Neena patted his hand. “I know, honey. What did you find out about Vic?”

“I called Jake and he vouches for Vic. Says that even though they don’t know each other well, Vic has a solid reputation in the military. Seems Vic is highly decorated and considered an upstanding soldier. The sexual harassment thing stained things a bit, but it’s cleared up now. ”

Lucy felt her cheeks turning red. “Thanks, Mitch. I know I can trust him...” She trailed off, unsure of herself in a big way. “That’s not the problem.”

Mitch smiled. “This sounds like girl talk. Ladies, I’m back to work.” He left the kitchen.

Neena grinned at Lucy, her eyes sparkling. “You okay? You’re as red as a beet.”

Lucy rubbed her arms. “I’m embarrassed. Now everyone in Clarksville knows that I’ve got a squiggy for Vic Moore.”

“Everybody? Just me and Mitch and a few friends. That isn’t everybody.”

“Feels like it.” She closed her eyes and shook her head before opening them and giving her friend a lopsided smile. “I’m a little confused. One minute I want to pick up the phone and pursue a relationship with him, and the next minute I think it was a great one-night stand, and I should just leave things as they are.”

Neena smoothed one hand over the granite countertop, her gaze thoughtful. “Every relationship is confusing and has its ups and downs.”

“Even yours?”

“Even mine. Welcome to being in love.”

Love? “Uh, no. I am not in love with Vic. I just met him.”

“In severe lust then.”

That she could admit to. “Major lust.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

Now that *was* the question, wasn’t it?

When Vic strode into his room at the inn Sunday night, it felt damned cold. He turned up the heat and stood for a moment soaking in a restless feeling he didn't understand how to banish. He'd spent a couple of hours with Jake and Marisa, happy to see his fellow soldier and his pretty wife. They'd introduced him to Sean O'Callahan, an Army reservist, and his wife Eve. The men had talked computers and war while Eve and Marisa had taken their conversation to the kitchen and fixed dinner.

Vic found Sean and Eve very nice people, and his time with Jake was like being with a close friend, he felt like they understood each other well and they could build a stronger friendship. They'd tasted bad water and even nastier food when they worked in the desert together. They'd bonded the way only soldiers could when confronted with tough times. Jake had revealed that their Special Forces unit was returning to Fort Carson, so he and Marisa would be moving there. They expected fellow Special Forces officer Keith Wallace and his wife Freddie to get orders soon. So there would probably be more opportunities in the future to get to know all of them better.

Not surprisingly, word had already gotten around that Army Major Daniel Mendoza had tried and failed to rearrange a fellow officer's face. Luckily for Danny, Vic was in a good enough mood New Year's Eve to give Danny a break. The fact Lucy didn't plan to go back with Danny made Vic damned happy. On the other hand, he didn't know that for certain, did he? What if Lucy had changed her mind about the rat bastard? Jesus, he hoped not. Worry crept in. Vic wanted to growl, wanted to pick up the phone right now and assure himself she hadn't decided to take back the scum. Jealousy surged upward when it shouldn't, but an even stronger emotion followed. Worry. If the guy was that possessive, that violent when drunk—

Stop. Just stop. Take a deep breath. It was her business and not his, but damn, he wanted to make it his business.

He sucked in one breath and released it slowly. This wasn't combat.

A tiny twinge of worry remained inside him. What if...what if Lucy didn't want anything to do with him because of the sexual harassment bull crap? *Then maybe she isn't for you.* He'd have to live with it and move on. But damn it, his feelings for Lucy went far beyond what he'd felt for Shelly. Way beyond.

Vic tossed his coat, socks, hat and gloves onto the bed. The room was decorated for female sensibilities—nothing male at all. Frills, gingham, ruffles. The gas fireplace was cold, and he fired it up by hitting the switch near the mantle. He rubbed his hands together and stood by the fire, contemplating. A while longer and it was back to Fort Carson. His thigh no longer ached, and sex with Lucy had proved he'd returned to one hundred percent. On the other hand, his mind hadn't. He didn't want to return to the Middle East right away, and he probably had six months before anyone considered sending him back, but he did want to fight for his fellow soldiers to make sure they came home safely. He'd do what he had to. If going back sooner meant he could help, he would. Two tours in the Middle East should be enough for any sane man, but maybe sanity had departed him long ago.

He rubbed his forehead and sighed. He'd almost called Lucy a half dozen times even though he'd told her to call him. He'd almost asked Marisa to give him Lucy's cell-phone number.

Maybe he'd pushed Lucy too far when he'd left her after they'd had sex. A hollow had grown inside Vic. The last time a woman had affected him like this had been when he was the ripe young age of twenty-five. He was too old to obsess now. At least he'd thought he was until Lucy Creed walked back into his life.

His cell phone rang, and he grabbed it out of the phone holster on his belt. "Yeah."

"Yeah? Did your mother teach you to answer a phone that way?" Jake asked.

Vic snorted. "Yeah. What's up? You guys miss me already?"

"Sorry to bother you, but Marisa had a wild idea right after you left. She called her friends and wants to have a small going away party for you before you leave."

Surprised, Vic almost didn't know what to say. "Uh...that's really nice, but she doesn't have to do that."

"I know, but once Marisa gets an idea in her head, it's not easy to stop her."

Vic chuckled. "I believe it."

"Come on. Humor me. I'll be there and probably Sean, Keith and Mitch."

Damn. "Wait a minute. Lucy Creed is friends with Marisa, right?"

"Good friends. Why? Are you afraid to be in the same room with her?"

"I might be."

Jake laughed. "Man up. You've been to war. You can handle one woman."

Vic fell back on the frou-frou bed and stared up at the canopy. "You sure about that?"

"Hell, no. Women can be a hell of a lot more dangerous than a firefight."

"Tell me about it."

"We'll have the party with or without you."

Vic made an impulsive decision. "I'll be there. Drop me a note and let me know the time and what to bring."

"Nothing to bring. You'll be the guest of honor."

He couldn't remember the last time he'd been a guest of honor at anything, and he felt humbled beyond words. "Thanks, Jake."

They signed off and Vic stared at the phone. Then, like a sign from heaven, it rang again.

He answered the phone and discovered it was Lucy.

"Vic." She sounded breathless. "Are you still in town?"

"Absolutely."

She sighed, and the sound was weary. Concern touched him and he sat up. "You okay?"

"Of course. Why do you ask?"

“You don’t sound all right.”

She laughed softly, but he heard the uncertainty behind it. Where had the bravado gone? She’d flashed confidence when he’d met her in the bar.

“I need to apologize,” she said.

He stood and paced the room. “About what?”

“For not giving you a clear answer the other day. I’m sorry I was wishy-washy. I know at first we said everything was a one-night stand. Then things were so intense and I started to confuse you with the other guys I’ve known. I shouldn’t have judged you when you said women threw themselves at you.”

Warmth filled him. “I’m sorry too. We jumped into bed so fast. I wanted you too much to think straight.”

“You regret going to bed with me?”

“Are you kidding? No way. Any regrets on your part?”

“None.”

“Want to go to a party Friday night?” he asked on impulse.

He explained Marisa’s idea for a party, all the while hoping Lucy would say yes. He almost held his damned breath waiting for it.

“Marisa already invited me. I’m going.”

He let out his breath. “Awesome.”

Her soft laugh sent a coil of heat through his groin. Jesus, he wanted to see her again. Now. Right now.

“Vic, would you like to come over to my place tomorrow night? For dinner? We could talk over things.”

Hell yeah. He’d talk over anything she wanted if he could see her again. His body reacted as if she’d said he could come over and fuck her. He glanced out the window and saw snow floating down slowly. Damn it, he wanted to see her, but he didn’t want to crowd her either.

“Want some company now?” he asked, unable to silence himself. He glanced at his watch. “I know it’s getting late, but…” He left the idea, or the hint of an idea hanging out there for her to interpret. “If I wait much longer the storm will keep me away.”

“I doubt wild rhinos could keep you away from something you wanted.” She sounded self-assured.

“You got that right.”

“It’s snowing. Supposed to be a blizzard by morning.”

“I can handle it. Unless you don’t want me to come over.”

“I’d love for you to come over.”

Pure enthusiasm in her voice made him smile. “Great. I’ll be there shortly.”

“Vic, be careful.”

“Always.”

After he hung up and grabbed his coat again, he wondered, *What the hell am I doing? Letting my Johnson tell my story?* “Maybe you are, old man.”

He didn’t care.

Chapter Seven

Mrs. Frances Maryweather, who owned the bed and breakfast, corralled him at the front of the Victorian house. She was what his grandmother would call blowsy. He didn't know what her blonde wig hid, but it wasn't a very good wig if he could tell she wore one. It wasn't that she wasn't pretty. She looked about forty, and yet her face had few lines. Her grey eyes were silvery and as predatory as a wolf. She appeared perpetually surprised, her mouth an O of amazement no matter what he said. She'd flirted with him every time she saw him. Rather than being repulsed, he treated her with amused respect.

She put her hand on her generous hip, the jumper she wore dotted by paint stains. She'd been working on painting the downstairs washroom apparently. "Mr. Moore. How are you this evening?"

"I'm fine." He smiled and nodded. "And yourself?"

Her grin turned from flirtatious to curious. "You're going out in this weather? I heard there's a big snowstorm coming tonight. A blizzard. You don't want to get caught in it."

"I'm not going far. But thanks for worrying."

She cleared her throat. "Listen, normally I'm not nosy, but I heard about that fight you got into."

Amazed she hadn't mentioned it before, he nodded. "Wasn't much of a fight. He tried to put my lights out. I just blocked him from doing it."

She fluttered her artificially long lashes in old-fashioned female appreciation. "That's what I heard. You must be in very good shape." She sauntered closer and he stiffened. "I mean, there aren't enough men around Clarksville like you."

He tried not to laugh. "I'm sure there are. Look, I need to get going."

She stood at an angle that looked blatantly artificial, like a mannequin or model at a photo shoot. She smiled and her large breasts pushed against her turtleneck. "Sure you don't want a thermos of hot coffee to take with you?"

He grinned. "No, thanks. I'll get something at my friend's."

"What friend? Maybe I know them."

"Lucy Creed. She owns the photography shop just off main."

Once again her mouth opened, eyes widened. "Oh. Her."

Her cool, almost contemptuous tone took him off-guard. "Her?"

"She's...well, there are a couple of rumors."

He was damned ashamed to say he wanted to know the rumors. "Oh?"

“She’s been hanging around with that man who beat you up.”

He gave her a half-amused laugh. “Do I look beat up to you?”

“Uh, no. Of course not. I mean, people were saying he tried to beat you up, but he couldn’t and well, anyway...” She flapped one hand in dismissal. “Lucy’s been seen with that man. So I didn’t want you to get your hopes up.”

Vic came this short of telling her to mind her own business.

“That’s Lucy’s business, I’m sure.” The woman’s mouth opened, as if she planned to add more, but he cut her off at the pass. “Well, I need to go. See you later.” He waved and headed out the front door as quickly as he could.

Wind caught the door and slammed it behind him as if to punctuate the disgust he felt for the inn owner’s gossipy personality. He shivered as another heavy gust of wind blew snowflakes across the ground, swirling at his feet. His stocking hat, parka and thick sweater fought off the rest of winter. He was nuts for traveling when snow promised to turn into a blizzard. At the same time, he wanted to see Lucy, and she apparently wanted to see him. He wondered if Lucy had gone back to the ass wipe who’d treated her so badly, and he hoped the hell not. He doubted it if she’d invited him over.

With that in mind, he drove his SUV slowly as the night closed around him. Two inches of snow had already accumulated in the short time he’d been in his room. Wind picked up, howling as it bombarded his vehicle. Damn, this was coming on quickly. No one with any sense moved on the roads. A police cruiser made its way down the street and drove as slowly as Vic did. It didn’t take long to reach Lucy’s house, and he pulled into the driveway. The porch light was on, and he made his way out of the car, down the slick sidewalk and to the door as fast as he could without falling on his ass.

The door opened before he could ring the bell. “Hey, soldier.” She grinned. “Get in here before you turn into a frozen dessert.”

Oh, yeah. I’d like to be your dessert. A rush of heat filled his groin as he thought about it. “Ah, I hoped you’d be interested in warming me up.”

She blushed. “Smart ass.”

He grinned as they closed the door on the weather. “I think you like me that way.”

She grunted. “Don’t push it, buddy.”

He liked her attitude and the smile on her face even more. She looked happy, healthy, and that made him feel damned glad he’d shown up. Dressed in a navy blue sweater and baggy sweatpants, she had the aura of a woman who didn’t care what anyone thought. Not an arrogant don’t-care look, but a confident I-can-do-anything woman. Thick socks covered her feet.

“Come on in before you freeze to death. I was just about to spike some hot chocolate.” She strode through the living room toward the kitchen. “Want some?”

“You bet. Not too much whiskey in mine.”

She stopped before she reached the kitchen. “Drinking and driving?”

“Yep. Can’t do it.”

She nodded, her eyes cleared of amusement. “Of course. I didn’t think.”

He smiled, worried by the sudden soberness in her gaze. “Don’t worry about it.” He showed a half inch of air between thumb and finger. “Just a splash.”

He wrestled out of his big coat, hat and gloves and left his snow boots on the entrance rug. She made the hot chocolate, spiked with a dram of whiskey. As he watched covertly, he tried not to wonder where this visit would lead. He needed to take it slow, take things to a natural conclusion, even if it meant he went back to the inn tonight without making love to her. He approached her in the kitchen as she stirred the whiskey into the mugs.

She hung her head a moment and sighed. She turned toward him, and damned if there wasn’t moisture in her eyes. She shoved a hand through her hair, and the inky strands stood up like she’d jammed her finger in a light socket.

Instinct pushed Vic to cup her face and swim into those deep ocean blue eyes. “What’s wrong?”

She swallowed hard. “Sorry. I’ve had a strange day.”

He released her face, but cupped her shoulders. “Like what?”

“Hormonal. Or just plain out of it. It’s been one of those days where things went wrong. I went over to the studio and sorted through paperwork. My business...well, things aren’t looking so good for my business.” Her voice went soft, weary. “I’m sorry. I didn’t invite you over to whine.”

His heart pinched in sympathy, and he realized it hadn’t done that in a long time. Pinched because he felt her pain down deep, down inside him where he didn’t want to feel it.

He rubbed her shoulders gently. “If you want me to go...”

“No.” She shook her head. “No, that’s not what I mean. I...this week has been kind of a mess.”

“All of it?”

A weak smile touched her mouth. “The only time that felt good and right was the time I spent with you.”

Sensing a lot more to this saga than he understood, he kissed her forehead. “Come on. Let’s sit down and talk about this.”

Lucy settled on the couch, cupping her mug in both hands. Her eyes threatened to tear up again, and she wished the day could return to the beginning and she’d have the opportunity to start from scratch. Vic settled near her and put his mug down on a coaster on the coffee table. She dared look at him and saw such understanding and compassion in his eyes that a sweet wave of emotion sideswiped her.

He sat with his arm up on the back of the couch, the rest of his body facing her.

“Whatever’s been happening this week, you can tell me. I’m a good listener.”

A smile managed to touch her lips. "I remember." She also recalled the delicious way he'd touched her, caressed her, kissed her until she'd screamed with the joy of it. "All of it."

He grinned, and that knowing look in his dark eyes made her heart thump. God, maybe she was glad she'd let him come by.

"Fess up," he said, his attention full on her.

"How was your day?"

"Excellent. Don't try and change the subject. Out with it."

She shifted on the couch, glad he hadn't pressed anything more physical by sitting closer. Not because she didn't want him near, because she really did, but because she couldn't think straight when he was.

"Like I said, I think my business is getting dodgy. Things have been slowing down over the last year. Clarksville's economy isn't really recovering as well as some small towns. I think I may need to move to a bigger city."

His eyes narrowed. "Damn, I'm sorry to hear that."

"My last wedding account cancelled today. They broke up and that was the third wedding in the last month that I was supposed to do that was called off." She sipped her chocolate, then placed it on the coffee table. "Like I said, it's just been a weird month. Danny, my business..." She shrugged.

Vic dared to capture her gaze and hold it. He leaned forward, resting his arms on his legs. "Where are you thinking of moving?"

She shrugged again. "I'm not sure. Maybe Jackson Hole. The thing is, it's a lot more expensive to rent office space there, and to live."

He laced his fingers together. "Ever consider Colorado Springs?"

Some of the pain eased from her midsection where the weight of the world was sitting. "Marisa and Jake are moving there soon."

"Jake got orders to PCS to Fort Carson," he said.

"PCS?"

"Permanent Change of Station."

"Gotcha. I'm not up on all the military terms, though I probably should be."

Silence settled down between them before he spoke again. "You'd miss your friends here if you moved, wouldn't you?"

She nodded, and weariness returned. "I'll miss them. My biggest thing is deciding once and for all where I'm moving. I can't let this go on any longer."

He frowned. "What about Danny?"

Her lips tightened, as if he'd asked a far more egregious question. "As I said the other night, he's history."

"No regrets that you aren't with him?"

She shook her head vehemently. "None."

Relief hit his face so hard, she thought maybe she'd imagined it. No, it was there, clear as day. He didn't speak for a moment. "The lady who owns the inn was hitting on me before I came over here, and she said you were back with Danny."

Her mouth opened a little in definite surprise. "She hit on you?"

He laughed. "Yep. She's been flirting since I checked in." He wanted Lucy to know up front that he wasn't going to mess with another woman if he dated her. "I'm not flirting back. Not even harmless flirting. I don't want her getting the wrong idea. Besides, she's married."

A grin broke over her face as she reached for her hot chocolate, and he thought he saw relief in her eyes. "She's known for spreading gossip, and I'd heard that she likes younger men. Even the rumor about me isn't surprising. What they say about small towns is true. Gossip runs the show."

Lucy took a long sip of the chocolate, and when she licked her lips, his eyes narrowed again and she saw them follow her tongue. A slow burning arousal ignited inside her.

"Did you believe her?" she asked. "I mean, about me and Danny."

"Maybe for about two seconds."

She brought her legs up onto the couch, putting her body in a more defensive position. "You honestly thought I'd go back to him? Or was there a tiny bit of concern there?"

He blinked.

Busted. "I didn't know what to think. Sometimes rumors are true." He continued the confession. "I guess you could say I was gun shy after Shelly. I asked about Danny because for a few seconds I was scared I didn't have a chance with you. I was scared that you'd tell me to disappear or that you believed I really could sexually harass a woman."

She returned the hot chocolate to the table, crawled across the couch to Vic and sat directly at his side. "Not a chance, Vic. I was hoping you'd come here tonight and the snow would get so bad you'd want to stay."

Lucy watched Vic's eyes smolder, but not with anger. Pure sexual heat. His nostrils flared a little, his lips parted.

"Then you don't hate the military anymore?" he asked, a soft rebuke in his voice.

"Never really did. I was just smarting from the other guy and Danny and, well...there's even more to my military story than I've told you."

His eyes turned wary, and she thought maybe she'd screwed things up by not telling him the entire story up front.

"Have you ever thought maybe a military man isn't the kind of guy you should date?" he said before she could respond.

She smarted again, but this time from his insinuation. “Does that mean you don’t think I should date you?”

He nodded. “Maybe. If the military lifestyle would drive you nuts. It’s not easy. Some jobs, like mine, require that I’m away from home a lot. A woman like you is independent, you have your own interests and career. Your own life. But some women still can’t handle it even when they’re independent.”

She considered it for a moment. Hell, who was she kidding? She’d considered it a lot in the two days since he’d left her house. “You putting me on notice?”

“In a sense.”

Challenge. Well, she was up to the task. “As much as I don’t know about the military, I’ve heard enough from my friends to understand what they go through when their husbands are shipped off. Marisa and Freddie are very special women to withstand it. They don’t know when their husbands will be back, and they know the missions they go on are very dangerous.”

“A lot more dangerous than mine.”

“But you’re still not completely out of harm’s way. No one is in the wars going on now. There isn’t any place to hide, is there? Your injury is proof of that.” Lucy waited as darkness clouded his gaze and provided the answer even before he spoke.

“No.”

She nodded toward his leg. “You never said how you got hurt.”

“You sure you want to hear it?”

“Yes.”

He shifted down on the couch until he could lay his head on the back. His long legs sprawled out, and her libido wanted her to reach out and touch his thighs. Touch any part of him she could reach. Instead, she pulled her legs up so she could hug them and rested her chin on her knees.

He blew out a puff of air. “I was stationed at Firebase Delta when I got to Iraq a few months ago. It was my second tour there. One night I was heading to my commander’s quarters. He wanted to tell me about some plans for the next day. I was halfway across this area that’s like a long courtyard between quarters when I heard this high-pitched sound.”

She waited while he gazed at the floor near his feet, his eyes glazed as he remembered. “A mortar. But couldn’t tell from which direction it was coming. There was this huge explosion in the courtyard. Knocked me on my ass. I was out cold for a few seconds. I woke up and Shelly was there hovering over me with her medical kit, and one of the quarters nearby was on fire. There was a lot of yelling and running around. At first I didn’t realize I was hurt until some guy said, ‘Dude, your thigh is bleeding.’ That’s when I realized I had this big gash in my leg. Shelly and a couple of other guys hauled me over to the hospital. I was damned lucky though, a shrapnel wound and a mild concussion kept me in bed a few days, but there was another

guy across the area who was killed when the mortar hit. Considering it could have landed right on some buildings, we were pretty fortunate.”

She closed her eyes for a second, hurting inside as thought of the world without Vic Moore in it. The pain came sharp and unbearable.

She opened her eyes and dared to touch his biceps. “I’m so glad you’re all right now and it wasn’t worse.”

“That’s the kind of life I’m going to have until I retire from the military in about five more years.”

She licked her lips, still tasting chocolate, and didn’t speak.

Vic asked, “Have you decided that you want me to get the hell out of your life?”

What had she decided? He’d asked her to let him know, and the moment of truth had arrived. “You’re one of the nicest guys I know. You’re just as great as you were all those years ago. Why a woman hasn’t snatched you up by now is beyond me. The women out there must be crazy—”

A sound mixed between groan and growl left Vic, and before she knew it, he snatched her from where she sat and drew her across his lap. “Maybe you’d like me to show you some military maneuvers then.”

“Yes.” Her breath quickened as she felt his cock pressing against her buttocks.

Arousal burned low in her belly. Lucy wanted him more than she’d desired any other man, even more than New Year’s Eve. How was that possible when so much was up in the air between them? He wiped out all other thoughts as he kissed her.

Vic’s touch lit her on fire. His mouth teased and played, a gentle invader. So warm. So caressing and sensual.

The phone rang and they jerked apart. The cordless on the coffee table trilled again, and they stared at each other. One more ring and the answering machine answered. While Lucy’s message played, the silence enclosing her voice grew.

A new voice emerged after hers finished. “Hey, Lucy. This is Danny.” His voice sounded clear. His old self. No slurring or shakiness like New Year’s Eve. “I’m sorry about New Year’s Eve. I…look, I want to see you. To get back with you. We have so much to talk about. Okay…um…I’ll talk to you later.”

He hung up.

Frustration coiled inside Lucy. She so didn’t want this. Not now when her body sang for Vic’s in a way that said *this* connection would bring her more joy than anything Danny might have created in her heart and body.

“Call him back.” Vic broke their eye contact and she flinched.

“What?”

“Call him back now and put him out of his misery once and for all. If that’s what you want. If you don’t want to go back to him now’s the time to set him free.”

She shook her head. “I’m not going back. I want you.”

She saw it in his eyes though. The uncertainty. "I'm a one woman man, Lucy. I don't share."

"Neither do I," she said in affirmation.

Okay. If he needed this proof of closure, she'd provide it. She left the couch and made the call, her nerves jumping and snapping. His answering machine picked up, but before the message could come on, Danny picked up.

"Hello?" Danny asked.

"Danny. This is Lucy." She caught movement in the corner of her right eye and realized Vic had the remote and had located a sport channel. She watched him stare at the screen with pure nonchalance.

"Oh, God," Danny said over the line. "I'm so glad you called me back. Can I come over and we'll talk?"

"No. We're done, Danny. Finished. Please don't call me again."

"But how can you say that after everything we went through together?" His voice filled with anger rather than sorrow.

"Because you were screwing another woman when I drove up to your apartment. That's why. Anything we had died that day."

"What about you?" His voice went razor sharp with sarcasm. "You were dancing with that freak when I came looking for you New Year's Eve. Seemed like you weren't exactly in mourning."

Pissed that he'd jumped right from sorrowful apology to nasty accusation, it didn't take anything for her to snap back. "Then I guess what we had wasn't that special, was it, Danny? If we could both screw other people, it just wasn't that damned special. Goodnight, Danny." She rounded the counter, her feet restless. "Don't call me again."

She hung up, her heart pounding a mile a minute as she placed the handset back into the base. When she glanced at Vic, he was staring at her, the classic football game playing on the television forgotten.

She shouldn't be shaking, her heart galloping like she'd been in a race, but she was. And maybe what Danny had said made perfect sense. She had hooked up with Vic right away, jumped into bed with him, found herself falling for him.

She had. Oh, my God, she had. Six months of talking to Danny hadn't made her fall for him. She'd cared for him, wanted to know him better. She hadn't fallen in love with him the way she had Vic. For some people a lifetime of knowing wouldn't do it. For some people all it took was one night.

Vic clicked off the television and came around the counter.

He cupped her shoulders. "Okay?"

Comfort soothed the shakes, and she melted under his touch. "I am now. It was a good idea to tell him. We have a clean slate now, don't we?"

He nodded. "Where do we go from here? What do you want out of this relationship?"

Good question. “I know that I can’t stop thinking about you. I can’t stop wanting you. Can we take things step by step this week and discover where we land?”

His arms drew her to him, and her arms went around his neck. Nestled close, she couldn’t help but notice how quickly his body reacted to her. His cock pressed against her, and suddenly all she could think about was how to get him out of those jeans. As if he could read her mind, he gently released her.

“Sounds like a great idea.” He drew his sweater over his head and tossed it on the couch. “Is it hot in here?”

“I think it just might be.” She didn’t hesitate. She drew her sweatshirt over her head, unsnapped her bra, and yanked off her sweatpants and panties.

“God, sweetheart.” His voice was strangled, choked on desire. His eyes blazed with it, and he reached down to unbuckle his jeans, unzip and make short work of them. He tossed them on his sweater.

Lucy’s insides blazed with need. His briefs didn’t hide much—his cock strained against the fabric. Her body reacted as if she hadn’t had sex in ages, her desire flooding her with moisture. God, she wanted him so much.

She walked into his arms, and they came together like lightning.

Chapter Eight

Vic groaned as he took Lucy's mouth. He cupped her sweet backside in both hands and squeezed. She shimmied against him. Fire erupted in his groin, a raging need to fuck and fuck hard. She'd surprised him by upping the ante and stripping so fast. But he liked it and it made him want her even more. They had all the cards on the table now with nothing to hide. Nothing to pretend. They were together for as long as they wanted to be, their consciences clear, their minds blurred while sex took them over.

Her kiss held nothing back, her tongue searching in his mouth, tangling with his. He advanced as she retreated, thrusting his tongue into her mouth and searching her interior with plundering force. Whimpers built at the back of her throat as she clutched at his shoulders, as her nails bit into him with a sting that made him gasp into her mouth.

She lifted one leg and curled it around his hip. He helped her, catching a strong but silky thigh under his grip. Holy crap, he couldn't take much more of this. He grabbed her butt in both hands and lifted her until her legs wrapped completely around him.

Frantic to be inside her, he tore his mouth from hers. "I want you."

"Yes." Her breathy reply matched the desire in her eyes.

Moist heat rubbed along his cloth-clad erection. Oh, yeah. She was wet.

He carried Lucy down the hall like that, her body wrapped around him as if she'd never release him. For a moment he thought he could stay like this, her body a part of him, forever and he'd die happy.

"Vic," she gasped into the side of his neck as he marched into the dimly lit bedroom.

"Yeah?"

"Please hurry."

Oh, yeah.

He'd like nothing better than to be deep inside her pussy right now.

She snapped on the dimmer switch and soft light glowed in the room. Her eyes seemed lit from within by excitement, and he wondered if his looked the same. Within a few seconds he'd feel her fire and he couldn't wait. Need ate him alive from the inside out. He gathered her close, took her mouth and allowed his body to take control over his mind. He wanted to be inside her, but he also wanted her screaming for it, writhing and burning for him to fuck her. He backed her into the bed.

Challenge filled Vic's eyes, and Lucy knew she could match him. She trembled again, but this time from an overwhelming need to have him inside her. She opened the bedside drawer and tore one condom off the strip. She reached for his cock and admired the thick, long length. She would lick it and taste it later. She needed him inside her this instant. He reached out for the condom in her hand, took it and ripped it open. Seconds later his cock was sheathed. Before he could move, she turned her back to him and leaned over the bed, palms down to present her ass to him.

A low sound came from his throat, encouraging and happy that she'd chosen this position. A lot of words weren't necessary. One big hand clasped her hip, then Vic's cock head probed her pussy lips, eased just inside. She gasped at the heat, the arousal that swung upward in a huge surge. His thickness pushed, tunneling deep. She wriggled and he groaned. As he cupped her breasts and teased her nipples, she moaned softly. Sweet sparks tingled outward from her nipples. He withdrew and then thrust. She gasped again, whimpering as the delicious sensation overtook her. They melted into the motion, her body meeting his, bumping and grinding as his hips circled, pumped, pounded at her. She wanted to beg, but she didn't, suffering as the arousal spiked so high but wouldn't send her over. His growls were coming faster, more frequently as he fucked her. They'd lost all finesse, all delicacy. This was raw, primitive sex, and God, how she loved it. He teased her clit. Pinched it.

She unraveled. She screamed softly as orgasm sent her up, tore her into bits, wrecking her composure as she sobbed through the bliss.

Vic wanted more. As her pussy walls rippled over his cock, he pushed in and out of her creamy channel, not caring if she'd finished. No, he wanted her to start all over again. He continued pumping, shoving aside all thoughts of coming.

He pulled out of her, his cock so hard he didn't know if he could make his own goal. "When I lift you, wrap your legs around my hips. We're doing it against the wall."

Yeah, he wanted that and wanted it bad. He saw her eyes widen and knew she liked the idea, maybe was surprised by it. She left the bed, and as he lifted her up, she wrapped her legs around his waist. He turned her about, found the wall. As he eased her down over his aching need, heat encompassed his cock and swallowed him with wet ecstasy. Wrapped around his flesh, Lucy tightened and released. With steady pushes he began to thrust, to find purchase inside her, to create a friction too delicious to endure. He'd never experienced anything like it, never wanted to let it go. As his body pumped into hers, he allowed the feelings to grow with a vengeance. Vic concentrated on the sensation of her pussy clasping him in a tight grip, the way she caressed him. With every movement of his hips, he delved into her silken, wet core. He danced inside it, tried to get as high inside her as he could. Heat poured off him, his body aquiver with a need to climax.

He dared to look at her. Lucy's head tilted back, her eyes closed, her mouth open as she moaned softly with each thrust.

"Come on, baby. Come," he managed to gasp.

She clasped her arms about his neck as her breathing hitched. He fought for control, but as his body wanted release, he wanted her pleasure more. With short, stabbing thrusts upward, he drew her body to the top of the precipice. Seconds later, her walls contracted sharply around his cock as a soft, shivering moan left her throat. With equal fierceness, his body let go of the battle, gave up the fight, and exploded in orgasm. He gasped, he groaned, unable to put words to the pleasure breaking him apart. Seconds later they stopped shivering in pleasure, and Vic's mind sank into the warmest contentment he'd ever experienced.

Lucy awoke some time later, cozy under the sheet and blankets, her body still recalling the amazing night. In the half-darkness she opened her eyes and noted Vic wasn't beside her. She sat up and looked at the digital bedside clock to her left. Midnight. Only midnight? She felt like she'd been sleeping for hours. She smiled. They'd made love for a long time, slowing down after that initial frenzy. Familiarity might calm their lovemaking some day, but it warmed her inside to think they would have a someday. She hoped. The silence worried her, but she turned on the bedside lamp and saw his jeans on the floor. Unless he planned on walking into the freezing night half-naked, he hadn't left.

She rummaged in her closet for her red fleece robe and slipped into its warmth. She put on her matching ballet slippers and left the bedroom in search of Vic. Low light filtered down the hall from the living room. Vic stood by the one picture window next to the couch. He stood at the right angle to assure that his half-naked form couldn't be seen—all he wore was briefs. They molded his backside in perfect and delicious intimacy. She barely managed to tear her gaze off his butt and back to the storm. The view showed snow blowing across the window.

He turned to look at her. "Hey, what are you doing up?"

"You were gone. Is anything wrong?"

"Just a blizzard. Doesn't look like I'm going any where soon." He slipped his arm around her waist.

"Did you plan to?" She leaned her head against his strong shoulder.

"Nope." He nuzzled the side of her neck and sent sweet shivers racing over her body. "I'm not finished with you yet."

She couldn't help but frown. "When will you be finished with me?"

His head jerked up, and he stared at her. "You're convinced I'm going to leave you in the dust, aren't you?"

She swallowed, her throat aching. "Old habits die hard. Mine, that is. I'm learning to trust again."

"Come on. Let's go to bed and talk."

As he slung his arm around her shoulders and led her back to bed, she snuggled into his warmth. He was so big and strong she couldn't help but respond on a purely female level.

"Talk?" she asked.

"With our hands. Our lips. Any way you want."

She giggled, not minding if she sounded like a schoolgirl.

When they'd snuggled back into bed, his body cocooned behind her, she sighed. "Talk."

"You first."

"I should try and go to the studio today and work."

"No way. I'm not letting you go. Too dangerous out there. Besides, I checked the weather and the report says things are going to get worse today. I think we're stuck in here for another day. Nothing to do but have sex."

She shivered as he caressed her stomach and teased her ear with his tongue. She moaned as sweet tingles penetrated between her legs.

"Like that?" he asked.

"Oh, yes."

"What about this?" He traced a circle around one nipple, then plucked gently.

She wriggled, breathless as he found her clit. He tapped it softly and she gasped.

"I hope you have enough condoms because I plan to fuck you all day. I want you naked all the time so I can simply lie you down and make love to you anytime I want."

"That's pretty primitive."

"Yeah, but it's how I feel about you. You do things to me I can't explain. You're like..." His voice softened, went husky and deep with thick passion. "A part of me I didn't know was missing. I want to get inside of you and stay there."

His primal confession sent her libido into hard-core life. She moved in his arms as he touched her. There. Everywhere until her body couldn't take it anymore. With silken strokes, he measured her thigh, a firm touch, now a feather-light touch, until his magic removed all thoughts of anything but him.

She gasped. "Wait. Condom."

He complied, and within seconds he lifted her leg and entered deep. Her pussy clenched him, held him inside, caressing with strong pulses, her body ready to explode with heady orgasm. Yet he didn't let her finish that easy. One stroke. Two. A pumping action that caressed her inner core until the slick friction vibrated along her skin. Wet. Hot. Incredible passion. She moaned continuously, unable to resist Vic's relentless thrusts. Seconds later, he touched her so far inside she shook, shuddered, and everything came apart. She screamed, shuddering as he held her close, pounded and pounded and fucked her so hard he couldn't keep it together. The way her flesh quaked around his cock set him off. He came apart like a firecracker. His world dissolved, and when he returned to earth he still held her in his arms.

Lying in Vic's arms, tucked under the covers, Lucy heard powerful winds driving the blizzard outside. So much for going into work. The blinds kept sun from entering the room, and only the dimmer showed faint rays of light. With the snowstorm howling like a beast in a horror movie, there wouldn't be that much light anyway. Better to stay here, wrapped in his arms and forget the world outside existed. Cocooned in his arms, her back to his front, she felt safer than she ever had in her life. Now they'd decided their old relationships had finished, a brand new world opened before them.

She hadn't wanted to move since the last time he'd taken her. She flushed remembering it even now. His body had thrust inside her relentlessly. Hard. Strength behind each silken movement. Yet her body had wanted it, craved it, screamed for more. Her mind had begged, had wanted to utter the words to force him over the edge, make him free her climax. And to her relief he'd given her that release. She had screamed, her voice raw with stunned pleasure. She'd never felt an orgasm so strong. It had shaken her to the roots. In the panting, shaking aftermath, she wondered if their time would prove a dream. A dream that could be taken from her at any moment.

"Okay?" Vic's voice rumbled close to her ear, and she jumped a bit in surprise.

She laughed and rubbed his forearm curled just under her breasts. "I thought you were asleep."

"I was lying here thinking I'm the luckiest damn man in the world." He cupped her breast for a second, then returned to her waist. She shivered in pleasure. His voice rasped, thick with just-surrendered sleep. "I don't want this to end."

The shiver that took her this time was filled with a sweet contentment so full and delicious she didn't think it could be real. She couldn't speak. Her body ached with it, wanted to open to his again in the most primitive way she could. Everything about this man had stolen her ability to resist. Hardness rippled as he shifted behind her, muscles like steel reminding her how incredibly strong he was. She moved in his arms until he released her and she turned toward him. Gazing at him in the low light, she took in his familiar features with a new wonder. Carved from stone, he had had a harshness, a uniqueness that wouldn't have allowed him to win a male modeling contract. But of all the men who'd posed for the charity calendar in Clarksville, none of them could compete for sheer alpha masculinity. At least she didn't think so. His eyes seemed to darken as he looked at her, his mouth a carnal line of seduction. His eyebrows were sardonic wings, his hair cut so short it didn't interfere or cover those sharp angles. With arms carved like granite, a chest covered with just enough hair to scream uber-male, and ridges of muscles that proved his prowess—hell, no woman on earth could deny his attractiveness. Not unless she was short a few brain cells.

Yet there was something more that defined him, gave Vic the alpha advantage other men didn't often possess.

He kissed her neck. "You're killin' me here. Am I coming on too strong?"

She laughed softly. Sliding her hand up his solid forearm and biceps, she savored her body's reaction. Sweet. Hot. Wanting more.

"No. You aren't coming on too strong. If anything, it's me. I think maybe I'm the one who's feeling too much."

"Feeling too much?" His voice stayed quiet, undemanding.

She swallowed hard, well aware that her heart could be broken in a minute if he rejected her. "I'm thinking this is all a dream, and if I go into the next room and come back, you're going to dissolve."

He kissed her forehead. "I'm not going anywhere. You can trust me."

She did. More than anyone she'd known. She held back what she wanted to say.

I'm falling for you, Vic.

No. She couldn't say that to someone who'd been an old acquaintance a few days ago. She just couldn't. Instead she said, "Since we're stuck here, what do you want to do?"

"Stay here in bed and talk."

For the next two hours, they told each other things they'd never told another person. No deep secrets, no horrific revelations, only things they had never wanted to share before. While outside the blizzard howled, a dangerous beast, it cloaked them in a warm softness she embraced. Soon, more secrets tumbled forth.

"Why did you decide to join the army?" she asked, wanting to know everything about him.

He smoothed his lips over her nose. "My father was in the army. It seemed natural."

"So you did it just because it was tradition?"

"No. I did it because it was natural and I loved everything about it."

"Everything?" The incredulity in her voice was unmistakable.

"Okay, maybe not everything. I just knew inside it's what I was supposed to do. I wouldn't have stayed so long if I didn't like it."

"You liked the order?"

"Sometimes. The neatness keeps chaos away."

"And you hate chaos."

He drew her onto his chest, and her body sprawled on top of his. "It's damned twisted. My father was a friggin' taskmaster. A man who saw things as black and white. I've always been more interested in grey. Sure, I believe some things absolutely. I love my family and my country. At the same time, I understand life isn't black or white, but everything in between."

Impressed, she allowed his statements to wash over her. "Sounds like me. Did the grey parts get you into trouble sometimes in the military?"

"Yes and no. I worked hard to get this rank, but it hasn't always been an easy ride. I imagine your photography is like that sometimes."

She skimmed over his chest, glorying in the way his pectoral muscles moved at her touch. She sighed. “Weddings can be weird. In fact, they’re the strangest events I’ve done. I have some pretty funny stories to tell.”

“I want to hear all of them.” His voice held heat and want and a huskiness that made her inside tremble. “But right now, I want to kiss you.”

He tipped her chin up and kissed her, swallowing a soft moan as she soaked in his touch and warmed under the stroke of his hand down to her waist.

It’s happening again. You’re falling for a military man.

She drew away from his kiss, panicked at the realization. “This isn’t supposed to happen.”

His brow furrowed, his disapproval sharply clear. “No?”

“I’m doing it again.”

“What?”

“Falling prey to a military man’s seduction.”

Worry cleared his face and headed straight to amusement. “You mean going from Danny to me.”

“Yes.”

“That’s old ground.”

She sighed. “There’s more. I haven’t told you all my secrets.”

He narrowed his eyes, but he didn’t look that worried. “Yeah? Spill it.”

Did she dare? Would he think she was nuts? She swallowed hard and managed to push the words out. “I’ve dated five military men in the last five years. After Danny...well, I walked into that bar vowing I wasn’t going to date a military man again.”

“That’s old news, Lucy. I know you didn’t want to have anything to do with a military guy.”

“It’s more serious than that. Four guys, Vic. Four. One was friend of Sean’s. A reservist like Danny. One was a very short month-long relationship with a helicopter pilot that fizzled as soon as his ex came back into the picture. And you heard about the other guy before Danny.” She scrubbed one hand over her chin. “So you see, my record with military men sucks.”

His eyebrows lifted, surprise and disbelief etched firmly on his face. “Five military guys in five years?”

“Yeah.” Ruefully, she looked away from his inquisitive gaze. Embarrassment heated her face. “Crazy.”

He shook his head and sat up. “Christ, Lucy. No wonder you expected the worst with me.”

Lucy winced. “I didn’t want to tell you because I was afraid.”

“Afraid you’d jinx us?”

“Maybe.” She shrugged. “Or maybe I was sure you’d be just like the rest of those men.”

He drew her down to the bed, his arms caging her to the mattress. Fire burned in his eyes, a primitive call to action. “But you know now I’m not like those guys, right?”

She hesitated, but her mouth gave him an answer. “Yes.” When he kissed her ear she shivered. “God.”

His pheromones screamed male, screamed capable, able to do anything he wanted to with her and she’d quiver like mad under his touch. A shiver ran through her, filled with awareness of him as hard, muscular, undeniable male. She licked her lips. His mouth traced a slow, hot path over her neck and ended up under her earlobe. She couldn’t think straight with his mouth discovering sensitive new points under her chin, down to the hollow of her neck, to one nipple where he toyed with lingering licks of his tongue. They didn’t get around to talking again for a good long time.

Chapter Nine

Lucy stared at herself in the mirror, waiting for Vic Friday evening. She hadn't dressed up for the party, choosing to wear a set that consisted of a clingy blood-red sweater and matching skirt that hugged in all the right places and ended just above the knees. She skimmed her hands over her curves, wishing Vic were touching. She knew she looked good, and wanted Vic to think so too. Frowning in the mirror, she glared at a single strand of hair at the top of her head that did a dance of insubordination. She sniffed. What did it matter? Perfect wasn't possible, and Vic liked her just the way she was. Since she'd met him, she'd started to understand what she had missed all these years. Other men hadn't respected her the way he did, made something inside her feel worthy in a way she'd never noted before the day he walked into her life. Before Vic and after Vic were two different tales. Two different lives.

She touched up her make-up for the second time, adding additional gloss over her red lipstick. Smiling in satisfaction, she tried to banish the last of her nervous stomach. She glanced at her wristwatch—five o'clock. He should be here by now. Worry edged around her attempts to stay cool. Two of her other military boyfriends had been notoriously late almost all the time—it wasn't like Vic. Vic was beyond punctual. Early, in fact. Called when he said he would, did everything he said he would. Reliability, it seemed, turned her on.

"You're just nervous because of the party," she said out loud as she strode back into her bedroom to pull on her knee-high black leather boots.

No need to be nervous because she planned to attend a party at Marisa's and Jake's house. Yet she couldn't banish the wicked dance butterflies did in her stomach.

Honestly, it was ridiculous.

As she shoved her feet into the boots, she wondered if practicality should have won the day. Maybe she should change back into jeans. Nope, she'd done that once already. Enough.

"You're nervous because he's late and because...you're nervous."

She shouldn't be. They'd spent every night together at her house since the blizzard. It had taken them a half day to shovel out of three feet of snow, and yet they'd had a hell of a good time together. In and out of bed. Once she could get out of her driveway, she'd driven across town to her studio, Vic's admonishment to stay safe making her feel cozy and wanted. When she got there, she called him at his request. After going through her finances, she made a decision. Maybe moving to another town with a higher population than Clarksville's forty-thousand would bring her more clients. Sticking around here

meant disaster. She braced herself as she'd thought about it. *Jackson Hole, here I come.* Vic's suggestion she consider Colorado Springs left questions dancing in the air. Did that mean he wanted to keep seeing her? That this relationship could continue if she did? Was moving to a much bigger place like Colorado Springs the answer to her career and love life? Her mind had whirled with the implications, just as it did right now. No. She couldn't count on anything yet, on a week's acquaintance. It was insane.

They grocery shopped together and discovered she zipped through the aisles and he wanted to go slower. They cooked together and discovered he was the better cook. They fought for the remote control, they even read in bed together. All of it seemed so damn normal and natural and comfortable.

In bed. God, they were great there. As she wandered into the living room and flopped onto the couch, she stared at the darkness cloaking the land outside her front window. Nights would be colder, lonelier when Vic left. And he would. It was only a matter of time. Try as she might to hold herself back from falling for him, it seemed she was doomed. She'd never found herself so filled with passion, so reckless in her needs, so uninhibited in her desires. She thought she knew everything there was to know about sex, but Vic had managed to show her a thing or two. More than that, he'd shown her consideration, tenderness, intelligence, strength of character, good humor, everything she believed she wanted in a man. Some might say it must be too good to be true.

Her cell phone rang and she jumped. It was connected to a charger in the kitchen. She practically sprinted for it, sliding in the kitchen. She grabbed the phone, almost ripping the charger out of the wall.

"Hello?"

"Lucy?" Vic's voice sounded funny.

She frowned. "Vic? Where are you?"

"Severely side-tracked. Listen, there's a problem."

A sour sensation filled her stomach and she placed her other hand over her midriff. "Oh?"

"I don't think I can make it to the party. You're not going to believe this. A car careened across the street on ice and T-boned me on the passenger side."

Alarm erased any horrible suspicions she'd had a second ago. "What? Oh, my God. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, but the other driver isn't. It's Danny."

Silence echoed in her head. She couldn't believe what Vic had said. It wasn't possible. "No."

"Yes. The police say he had an open whiskey bottle in his car."

"Oh, God." She headed back toward her room to snatch her purse and coat.

"They're loading him up right now, and they want me to ride along."

Concerned edged upward. "I thought you said you're fine."

"I might have hit my head."

“Might have?” Her voice rose. She opened her closet and grabbed her coat, almost dropping her phone as she leaned over to fetch her purse off the closet floor. “Might have?”

He laughed softly, but the sound didn't have much humor. “Hey, I'm fine.”

The sickness in her stomach now didn't come from nerves. At least not the kind she'd experienced thinking of the party. “I'll meet you at the hospital.”

Wind whisked across Lucy's face with sharp teeth as she hurried as fast as she dared over ice in the hospital parking lot. Despite her thick parka, boots and gloves, the near-zero temperature threatened to bite through her clothing.

With the hospital parking full to overflowing, she'd had to take a spot on the street. Not an easy venture when a good chunk of the street had snow piled along the sides. She'd walked a half block in the whirling arctic winds. Maybe wearing those jeans would have proved the smarter idea. She didn't care. Mixed feelings assaulted her from every angle. Worry for Vic headed the pack, a sick feeling wearing away at her composure. Second came concern for Danny. She'd called Neena and Mitch to let them know what was happening, and they planned to head to the hospital as well.

She entered the emergency room in a rush, gaze darting around the waiting area. Surprisingly the room wasn't crowded, but she didn't see Vic anywhere. After checking in with the desk, they had her use a telephone located on one wall to inquire about Danny and Vic. A nurse told her no information was available yet. Call back in fifteen minutes. Damn it. She was tempted to chew her nails, but she hadn't done that since she was fourteen. Taking a deep breath to drown her nerves, she found a seat. She chewed on her lower lip for a second, then rubbed her arms. Once in a while the automatic doors in the emergency room would slide open and arctic air would blast by. She kept her coat on, but pushed back the hood and stuffed her gloves in her zippered pockets. She felt tempted to break the no-cell-phone rule and try and call Vic's phone. The rule-following part of Lucy kept her in line. She fidgeted in her chair. Friggin' hell. She needed to know what was happening, and she had a feeling it would take a damned long time to find out.

Ten minutes later, Neena and Mitch strode in, as well as Jake and Marisa. Sean and Eve followed in another few minutes. Keith and Freddie were on their heels. They all hugged her.

She managed a smile. “You all came.”

Eve returned her smile with a soft, reassuring voice and gaze. “Of course.”

Jake settled his big form in a chair across from Lucy. He scrubbed one hand through his short, dark hair. His mouth was a grim line. “Vic doesn't have anyone else here but you and us.”

She marveled at something that should have been apparent to her a long time ago. These military types, as she thought of them with affection, they stuck together. Her friends, all of them.

As they all found chairs and she filled them in on what she knew—which was essentially not much, she said, “Sorry to ruin your party.”

Mitch slung his arm around Neena’s shoulders. “We couldn’t have enjoyed ourselves knowing Vic was in here, and you were here waiting.”

She saw it in their eyes, the unspoken. They’d be here no matter what. Eve, Marisa, Neena and Freddie looked at her with genuine concern, and the men had that stoic expression she’d come to expect.

Marisa placed a hand over Lucy’s. “You okay?”

“Me?” Lucy said with a soft chuckle that lacked all humor. “No. I won’t be until I know how Vic and Danny are.”

She left her chair for the wall phone. After a quick call, the nurse said she’d be right out. Frustrated, Lucy returned to her chair and told the others. Sympathetic grumbles ushered from the group.

True to her word, the short middle-aged nurse came into the waiting area. “Lucy Creed?”

Lucy popped up and greeted the woman. “That’s me.”

“I’m Anna. You can see Mr. Moore. Follow me.”

As Lucy followed the woman, she waved at her friends and left them behind. “How is Vic?”

“He’s fine. He’ll probably be released within the hour. The CAT scan has to come back. He’s solid as a rock.” Anna’s stern expression melted into a warm smile as she lowered her voice and stopped. “And I mean that in the nicest way. That’s one strong, healthy young man. If I was twenty years younger....” She winked and shrugged.

Relief drove into Lucy. She laughed softly as tension started to trickle out of her slowly. Within a few seconds, the nurse directed her to an area cordoned off into cubicles by stalls. Curtains were pulled across some of the stalls. She heard a woman weeping, her voice low as she talked with another person.

All the hair went up on the back of her neck. “Danny Mendoza. Is he all right too?”

Anna’s narrow face returned to an official, stern expression. She didn’t say anything.

“Is he badly hurt?”

“You’re not family?”

“No.”

“Then I’m afraid I can’t give you that information.”

“He’s a...I’m a close friend. He doesn’t have any family here as far as I know. They’re all in Jackson Hole.”

Anna’s mouth pursed in thought. “His parents have been notified. They’re on their way.” The nurse’s eyes softened the slightest bit. “I can tell you that if it hadn’t been for Mr. Moore’s quick actions, Mr. Mendoza wouldn’t have survived.” She gestured to the stall at the end on the right. “Mr. Moore is the last one on the right.”

Curiosity rose inside Lucy, but she nodded and decided not to press further. “Thank you.”

The curtain wasn't drawn all the way across Vic's niche, and she pushed it back with caution. He was sitting up in the gurney, hospital gown top on, a blanket covering his lower half. His gaze snapped to hers as she entered the stall, and Lucy's heart skipped a beat at the instant connection.

He gave her that heart-melting smile. "Hey."

"Vic." She went to his side and gathered his hand in hers.

As she leaned toward him, he pushed one hand into her hair and brought her close for a quick, warm kiss. "God, it's good to see you."

Tears filled her eyes, but she blinked them back. "You too." She drew in a deep breath. "I was so worried."

His grin was irreverent, but also filled with a deep emotion she hadn't seen in a man's eyes before. "Nah, I was never in any danger. I don't even have a concussion. They're going to let me out any second."

"I'm so grateful it wasn't worse." That curiosity wouldn't leave though. "The nurse said you saved Danny's life."

He gestured for her to come closer, and as she leaned down, he whispered. "I was in the ambulance with Danny. It was touch and go for him for a while."

"What was wrong with him?"

"Femoral artery was nicked. His compact car crunched up like a cracker box when he hit me. He has a concussion, a broken left leg, and I don't know if he has anything else wrong with him. Anyway, when I crawled out of my car I heard him screaming. I got the passenger side door open and realized his left thigh was cut badly." He took a deep breath, looking a little green. "The amount of blood told me he was in big trouble. I had to..." He trailed off.

"Had to?" she asked cautiously.

"A few years back a medic friend of mine trained me in a technique. I had to reach in his wound and pinch the nick in the artery to keep him from bleeding out."

"You saved his life."

Vic shook his head and tightened his hold on her hand. "Nah. The paramedics and doctor's saved him. I just made him last long enough for them to get to him."

If Lucy hadn't already known she loved Vic, this would have assured her that she did. Far more quickly than she ever imagined she could. His modesty wasn't false. She saw it in his eyes. He didn't see what the big deal was, or even if he did, he wouldn't think of bragging on himself. His just-the-facts-ma'am face told it all.

She swallowed hard. "The nurse said she'd let me know how he is, but since I'm not family..." She shrugged.

Vic smoothed his fingers over hers, tightening his grip. His big hand was warm and strong, and she wanted to wrap him up, keep him safe forever. "Maybe we'll get to see him."

“You’d stay here to find out how he is?”

“Sure.” Vic’s eyes darkened with more emotions, some which flicked by so fast she couldn’t identify them. “He’ll be in surgery for a while. If his parents get here tonight, they’ll need someone to let them know what happened.”

Oh, Victor Moore. Could you say another thing to make me fall for you even harder?

“This place is small potatoes to you, isn’t it?” She gestured with one hand. “Battlefield first aid. Lying in a hospital. You’ve been in war zones. You were just in a hospital recovering from your leg wound and here you are again.”

She remembered the scar showing that he’d healed, but just barely. Her concern had been that some of their sexual escapades would hurt him. He’d told her that if he hadn’t already been a day away from coming back from a tour, his type of wound wouldn’t have warranted enough to send him back.

“Yeah, this war zone is pretty tame. But I won’t be here too much longer. Someday soon I’ll return to the sandbox, and it’ll be war all over again.”

Her heart panged. “Did you have to remind me?”

Before he could say anything else, the doctor came in. All smiles, the young doctor had a great bedside manner and pronounced Vic in great health.

“Doc,” Vic said. “What about Mendoza? He’s in surgery, right?”

The doctor nodded. “Yep. He’ll be in there awhile. By the way. Damn fine work you did on him out there. Without you the man would have died. No doubt about it.”

Vic brushed aside the doctor’s praise with a smile and thanks. Vic signed release papers, and within a few moments he’d pulled on a set of scrubs. His sweater and jeans had been so blood stained they probably weren’t salvageable. He gathered his coat, hat and gloves. Her stomach jumped, the thought of having the wherewithal to help someone like Vic had overwhelming her. Admiration welled up inside her. More than ever, she couldn’t ignore her feelings for him—they’d grown as big as the room.

They returned to the room where their friends waited. There were handshakes all around, relief clear on everyone’s faces. When Lucy told them she’d stay here with Vic and wait for word on Danny, they all understood. They left shortly afterwards to return home.

By this time it was getting late. Vic slipped his arm around her waist and before she knew it, they stood in the waiting room with their arms around each other. She sighed. Yeah, this felt good. Way good. Then she thought about Danny, so busted up, messed up, and wondered where the man she’d known through emails had gone.

Lucy woke with a start. Her tailbone ached from the unforgiving chair in the emergency room. She glanced around, realized Vic wasn't next to her and sat up straight. A sterile-looking metal clock on the wall across from her said one in the morning.

She yawned, stretched and shifted to her left cheek in the chair. If she were rich she'd donate some damned padded chairs to the hospital. Vic reappeared, holding two tall coffees. When he captured her gaze he smiled, and Lucy couldn't miss the sincerity in that look. It warmed her from the inside out. He looked a little bizarre in scrubs and wearing snow boots, but he was so damned hunky it didn't matter one bit what he wore. Despite the situation, her body stirred with longing, wanting to see him wearing absolutely nothing.

"Coffee?" She kept her voice down in deference to the hour and the few people several chairs away who still dozed. "This time of night?"

He handed her one cup. "Large, decaf, with lots of cream." He settled into the chair to her left and cradled his even larger coffee. "You were dreaming, muttered something about being cold, and when I touched your hand, it was icy."

"Still is. It's always been that way with me. Cold hands. Cold feet."

He grinned and ventured a sip of his coffee. He winked. "I remember the cold feet part."

A blush filled her face. He'd complained a couple of times about her cold feet while they were in bed, but she took it with a grain of salt.

She sipped the hot coffee. "This isn't half bad. I'm surprised."

"From the coffee cart two doors down. I'm surprised they're open this time of night. I expected to find one of those nasty machines that dispense motor oil."

Lucy swallowed one more sip before replying. "Thanks. I'm feeling warmer already." She placed her coffee cup on the small table to her left before saying what she knew he had to be thinking. "Maybe we should go home. I didn't know he'd be in surgery for so long."

Vic shook his head. "He shouldn't have been. Maybe there were complications. Even if his artery wasn't severed, a leg as messed up as his would take some work to repair."

She kept her hands cupped around the coffee, using it as much to have something to do with her hands as to warm them up. "Did you...did you have to save anyone like that in combat?"

"No." His eyes turned harder. "He could just have easily died right there in front of me."

"But he didn't. Thanks to you."

She didn't get another word in. A man and woman pushing seventy entered the emergency room, and it wasn't long before the nurse named Anna pointed toward Vic and Lucy.

"Those must be his parents," Lucy said.

The man and woman turned toward Lucy and Vic. The man was bald and with a solid baring and sternness that reminded Lucy of Danny on a good day. The salt-and-pepper-haired woman appeared around

the same age, her form petite, her pretty face haunted. Lucy felt something inside her clench with apprehension. She never thought she'd meet Danny's parents this way in a million years. God, what a horrible way to have to introduce herself.

“Mr. and Mrs. Mendoza?” Lucy said as the couple walked up.

“Yes,” the man said. “I'm Danny's father. You're...”

“Danny's friend, Lucy Creed.” She touched Vic's shoulder. “And this is the man who saved Danny's life.”

Chapter Ten

As Lucy drove him to her home from the hospital, Vic ached in every muscle. Once in a while his body shivered, and he couldn't be certain if it was just cold or leftover reaction to the accident and watching a man almost die in front of him. He wanted to sleep, yet he was pretty damn certain he wouldn't for some time. He needed to talk, yet he couldn't think of a thing to say. It stayed bottled within, his mind whirling, unable to land on one subject for long. Only Lucy kept him anchored.

Outside the streets passed by, everything quiet, as if they were the only ones inhabiting the city. Three in the morning would do that to a person. With ice on the streets, it took them longer to reach Lucy's house. Once there he figured his head would hit the pillow and it would be lights out.

Inside the house, they stripped off their boots and coats and moved into the living room.

"Want to try and get some sleep?" she asked.

"Yeah. Let's try." He ruffled his hand over his hair and blew out one weary breath. "Might not work, but my brain is like mush right now."

They stumbled into the bedroom and in a flash got ready for bed. While he slept naked, she'd chosen turquoise flannel pajamas with penguins on them. He smiled.

"Cute," he said with a smile as he folded her in his arms and they huddled under the covers.

"What is?" she asked with a yawn.

"Your pajamas."

She laughed, and the soft rumble vibrated against him. "I'm freezing still."

He rubbed her shoulders and back. "If I wasn't bruised up and damned tired, I'd make sure you got hot. Fast."

She laughed again, this time with a higher-pitched giggle filled with genuine mirth. She propped up on one elbow and gazed down at him. Dark shadows marred her eyes, but so did a relief he wanted to understand.

Seriousness pushed away the joking expression she'd worn moments ago. She sat up, sitting cross-legged next to him.

He tucked his hands behind his head. "You were wonderful at the hospital."

"What?" Clearly she didn't expect him to say that.

"You were wonderful. You came to see me, number one, and to make sure I was okay." He touched her knee, cupped her flannel-clad skin. "More than that, you were fantastic with Danny's parents."

Her gaze met his and tears mounted. Ah, Jesus, he hadn't meant for her to cry. But she did, and though he wasn't one hundred percent sure why, he didn't need the answer. He held his arms out to her, and she came into them without hesitation. He wrapped her close, felt her tears moisten his chest. She wasn't sobbing, her tears silent.

She sighed. "Thank you. Of course I would want to see you. And Danny's parents are nice people. They're so worried about him."

"With good reason."

"Yes. For more than his injuries."

"You told them about the whisky bottle in the car?"

She stroked her hand, which was no longer cold, over his chest. "Didn't have to. The police did. He'll be charged with reckless driving and driving under the influence at the very least. I think at first his parents thought you'd press more charges."

He shook his head. "Ain't worth it. He's already facing some bad times with the military."

"I have to go and see him, you know. When he's well enough for visitors."

Vic didn't want her to see him, and yet he did. Mendoza had to know once and for all that she was off-limits.

"I don't have feelings for him any more, Vic." Her voice held absolute reassurance.

Damn straight. The possessiveness zinged through his blood was hot and fast.

He tightened his arms around her. "Yeah, that's for certain." He almost gritted his teeth. "You should see him."

She kissed his chest. "Thank you for understanding."

"You're welcome."

Quiet covered them for so long, he thought maybe she'd fallen asleep. Then she said, "I didn't finish telling you something." She took a huge breath, as if she might be going for a swim and said, "When I met you I had an attitude about military men. You know that."

"It's understandable."

She tapped his chin with her index finger. "Still, I *shouldn't* have had the attitude. All military men are not alike. I know there are plenty of men out there that women don't hit on all the time, and those men still cheat. I've come to realize that someone, man or woman, will cheat if they want to. It wasn't the military that made those guys cheat. They would have cheated no matter what job they had. I just had blinders on and was attracted to them the same way I attracted the wrong friends in high school. Yes, you're a gorgeous man and other women are going to see that. And no matter what you do for a living, I trust you and want to take a chance." She caressed his face, touched him with reverence. "I know it's too early. It's too amazing to be real. But I almost lost you tonight in that car wreck. So I want you to know, even if you don't feel the same. I'm falling for you, Victor Moore."

His chest expanded, but not from breath. From the beauty of her words, the comfort, the sense of home and happiness her statement gave him. No woman, other than his mother, had ever expressed love to him, and this was new and fresh and amazing. He wanted it with a fierceness, a raw emotion, a punch that hit him in the gut. With a vengeance, he grabbed a hold of that feeling, one he couldn't define, and knew it could sustain him through all his days. His arms tightened, and he rolled her onto her back. He kissed her with a fierceness he couldn't contain.

He finally released her long enough to look down at her, both of them breathless, his cock aching to find her hot softness. "I understand the trust issues. But I'm willing to trust you with everything inside me. I know you'd never hurt me like Shelly did. You know what I think?" Her tired smile, her soft eyes gave him strength to confess. "I think I'm the luckiest damn soldier ever to live. It would be my honor if you would write to me the next time I go on a deployment. It would make me the happiest man alive if I knew you were waiting for me when I got back."

He waited, anxiety touching him. What if she said no? What if she couldn't take the life of waiting for a military man to come home?

She tightened her arms around his neck. "It would be my honor to write to you. Wherever you go. Whatever you do."

He drew back long enough to say, his eyes burning, his throat tight, "I love you, Lucy Creed."

With a big smile she reached up and pulled his head down, and despite the lateness of the morning, aching muscles, and tired everything, they made love in the semi-dark. He wanted it that way, so he could see her expression as he brought her to that first shattering climax. Her head thrown back, her body shivering, her cry high and quaking with unmistakable pleasure. As he sank within her, he found a special heaven he understood he'd never known until now. In her arms was where he belonged.

Colorado Springs. Lasting Images Studio. A year and a half later.

As six o'clock came around, Lucy snapped off the air conditioning in her studio and made sure her security alarm was set. Time to go home. As she always did though, she looked around her studio and the numerous wedding photographs gracing her walls. She smiled. To date, since she'd moved to Colorado Springs a year and a half ago, she'd built a thriving business even faster than she'd expected. Jake, Marisa, Freddie and Keith had transferred to Fort Carson not that long after Vic. She'd found a contentment in life she'd once never knew existed. What else was there other than a career she loved, great friends and a wonderful home?

Love. Of course. More than any of those things, she couldn't forget love. She smiled.

Her cell phone rang and excitement jumped inside her as she rushed back to the counter and reached for her phone tucked away in her purse. The screen held the name she wanted to see the most.

A huge smile broke over her face as she answered. “Vic!”

“Hey, babe. It’s good to hear your voice.”

“Where are you?”

“On my way to you.”

She sighed with mock indignation. His flight in to the airport wasn’t due for another two hours. “That doesn’t explain where you are, silly man. I’m just heading out to Fort Carson now.”

“Don’t bother.”

“What?” Worry struck her.

“I’m right outside your door, love. We got an early connection back, and I wanted to surprise you.”

She swung around and there he was outside the studio, waving at her from the window. Wearing his Army Combat Uniform, or ACU’s as people in the military called them. His soldier’s bearing sent a primitive need through her body, but his dear face and wonderful smile took her breath away. She let out a squeal of joy, clicked off the phone, placed it on the counter and ran for the door. She couldn’t get there fast enough. When she did, he grabbed her up, stepped into the store and slammed the door.

His eyes were bright with love, and she hugged him as close as she could.

“God, baby,” he whispered close to her mouth. “I missed you.” He kissed her.

Their kiss went on so long she almost considered dragging him into the back room and having her way with him. Instead they lingered, only releasing the kiss after an eternity.

They stayed in each other’s arms. Vic grinned and pushed her hair back. She’d grown it to that lengthy, black tangle from high school. “Lucy, I can’t believe how long it’s been.”

“Six months of emails and video chats just isn’t enough. Promise you’ll stay home for a long, long time.”

He lifted her left hand, stared at the princess cut diamond nestled between antique diamond ring guards. They’d found the wedding set a year ago right before their simple, elegant ceremony. He held up his own left hand, displaying the white gold, plain wedding band that never left his hand.

He kissed her fingers. With a wicked grin, he said, “Only forever, my love. Only forever.”

And Lucy knew he meant it.

About the Author

Romantic Times Book Reviews calls Denise A. Agnew's romantic suspense novels "top-notch", and she's received their coveted TOP PICK rating. Denise has written paranormal, romantic comedy, contemporary, historical, erotic romance and romantic suspense. Archaeology and archery have crept into her work, and travels through England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales have added to a lifetime of story ideas. A newly minted paranormal investigator, Denise looks forward to exploring the unknown. Visit Denise's website at www.deniseagnew.com.

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Intimate Alliance

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Before The Dawn

First impressions can be dead wrong.

Close Quarters

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Hot Zone, Book 4

Neena Williamson is positive the man who just walked into her favorite café is all wrong for the local charity's new hot male calendar. For starters, he's wearing the most butt-ugly Hawaiian shirt on the face of the earth. He doesn't fit anyone's image of a smokin' hardbody, even if her friend insists he's perfect for Mr. December.

When a gunman robs the café, Mr. December proves that underneath his bad taste in clothes, he knows how to bring it.

Clarksville, Wyoming is the perfect place for Mitch Gilroy to hide in plain sight. He enjoys his low-key handyman job, and no one pries into his former life. But in an instant, Mitch is forced to remember everything he's tried so hard to forget.

Thrown together by sudden violence, Neena and Mitch quickly discover how tangled their emotions can become. And the only way to banish the monsters that haunt them is to do the one thing they fear most. Become vulnerable—to each other.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Close Quarters:

Mitch unlocked the screen door and front door, eager to lead Neena inside and discover how quickly he could bring her into his arms and taste her delicious skin under his tongue. He ached; his cock had been hard as a rock for what seemed forever.

Rain pounded on the porch as thunder rolled and tumbled. Another flash of electricity followed close behind. Mitch fumbled with the keys before he jammed the right one into the lock. He couldn't remember the last time nerves had caused him uncertainty with a woman. Last time he'd been nineteen and losing his virginity. God, why did he think about that now? Neena probably wasn't a virgin—she'd kissed like a woman who'd experienced passion before, and although her responses had been hesitant at first, once she did respond, she'd heated like a firecracker ready to ignite. He wanted her in his arms again. If he'd thought they wouldn't get caught, he would have taken her there in his car. He would have unfastened his pants, tore away her pantyhose and panties and found her heat and wetness. Would have allowed her to slip down over his cock until she swallowed him whole. He almost groaned imagining it, and his erection got even harder, if that were possible.

No. He didn't keep condoms in his truck, and he never had sex without a condom. Never. He wouldn't take that risk.

"Fuck," he murmured softly as he wrestled with the doorknob.

She squeezed his shoulder. "Having problems?"

"Yeah." He finally opened the door and they went inside. He relocked the door.

He tossed his keys on a table beside the door and turned to her. Her hair, once artfully arranged atop her head earlier in the evening, lay in tumbled disarray across her shoulders. One thin strap of her red velvet gown had slipped down her shoulder. He almost groaned remembering what her nipple had felt like against his fingers. Tight. Aroused. Ready for the lash of his tongue, the sucking heat of his mouth. The curve of her bust, the smallness of her waist, and the roundness of her hips called to him on the most primitive level. Her gentle smile held questions. Her dusky eye shadow gave her eyes a mysterious allure.

His cock hardened a fraction more. He had to get inside her or die. Plain and simple. Yet the last thing he would do was frighten her. She looked too much like a woman who hadn't committed to the next move. A woman on the threshold of deciding, of reversing the confident answer she'd given him in his car not so long ago. He burned to make love to her, but he didn't want her hesitation and uncertainty.

He started undoing his clothes, slowly. He tossed his tux jacket on the same table where he'd placed his keys. "Would you like something to drink?"

"No. I'm good." Her voice was gentle and soft.

She walked toward him, and to his surprise, helped him undo his shirt buttons. She stared into his eyes and he allowed her to open his shirt and bare his chest. Her eyes widened a bit, and her attention glided over his muscles. She licked her lips, and his cock throbbed.

Screw subtlety.

"If you look at me like that..." he started to say.

"What?"

"I'll have to do this."

He leaned down and did away with his shoes, tossing them aside. They skidded across the foyer. As she propped her back against the closed front door, he placed his hands down on either side of her about shoulder-width apart. Neena's pupils dilated a little, and he smiled. Oh, yeah. She was still interested. But would she admit it?

"Do you...?" She swallowed hard. "Do you still want me?"

He laughed softly, and because he couldn't stand it any longer, he drew her hand to his cock. Through the fabric he was still hard as granite. Her fingers moved under his, caressing his length. *Oh, Jesus.*

Her lips parted. "I guess that was a stupid question."

Social butterfly and a soldier in the Special Forces—a match made in...bed.

Jimmy

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Red Hot & Blue, Book 3

Special Forces gave Jimmy Gordon the undercover skills of a chameleon, but nothing prepared him for Amelia Monroe-Carrington, the governor's hot, redheaded daughter. She thought she was seducing a banquet waiter, and he let her.

His next assignment pulled him from her bed and into the worst six months of his life. Images of Lia were what kept him alive imprisoned in Kosovo, and even now he's home and recovered, she's still in his head.

For her father's political career, Lia has always done the appropriate thing, right down to dating a senator's son. Her one rebellious act, an incredible night with a totally *inappropriate* man, ended when he disappeared. And then never called.

When they unexpectedly meet again, the pull between them is stronger than ever, tempting Lia to stop sacrificing her own happiness for the family dynasty.

This book has been previously published and has been revised and expanded from its original release.

Warning: Contains incredible one-night-stand sex hot enough to withstand time, distance, and some really nasty terrorist torture.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Jimmy:

"Hello?" Her sexy voice sent a shiver right down from his ears to his toes and everywhere in between.

"Hey, darlin'. It's Ji...uh, James."

"Hello there, James. Where are you?"

"In my car outside the party. We just got off." Oh yeah. Judging by the sexy purr of her voice, he had a feeling he was about to *get off* all right.

"Meet me at the Hilton in ten minutes. Ask for the private elevator that leads to the presidential suite. I'll leave your name at the desk so they'll let you up." Jimmy heard a click and then she was gone.

Holy crap. He didn't know what to be amazed at more. The fact he was going to get lucky with the hottest woman he'd ever laid eyes on, or the invitation to the presidential suite at the Hilton. Meanwhile, there was no way he could drive back to base, check in and then get to the hotel in ten minutes, and Jimmy had a feeling Lia was not the kind of woman who responded well to being kept waiting.

The mission had been uneventful. Maybe no one would notice if he didn't check in tonight. His decision made, he drove directly to the Hilton so fast it was a miracle he didn't get pulled over for

speeding. He stopped only long enough to grab a box of condoms and breath mints at the twenty-four-hour convenience store across the street from the hotel.

Jimmy remembered to unstrap his leg holster and secure his weapon in the glove compartment. He even remembered to lock his parked car, but that was about the only time his mind strayed from thinking about what was about to happen up in that suite.

Inside the massive marble lobby, he gave his name to the man standing behind the front desk, thinking there was a good chance he'd be thrown out on his ass. Lo and behold, he wasn't. Instead, he was ushered by another uniform-clad employee into a brass and mahogany-lined elevator car with only two buttons inside. They read *Lobby* and *Presidential Suite*.

As the valet, or whatever he was called, rode up the many floors to the top with him, Jimmy finally allowed himself to stop thinking this whole thing must be some kind of a joke. That was something he knew for sure when the elevator doors opened onto the eerily quiet, private hallway on the top floor of the building.

The hotel employee held the door open with one arm and dismissed him with a nod. "Have a good night, sir."

"Thanks." He stepped out onto a marble floor. With a swish, the doors swept shut behind him and he was alone facing a single, massive white door.

Jimmy ignored the erratic pounding of his heart and raised his hand to knock. When the door swung wide a moment later, Lia stood before him wearing nothing but a black strapless bra, lacy thong underwear and mile-high heels.

He didn't question the state of her attire. Her intentions were clear enough, so he simply walked in and blindly slammed the door shut behind him. Never a man to beat around the bush, Jimmy grabbed her head with one hand and her waist with the other and sank his tongue deep into her warm, welcoming mouth. He explored down the silky warm flesh to land on her ass cheek and discovered she felt as good as she looked.

Lia let him enjoy both her mouth and body for long enough to make his hard-on start to throb as it pressed against the zipper of his pants. Then she pulled away. "You don't waste any time, do you?"

A woman who answered the door half-naked shouldn't talk about how fast he was moving.

"Darlin', you ain't seen nothing yet." He ran his hands one more time over her firm curves with a groan.

Enough with the standing. Time to get horizontal. He glanced around the large space. It was decorated like a living room with a sofa and a huge flat-screen television that he might enjoy at another time when he didn't have a raging hard-on and a willing woman beneath his hands. His gaze swept quickly over the kitchenette and dining area and landed on a partially closed door. Bingo.

She let out a small squeak as he scooped her up and headed for the adjoining room where he hoped to find a bed. A really large one if he was lucky. What he had in mind was going to take more than a little bit of time and a whole lot of space. When he pushed the door open wider with one foot and saw the king-sized mattress with the bedding already turned down for the night, it looked as if he was blessed enough to get what he wanted.

He dropped her on the bed and began tearing off what remained of his uniform. He'd long since ditched the jacket back in the car, so all he had left was the button-down shirt and pants.

She watched each piece of clothing fall to the floor, including his underwear, and then stared at his naked body. "Nice."

Jimmy didn't miss the gleam in Lia's eye as she said that. Damn right, it was nice. He worked hard enough to get this body. About time he put it to use for something other than practice maneuvers and fighting bad guys.

"Glad you approve, darlin'." He pulled her panties down with both hands and spread her legs. He ignored her surprised intake of breath and settled himself eyelevel with her creamy thighs and a whole lot more. She was totally bald down there except for a tiny neat triangle of red curls. The rest was smooth and hair-free. It was different and really hot.

He must have been staring for quite a while, because she finally reached down and grabbed his head in both hands, raising his face so he could see hers.

"What's the matter, handsome? Don't your waitress girlfriends believe in Brazilian bikini waxes?"

So that's what it was called. He'd have to remember that. But hot as she was, and as incredible as her Brazilian bikini wax looked, he didn't need any more of her smart-ass waiter comments. He was betting she was a talker, and he wanted quiet so he could fully enjoy himself.

There was one sure-fire way to make sure she stopped talking.



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