



Tory Richards

the  
**PROMISE**



## **The Promise**

Tory Richards

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This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

## **Blurb**

Shannon Hayes' husband David was killed in Iraq nearly a year ago, and now she must face her first holiday season without him. With a toddler in tow, she travels to the Vermont farm where the rest of the family has gathered for the holidays. There she comes face to face with the man who was with him when he died, *and* her destiny, his older brother Ryan.

For the first time in years, Ryan returns home to keep a promise he made to David—to take care of Shannon and their daughter. It's a pledge Ryan is reluctant to keep because he's been secretly in love with Shannon since first setting eyes on her. Their attraction to each other is instant, intense and soon the *promise* isn't the only thing between them.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this story to my best friend and daughter, Michelle. I thank God every day for having you in my life.

## Prologue

The holiday season was Shannon Hayes favorite time of the year, and had been since her fairytale wedding to David six years before. From the moment he brought her home to meet his family, they'd welcomed her into their fold with open arms. Showing her what being part of a *real* family was all about and erasing years of loneliness for a young girl who'd grown up in an orphanage. But this year would be different. It would be her first Thanksgiving without David, the first Christmas and the first New Years. Shannon knew she would be facing many firsts without David.

*Because David had been killed in Iraq.*

Shannon picked up the antique gold picture frame that held their wedding picture. Not the traditional pose of a newly married couple standing hand in hand beneath a rose covered trellis, but of one showing a couple playfully feeding each other their first piece of wedding cake. Every time she looked at the picture, a smile spread across her face. Recalling how David had kissed her afterwards, licking the sweet frosting off her lips until they'd collapsed against each other with joyful laughter. Now it made her heart ache with the knowledge of what had been, and what was lost. She carefully set the frame down on the bookshelf and released a small sigh of sadness. God how she missed him.

*How was she going to get through the next month and a half without him?*

The answer came to Shannon the moment she glanced down at their two-year-old daughter. Alivia had fallen asleep curled up on the sofa, hugging her baby blanket and favorite stuffed teddy bear. Shannon reached down to fluff the soft curls resting against her little forehead, her heart swelling with love to near bursting. She didn't think it was possible to love someone so much. She thanked God every day for giving her a piece of David.

At least he'd been able to meet his daughter once before his death. Shannon didn't know how she would have been able to face a future if he hadn't had that one small gift. Alivia would only know her father through her and his family and Shannon was going to see to it that she did. She thanked God that David's family was loving and nurturing people.

The phone began to ring and Shannon reached for it quickly, keeping an eye on Alivia, praying the noise didn't disturb her. "Hello?" she said softly into the receiver, turning her back on the sleeping toddler.

"Hi dear, what are you up to?" A familiar voice asked in a clear-cut voice, causing Shannon's mouth to curve upward into a welcoming grin.

Marsha was David's mother. "Hi Mom, I'm okay. What about you?"

She released a heavy sigh. "Thinking it's time to start making plans for the holidays. How's that little granddaughter of mine? Still teething?"

"Among other things," Shannon admitted without hesitation. "She's trouble with a capital T."

She made a sound of disbelief. "Oh come on, dear. How much trouble can one little girl get into?"

Shannon could hear the smile in her voice. "You tell me, you've had a few of your own."

Five to be exact. David had been the youngest at twenty-five when he was killed. Next in line came thirty-year-old Sheila, thirty-one-year-old Richard, thirty-three-year-old Ryan and thirty-four-year-old Amber. Since all of them except David were only a year apart Shannon suspected that David might have been a surprise. All but Ryan had spouses and children of their own.

Shannon had only met Ryan twice. Once when he'd come home for his father's funeral and then again for David's. He didn't come home on holidays, didn't join in on the family reunions or vacations. He'd chosen a life in the Marines, much to Marsha's dismay. It had taken her ten years to finally accept that she couldn't change him.

"You know why I'm calling."

A knowing chuckle escaped Shannon. As Marsha had already said, it was that time of year, when family made plans to get together for the holidays. Marsha had a huge farmhouse in the back woods of Vermont where she'd raised her children. Big enough to accommodate the ever-growing family, which thanks to Alivia, now included ten grandchildren. Two more were on the way.

"I hope you can get away, dear," she breathed into the receiver when Shannon remained silent. "Thanksgiving and Christmas wouldn't be the same without you and Alivia. Everyone is expecting to see you."

"I can't think of anywhere else I'd rather be during the holidays, Mom. You know I want Alivia to grow up knowing her aunts, uncles and cousins. To tell you the truth, I've been anxiously waiting for your call."

It was the truth. Shannon loved being around David's siblings and their families. The walls of her townhouse, where she lived *and* worked, were beginning to close in around her.

"I wasn't sure..." Marsha hesitated. "I wasn't sure you'd feel like celebrating much this year."

Neither one mentioned what was really on their mind. "I have a rambunctious two-year-old preventing me from getting any work done, Mom, and a publisher yanking her hair out because I'm behind. We've been cooped up in this house too long. Time away will do us good."

"I'm so glad to hear you say that. I've called everyone else but was afraid to phone you because I didn't want to hear you say no. If you'd like I can arrange for you to have the guesthouse in the back."

"Oh no you don't! It's always been a rule whoever has the most kids gets use of the guesthouse. Amber and her bunch would have my head on a platter." Shannon laughed, before remembering about Alivia. "You want that on your conscience?" she whispered into the phone.

Marsha returned her laughter. "I think Amber had Laura just so she could have the guesthouse every year. I don't know what we'll do once Sandi gives birth, they'll each have four. I guess we'll have to draw straws."

Alivia began to stir. Shannon reached down and rubbed her back, hoping that would comfort her into remaining asleep. "Either that or you could have Richard and Tom duke it out," she joked.

"That's not funny, dear. Can you see it? Two ministers fighting over who gets the guesthouse?" Marsha chuckled. "We'd have a better chance of seeing some action between Sandi and Amber. Now tell me, when can you get here?"

Thanksgiving was two weeks away. Shannon knew Marsha liked a full house from that holiday until the New Year rolled in. Most years she got what she wanted. She was lucky enough to have successful children who could arrange their time any way they wanted, even if their spouses couldn't always. Amber owned an antique business in New York. Richard was a minister in Maine, and Sheila didn't work. She'd married a doctor in California.

"When is everyone else arriving?" Shannon questioned, covering a yawn behind her hand. It wasn't all that late but she'd gotten up early that morning to get some work done before Alivia rose.

"Sheila and the kids are flying in a few days before Thanksgiving to help me with all the cooking and baking that I need to do. And you know Mark. He'll fly in for Thanksgiving, fly back to California for a month and then fly in for Christmas. Amber, Richard and their brood won't arrive until the night before and stay until the New Year."

"Ryan's not going to make it again this year?"

"Oh, you know Ryan." There was a clear tone of sadness in Marsha's voice. "He just can't seem to get away for the holidays. He used to make an effort, if only for a few days, but all that seemed to stop about five years ago."

About the time his father had passed away. Roger Hayes had succumbed to cancer shortly after Shannon and David's wedding. She'd never forget the first time she saw Ryan. He'd just flown in for the funeral, the flight delayed because of bad weather, and had arrived at the cemetery just as they were laying Roger in the ground. As they were all standing around the gravesite she remembered hearing the squeal of tires and glancing up to see a jeep pulling to the side of the road. Then a mountain of a man, dressed in the full uniform of a Marine, jumped from the vehicle and made his way toward them.

His gaze seemed to zero right in on Shannon as he joined the family. She remembered feeling trapped for a moment, unable to look away from the piercing directness of his electric blue eyes until a small movement from David reminded her where they were. After that, she rarely saw Ryan during the two days he was home.

Their second encounter had been even briefer. Ryan had come home for David's funeral. But other than his initial greeting and condolences he'd remained in the background. Shannon had been in a daze during the days surrounding David's death, nothing had seemed to matter. "Shannon?"

She blinked, pulled back to the present. "I'm sorry, Mom. I guess I wandered off. Have you called Ryan?"

"No. I stopped calling him years ago. It hurts too much, always getting the same response. He knows we all gather for the holidays. Maybe one year he'll surprise us, huh? So, when can you get here?"

It sounded as though Marsha wanted her there *yesterday*. Shannon smiled. "I'll fly in on the Tuesday before and help you and Sheila with the cooking and decorating."

Spending a month or so with Marsha and the rest of the family would be a welcome break from the normal mundane life she lived. Shannon realized she would need to make some changes, and soon. It wasn't fair to Alivia living in seclusion, like a hermit.

The beginning of the New Year, things were going to be different...

## Chapter One

Shannon felt bone tired and grubby by the time she flew into the Mount Snow Airport, two days before Thanksgiving. The small airport was busy, probably more so than usual, and the plane was jam packed without a spare seat anywhere. It seemed everyone on the face of the earth had the same brainy idea she had...trying to reach their holiday destinations in time. Shannon should have remembered the years before when she and David had left earlier to avoid the hassle.

Traveling with a toddler, one who'd clearly reached the terrible two stage was no picnic either. By the time Shannon stepped off the plane, she had a huge grape stain on her white blouse, which she knew wouldn't come out in a hundred years. She couldn't blame the stewardess, who had only been trying to help when Alivia had turned her nose up to everything Shannon had brought on board. Clearly, the stewardess didn't have children if she thought handing a two year old an open cup of juice was the smartest thing to do. Alivia's little chubby hands had reached for it before Shannon had a chance to blink, much less speak.

On top of the juice stain, Shannon had dried drool on her left shoulder where Alivia had fallen asleep, and now smelled sour from the milk and oatmeal she'd consumed for breakfast. Her red hair, which she'd pulled up in a haphazard bun, was hanging about her face and neck like she'd just finished ten hours of strenuous housework. Every time Alivia got anywhere near it she'd bury her little fingers into the bun, pulling more and more hair loose. Shannon sighed, smiling in spite of everything.

It's not like she was trying to win a beauty pageant.

She thanked God Sheila had arrived on time to pick them up. The long drive to the farmhouse had been done with them catching up on what they'd been doing most of the year, while Sheila's kids, Dawn and Kelly, had kept Alivia amused in the back seat. Every once in a while Shannon glanced back to make sure her daughter hadn't worked her way out of the car seat. She hated being confined. Apparently, the attention of her cousins had kept her from getting bored.

Now, some four hours later, Shannon glanced down at Alivia, and released a deep sigh of tiredness after the long day. Her daughter had eaten, been bathed, powdered down, read a story and was fast asleep in the playpen next to her bed. Hopefully until the next morning. Shannon glanced at the clock, almost nine. *Her* time now, to eat, bathe, powder down and replace the story for a glass of wine and a little peace and quiet. Marsha left a dinner plate in the oven for her when she was ready for it.

On her way to the door, she caught a glance of herself in the huge mirror over the antique mahogany dresser. *Lord, she looked a wreck!* Her green eyes looked dull with exhaustion, her mascara smeared beneath them. Her full lips were void of lipstick, and she knew the blush in her cheeks was natural because Alivia's hands had smoothed away her makeup long ago when they'd been playing. She was still wearing her stained and wrinkled traveling clothes, only now her white blouse was missing two buttons where Alivia had tugged on it.

She glanced at her daughter once more before opening the bedroom door to head for the kitchen downstairs, thankful Marsha had installed a baby monitor in the room. If

Alivia woke, they'd be able to hear her. Of course, she'd probably let out a loud squeal when she realized she wasn't sleeping in her own bed. Leaving the door open, Shannon tiptoed out until she was a safe distance away.

The first thing Shannon noticed as she descended the stairs was how quiet the house seemed, before she remembered Marsha had one of her wicked migraines and had turned in early hoping to fight it off. Sheila would be tied up with her little ones in their rooms, which Shannon knew were at the far back of the house. After the grandchildren started coming along Marsha had sectioned off parts of the huge house into suites so everyone would have the privacy they needed. Adding bathrooms where needed. Shannon was the only one who had a bedroom that shared a connecting bath in the main part of the house, down the hall from Marsha.

Just as she stepped off the bottom step, she heard a noise at the front door. She hesitated, unsure what to do. *Who could be visiting at this hour?* Just when she expected to hear a knock, she heard something else instead. A key was being inserted into the lock, and right before her startled eyes, she watched the knob turn and the door open. Her gaze landed on a pair of army boots and slowly traveled upward, taking in the muscular body in military fatigues. Her mouth dropped open in shock. Ohmygod!

*Ryan had come home!*

He appeared just as startled as she was. Halting in the threshold as their eyes meet, his rugged expression carved in granite. Only his eyes, those piercing blue orbs, showed any sign of life, if you could call it that. Shannon had a feeling that Ryan Hayes didn't reveal any emotions that weren't hardened by years of combat. For a moment, she thought he wasn't going to speak and half expected him to back out and leave.

"Do you mind if I come in?" His deep voice was just as Shannon remembered. "It's damn cold out here."

For the first time she realized she was blocking his way. Swallowing, she stepped back enough for him to enter and close the door behind him. He dropped a large army bag on the floor by his feet, and shook off the snow onto the floor mat. All the while keeping his eyes trained on Shannon, as though she were the enemy. She took a nervous step further into the foyer, directly into the soft glow of the lamp that had been left on in the living room.

Ryan looked just like he did the last time she saw him. Big and tall, cloaked in that attitude of quiet strength he seemed to possess. His black hair cut in military fashion and suited his strong, square boned face. Though sporting a tiny scar over his left eyebrow and another, bigger one halfway down his left cheek he was still a handsome man. He eluded danger in practically every move he made, every glance.

His eyes dropped, running over Shannon rapidly, making her painfully aware of her disheveled state. She refused to reach up and smooth her hair back, knowing that it would do no good. The tiniest quirk on his full, sensuous mouth revealed he found her condition amusing. Quickly, his lips thinned almost menacingly when his gaze narrowed on her breasts. It was then that Shannon reached up and pulled her ruined blouse together where the buttons had come off.

She finally found her voice. "Welcome home, Ryan."

"Where is everyone?" His tone seemed hard, gruff, more commanding than inquiring. He slipped off his jacket and hung it on a peg on the back of the door, and then bent to slip off his boots.



“Mom went to bed with a headache. Sheila must be putting the kids to bed. The rest won’t get here until tomorrow night.” Shannon couldn’t help but notice the quick glance he shot her way when she called his mother mom. She watched quietly as he set his boots against the wall and stood, towering over her again.

“It’s just as well. I’m tired as hell and want to turn in early myself. But first, I want to find something to eat. I’m starved.” Closing the distance between them, Ryan halted when he reached Shannon. “Is that okay?”

Shannon felt a telltale heat rush up to her cheeks when she realized she was watching Ryan’s mouth form the words. *What the heck was wrong with her?* Jet lag, that’s what. She gave her head a little shake. She must be more tired than she thought. As his words became clear, it dawned on her that she was once again blocking his way. “Oh! I’m, ah sorry.” Instead of moving to let him pass, she turned and began to walk in the direction of the kitchen. “I’ll be glad to fix you something to eat.”

“Thanks, but that won’t be necessary.” He was right on her heels.

“That’s okay.” Shannon pushed the kitchen door open and flipped on the light switch on the wall next to it. “Sheila put a plate for me in the oven and if I know her, she left enough for two. I don’t mind sharing.” Not waiting for Ryan to acknowledge her, Shannon took the potholders from the counter by the stove, opened the oven door and retrieved the plate. “Just as I thought.” She turned and showed him the full plate of corn beef hash. But the expression on Ryan’s face almost made her drop it.

Sweat had broken out on his forehead and he’d turned pale, his lips were thin as a muscle twitched in his jaw that had hardened in an effort to hold back that he was in obvious pain. *Intense pain.* He was clutching the island counter in the middle of the kitchen as if it alone was holding him upright. “Ryan!” Shannon set the plate down and rushed to his side. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

He held a hand up in a silent warning for her to back off. She stopped immediately and waited for another sign from him, afraid he was having some kind of attack. After a few more seconds, he sucked in several deep breaths and released them slowly. It was clear by his expression that he hated showing her even that one small weakness. It was very clear that he didn’t intend talking about it. Shannon knew the moment the pain left his body when his expression relaxed.

“You said something about sharing your dinner?” He pulled out one of the barstools from around the island and sank down onto it.

Shannon hesitated for a moment, fighting the urge to question him. Something was terribly wrong, she just knew it, but she didn’t know Ryan well enough to feel she had the right to ask him anything personal. The look in his cold eyes warned her she’d be shot down before she managed to speak the first word. Forcing a smile she was far from feeling, she turned to get a second plate.

“I’ll thank you not to mention what just occurred to my family,” Ryan surprised her by saying while her back was turned to him.

“If that’s what you want,” Shannon responded, opening a cupboard door.

She glanced with surprise at where the plates were usually stacked. Glasses had replaced them. Marsha had obviously done some rearranging since the last time Shannon had been there. She opened up several other doors before finding the plates, stacked on the second shelf. Standing on tip toe she strained to reach them.

“Here, let me help you.”

“*Oh!*” Feeling Ryan brush up against her, Shannon spun around before she could think. Suddenly, it wasn’t her backside feeling his hardened muscles. Since he was in the process of reaching over her head for a plate, they were now flush against each other. Her breasts flattened against his hard chest, the lower halves of their bodies were shockingly aligned, and their thighs were touching. Mouths within inches of each other, their breath mingled. It was crazy but Shannon was sure she felt their hearts beating in rhythm. She began to tingle *everywhere* and held her breath.

Their gazes met and held and Ryan became motionless, his arm still above her head reaching for the plate. It struck Shannon that she was seeing the dangerous side of him, the soldier sizing up the situation and preparing for action. Only in this case, what would that be? She refused to let her mind go there.

When his gaze fell to her mouth she began to tremble, but not from fear. A sliver of excitement shot through her. Then as quick as it happened it was over and he was pulling a plate out and stepping away.

“Thank you,” she whispered, not sure what just happened or what she was feeling. It was insane, finding herself momentarily attracted to Ryan. He was her husband’s brother for crying out loud! A feeling of overwhelming guilt engulfed Shannon and she wondered that it might be best if she skipped dinner and went straight to bed.

“You have nothing to fear from me, Shannon.” Ryan said out of the blue, breaking into her thoughts. She unwillingly met his eyes again, wondering what prompted him to say such a thing. Had he felt something too?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m not afraid of you. Why would I be?” Finally able to move, she went to the island and picked up the plate with the corn beef hash on it. Without looking at Ryan, she scooped more than half onto the extra plate before setting it down before him. He surprised her by reaching out and grabbing her wrist before she could move away. Shannon reluctantly raised her gaze to his and that’s when she knew she had to get out of there. She wasn’t afraid of him, she was afraid of herself! “If you’ll excuse me, I better go check on Alivia.”

So many emotions were running through Shannon at that moment. Feelings she hadn’t felt in a while, and didn’t know how to handle. She was confused and frightened. Where had they come from?

Without waiting for his acknowledgement, she turned and fled the kitchen.

## Chapter Two

“Damn it to hell!” Ryan swore under his breath, after Shannon took off. The kitchen door was still swinging back and forth and he could hear her running up the stairs. He should have known she’d be there. After all, she was part of the family. And always would be now that she had Alivia.

Why the hell had he come home? He knew the answer to that the minute the thought materialized. *Because of the vow he’d made to David.* But that was only the half of it.

He dropped his fork, made a tight fist, anxious to hit someone. If flying shrapnel hadn’t wounded him, and he didn’t have a leg on the mend he probably wouldn’t have come back. He could have remained on base during the holidays. Only the thought of staying there alone hadn’t been very appealing. And maybe deep down he’d wanted to see Shannon again. Wanted to see if he still found her as attractive as he had the first time he’d laid his eyes on her.

It was worse than he remembered. The years he’d remained away had been for nothing, he could see that now. What he’d thought had diminished over time had sprung to life the moment he’d opened the front door and fell headfirst into her cat-like eyes. Every time he made the mistake of looking at her sensuous mouth all he wanted to do was grab her and kiss her breathless.

Maybe he was being punished for all the lives he’d taken. Slowly being driven insane by a woman he couldn’t have. Everyone had to pay penance for their sins but did it have to come in the way of his dead brother’s wife? The only thing he could hope for was that Shannon never realized how he felt. And the only way that could happen was to stay the hell away from her.

Releasing an angry breath he got to his feet, taking his plate to the fridge, his appetite gone now. He might as well get a shower and turn in, and pray for a night of relief. As he limped through the house, he flipped off the lights, and grabbed his duffel bag before heading up stairs. The heat from the shower would do his leg good.

His bedroom was the first one at the top of the stairs. It was only natural to open the door without knocking. He had no reason to believe he’d find anyone in there. But as the door swung open the first thing his gaze landed on was that his bed had been turned down, the playpen and then the huge suitcase on the floor next to it.

The second thing he noticed was humming coming from the bathroom. Before he could back out Shannon opened the bathroom door and stepped into the room, wearing nothing but a towel. It was obvious she hadn’t spotted him yet and reached up to release the clip holding her hair. And then her gaze fell on him, widening, and she froze. For a moment, neither moved or said a word.

Then her startled eyes took in the duffel bag in his hands. “Oh Ryan, I’m sorry. I didn’t know this was your room. Marsha just told me to make myself at home in one of the bedrooms upstairs so I grabbed the first one I came to.”

Ryan swallowed, trying to ignore the instant rush of desire settling in his loins. His eyes took in the abundance of flaming red hair about Shannon’s slender shoulders, wondering if it felt as soft and alive as it looked. Lord, he was never going to survive the next few weeks if this kept up. “Don’t worry about it. I can take the next bedroom.” He

started to swing around.

“We can move if you like. It’s no bother, really.”

Ryan glanced at his bed, visualizing her lying there, hair spread out around her. Only she wasn’t alone. He was there with her, they were naked, and making love. Twisting like wild animals among the sheets. *Damn!* The tingle in his cock warned him he was getting a hard on. How many times in the last five years had he turned hard just thinking about Shannon? How many times had he fantasized about sliding into her soft body and screwing the hell out of her?

Without warning, a burning spasm raced down his injured leg, paralyzing him with intense pain. He dropped his bag and reached for the doorjamb to keep from falling, and grit his teeth to hold back a groan. The doctors said in time the spasms would go away but in the meantime he was at their mercy, never knowing when one was going to hit. Praying that it was one he would be able to handle like a man.

“Ryan!”

He could hear the alarm in her sharp whisper. She rushed towards him as she’d done in the kitchen. This time she ignored him when he motioned her back. She pried him away from the doorjamb, draped his arm across the back of her naked shoulders and led him toward the bed to sit down. She thought she was helping. But as she started to lower him another stab of blinding pain jerked him out of control and he fell back with a savage groan, dragging Shannon down with him.

“Oh hell!” he said sharply, sucking in his breath as the pain became almost too much to bear. He tried to recall what the therapist had said. He closed his eyes and sucked in slow, deep breaths, releasing them slowly. It didn’t seem to help. He clenched his hands into the bed.

“Ryan?” Shannon whispered with obvious concern in her tone soft tone. “Tell me what’s wrong, what I can do to help. It’s obvious you’re in terrible pain.”

He was surprised and thankful she wasn’t angry for her current situation. The last thing he needed was to have a squirming, indignant woman on top of him. “Just don’t move,” he ground out between his teeth, terrified she’d jar his throbbing thigh. It felt as though someone was pushing a hot poker through his flesh.

She complied, barely breathing against him. After a few seconds, the spasm gradually let up and he was able to relax beneath her. Ryan quickly became aware of other things. Like what it finally felt like to have the woman he wanted sprawled on top of him, in nothing but a towel.

“Do you need something?” she asked innocently.

Yeah, but he’d bite off his tongue before telling her he wanted to fuck her until neither of them could walk. Ryan was aware of every inch of Shannon. The weight of her full curves, the sensuous scent the enveloped her freshly washed body, the softness of her skin where he gripped her upper arms. And God help him he could feel her sweet breath against his neck as it warmly caressed his flesh. He inhaled deeply, praying for strength. Everything about Shannon sharpened his arousal into a painful knot of desire.

He had to get her off him soon or she was going to find out what she was doing to him.

“Ryan?”

He opened his eyes. Was it his imagination or had her pupils dilated? “I’m sorry if I hurt you, Shannon.”

"You didn't, and I think you're the one who's suffering," she whispered with compassion. "What happened?"

There was no way he was going to continue lying there with Shannon splayed out on top of him and try to hold a normal conversation with her. It wasn't humanly possible. "Do you think we can have this conversation later?"

"Of course. How can I get off you without causing you further pain?"

"That's easy." Now that he was back in control of his full capabilities, Ryan took Shannon by the waist and easily lifted her, depositing her on the bed next to him. Before she had a chance to blink, he pulled himself into a sitting position. He found out real quick that he'd made a grave error when his gaze landed on the naked expanse of her shapely legs. He quickly turned his attention to his sleeping niece. "She's grown quite a bit since I saw her last."

Shannon's soft chuckle was close behind Ryan as she also moved into a sitting position. "Babies grow fast in a year," she agreed. The baby in question began to stir as though sensing there were two adults present who were discussing her.

Ryan jumped to his feet, his eyes studying Alivia for a moment as he moved quietly closer to the playpen. After a few seconds of squirming into a more comfortable position, the toddler stuck her thumb in her mouth and settled down once again. He reached for the baby blanket at her feet, drew it over the little rounded bottom sticking high in the air and noticed her hair was more brown than red. She had her father's hair.

"She has David's coloring," Shannon said, as if reading his mind. "His brown eyes."

Ryan hadn't heard her move. She'd apparently slipped from the bed to retrieve her robe and was tying the sash around her waist as she joined him. She made an enticing picture, with her soft hair all about her face and the green in her eyes emphasized by the deep color in her robe. He tried to pull his gaze away but found he couldn't, damning himself because of the promise David had extracted from him right before he died.

*Take care of Shannon and Alivia*, he'd begged, clutching Ryan by the shirtfront as he fought off death. *Please, Ryan. Promise me you'll look out for them.* He'd never forget the sound of desperation in his brother's voice or the look of complete peace that had spread across his face once Ryan had muttered what he'd wanted to hear. Only then did David fallen back to the wet, muddy ground and taken his last breath.

Almost a year had gone by since then and guilt had consumed Ryan for not coming back right away. But things weren't that simple when you were in the service. You couldn't just pack up and call it quits when you wanted. Getting hurt had forced him to make a choice to come home, an omen that you kept your promises or else.

It occurred to him that he'd been standing there staring at Shannon for a long time. Her expression was a curious mixture of patience and tenderness. She must think the wound he was suffering from was in the head.

"Goodnight, Shannon." He pivoted to leave, snatched up his duffel bag and exited the room before he did something stupid.

### Chapter Three

In spite of going to bed late, it was early the next morning when Shannon roused. Still dark out, the night-light she'd left on cast enough brightness to reveal that Alivia still slept soundly. A fact that surprised Shannon because she couldn't recall the last night she'd slept straight through.

She lay there a moment, going back over the events from the night before. Reliving the moments between her and Ryan and wondering at her unexpected reaction toward him. There was a time during their brief contact when she'd actually felt a flutter of desire in her belly from his closeness. His piercing eyes and reserved demeanor made him interesting.

Sighing, she turned on her side and hugged her pillow to her breast. She was just missing David, that's all. There was nothing about Ryan that reminded her of David or the fact they were even brothers. He was taller than David had been, with a rugged, muscular build that aided the die-hard Marine, which he'd been since fresh out of high school. If she remembered what David had told her once, Ryan wasn't the marrying kind or as family oriented as the rest of the Hayes.

*Which probably explained why he hadn't attended their wedding.*

Lying there thinking about him was crazy! Shannon rolled to the other side and pushed back the covers to get up. The clock said five and the house was quiet. But if she knew Marsha, she was already up and in the kitchen, busy cooking again. She slipped into her slippers and robe, checking on Alivia before deciding to go downstairs for coffee.

As she neared the kitchen, she could hear Marsha humming against the sound of rattling dishes and pots. A smile lit Shannon's face as she pushed the door open and crossed the threshold, just in time to see Marsha wipe her hands on her colorful apron.

The older woman started slightly before meeting Shannon's gaze and release an amused chuckle. "Good morning, dear. I didn't wake you did I?"

Shannon shook her head. "Not at all. You're up early." She went straight to the full coffeepot, reaching for one of the mugs on the mug rack next to it. "Headache gone?"

Marsha nodded. "Thank God. I have so much to get done. Sheila's going to make the pies for me later so I've got to get the bread made before she needs the oven."

Shannon took a sip of coffee and let out a satisfied groan. "Anything I can do to help?"

"Well, since you asked—" Marsha gave her a wink. "—you can be in charge of hanging the mistletoe this year. There's a bag in the mud room filled with fresh mistletoe. Try not to hang them where they were last year, everyone will be looking for them to be there again."

"I meant help here in the kitchen." Shannon smiled, taking a cautious sip of coffee.

"I know you did. If you want, you can do the green bean casserole. For..." She halted abruptly, her eyes riveted to something behind Shannon. "Oh my God!" she whispered shakily, tears instantly filling her brown eyes.

Shannon turned around to see what upset her so. It hadn't occurred to her to tell Marsha that her son had arrived the night before, but there he was, filling the doorway.

She'd never seen him in anything other than fatigues before. The gray slacks and black turtleneck suited his rugged looks, making him seem even more powerful than in his uniform. Unapproachable. *If* it hadn't been for the baby in his arms.

"Ryan!" Marsha cried, rushing to him, tears of joy running down her face. "I knew you'd come home again someday. When did you get here?" She wrapped her arms around him, getting a squeal from Alivia. "Good morning, little one." Marsha acknowledged as she pulled back, giving her granddaughter a gentle pinch on the cheek.

"Late last night," he answered, meeting Shannon's eyes over his mother's head. Alivia's little hands were running all over Ryan's face and Shannon had a feeling she was enthralled with the five o'clock shadow covering his lean jaw.

"Why didn't you wake me?" Marsha scolded, wiping her eyes with a corner of her apron. "How long are you here for? I hope you can stay for the holidays. Did you bring anyone with you?"

"I'm alone." Ryan responded to that one question. "Is that coffee I smell?"

Marsha turned and headed for the pot. "Yes. Let me get you a cup. Come in and sit down. We have a lot of catching up to do."

Shannon put her mug down and met Ryan halfway, reaching for her daughter with a smile on her face. "Let me guess, Alivia saw you walking by our room and let out a protest that you didn't stop and say hi."

"Something like that," he admitted. "I couldn't leave her." He made sure Alivia was secure in Shannon's arms before releasing her completely.

"Mama!"

"Hello, sweetheart," Shannon cooed, hugging Alivia tight before kissing her loudly on the lips. "Thank you for letting mommy sleep all night." Alivia's hand reached for Ryan's chin, rubbing it as she'd done earlier. Without giving thought to what she was doing Shannon mimicked Alivia by touching the dark stubble on his firm jaw. "She likes the feel of your whiskers," she explained, smoothing the back of her hand over them and finding she liked them too.

As Ryan's jaw tightened. Shannon glanced up, seeing the almost hostile look in his eyes and wondered at the reason for it. Was he in pain again? She wrapped her hand around Alivia's, pulled it away from his face, before turning to walk back to the island. Maybe she was imagining his unfriendly mood. He certainly hadn't seemed to mind Alivia touching him earlier.

"Here's your coffee, son." Marsha turned back from the pot and placed the cup next to Shannon's. "Sit down, sit down," she insisted, noticing he hadn't moved from the doorway. "Are you hungry? I can fix you some breakfast. Sheila and the kids..."

"Mom, stop fussing," Ryan admonished in a light tone, taking a place beside Shannon. "I didn't come home to have you worrying over me."

Marsha ignored him, clucking her tongue. "What's a mother for?" she laughed softly. "Now tell me, how long are you here for?"

Shannon watched the exchange between mother and son for a few moments, absentmindedly reaching for the banana Alivia's little hands were trying to grasp. She peeled it and broke off a manageable piece before giving it to her, unable to take her eyes off Ryan. For the most part his expression remained the same, tough and hard to read. She couldn't help wondering what it would take to crack that uncompromising shell he kept in place. But there was no denying having him home brightened Marsha's eyes and

gave her a glow she hadn't had before.

"At least until the New Year," he replied to her question before quickly changing the subject and reaching for his cup. "When are the others arriving?" Their eyes met for the briefest second before he looked back at his mother, who'd returned to the bowl she'd been adding ingredients to for the homemade bread she was making.

The first thing Shannon noticed was Ryan's woodsy scent. She broke off another piece of banana for Alivia.

"Tonight we'll have a full house," Marsha said happily, shooting them a satisfied smile. "Shannon, honey, do you want something to eat?"

"I'm fine, Mom. As soon as Alivia finishes this banana, I'm going to take her upstairs." She wrinkled her nose. "She doesn't smell so good." Realizing they were talking about her, Alivia began giggling and acting up. As Shannon turned her on her lap, Alivia offered Ryan a bite of her fruit. "She seems to have taken to you."

Ryan opened his mouth, taking the slightly smashed fruit from her little fingers. Suddenly noise from the other room indicated company was about to descend.

"Oh, oh. Here comes trouble," Marsha joked.

Trouble flew through the door in the way of Sheila's six-year-old twins, Sheila right on their heels scolding them for running. But when she glanced up and saw Ryan, her mouth dropped and she headed straight for her brother.

"Ryan! Oh my goodness! Mom didn't say you were coming home this year." Ryan slipped off his stool to give his sister a hug. "How have you been, stranger?"

"Good," he said, returning to his stool. The look he shot Shannon clearly warned her not to dispute that. She wondered what he was going to do if he suffered one of his attacks in front of them.

"He's surprised us all," Marsha joined in, emptying the bread dough onto a marble cutting board. Noticing Kelly and Dawn were crowded around Alivia with a little too much excitement, she added, "Girls, sit and your mother will fix you a bowl of cereal. Let Alivia finish her breakfast."

"They're okay, Mom. I really need to get Alivia upstairs for her bath and a change." Shannon slipped off the stool as she spoke, which one of the twins quickly took. "We'll be back down later."

Shannon tried not to look at Ryan but once their eyes met, it seemed impossible not to be affected by the sensual heat in his gaze. Maybe she was imagining it. But she wasn't *imagining* the flutter of awareness in her belly. *Goodness, what was wrong with her?* Alivia began to squirm in her arms, reminding Shannon what she was doing. Making an effort to paste a smile on her face, she quickly exited the kitchen.



## Chapter Four

With Alivia down for her mid-morning nap, Shannon decided it was a good time to hang the mistletoe. She went to the mudroom, spotted the bag immediately in the corner. Next to it was a small stepladder, scissors, a ball of string and a roll of tape. Marsha had thought of everything, which didn't surprise Shannon. The woman was the most organized person she'd ever met.

Humming softly, she tossed the scissors, tape and string into the bag, grabbed it and ladder before taking off for her first location. The year before Amber had been in charge of hanging the mistletoe. A chuckle escaped Shannon when she recalled how she'd overdone it. The rule in Marsha's house was that once a couple realized they were standing beneath it they had to announce they were going to kiss. About every ten minutes, someone was kissing!

Shannon couldn't help wondering what it would be like getting kissed by Ryan. He had a sexy mouth, even if most of the time he kept his lips pressed in a straight line. As though smiling was foreign to him, or he didn't know how. She supposed after ten years as a Marine he hadn't had much to *smile* about, recalling what David had told her once. Ryan liked action, liked to be in the thick of things, usually volunteering for the more dangerous missions.

She paused in the middle of the family room, which was the biggest single room in the house and where Shannon knew would be the center of all family activity soon. It was where they would watch the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Christmas parade tomorrow, where the tree would be set up and decorated. The Christmas Eve's family celebration and the New Year's Eve open house would also take place there.

She glanced around the room, wondering where she could hang the first sprig. Beneath the doorway was too obvious and expected. Everyone would be glancing up as they entered the room. But maybe they'd miss it right past the doorway. She smiled, looking up at the perfect spot. It wouldn't be noticeable until they were directly beneath it. She positioned the ladder, got what she needed and climbed. Uh-oh! It didn't occur to her that she'd be too short, even on the very top step, which wasn't safe. At five foot three, all of the adult Hayes' were inches taller than she was.

As she glanced around the room searching for alternate areas her gaze landed on Ryan. She hadn't noticed him enter the room. Stretched out on the sofa, he took up every square inch of it and then some. A smile spread across her face as her gaze roamed over the peaceful look on his while he was relaxed in sleep. She got the impression he didn't get the chance to relax much.

She could hear the murmured voices of the rest of the family from where they were in the kitchen but it didn't seem to bother him. She held her breath when he suddenly shifted slightly, reaching for the throw over the back of the couch as he sought a more comfortable position. Making a halfhearted attempt to spread it across his body, he settled down again with his arm thrown across his eyes.

He was obviously cold. Shannon climbed down the ladder and walked quietly to him with the intention of arranging the throw more fully over him. But just as she reached for the top of the cover beneath his chin, Ryan moved with the speed of a striking snake,

reaching out and grasping her wrist while pulling her closer. Shannon let out a startled gasp as she lost her balance and fell to her knees, her eyes rounding as they met his.

The look in Ryan's eyes frightened her because she knew at that moment that he was disoriented, forgetting where he was. "What are you doing?" His fierce tone matched his savage expression.

"I thought you were cold," Shannon whispered.

"*Never* sneak up on a sleeping soldier," he finally rasped, visibly relaxing.

"I'm sorry, Ryan. I was only going to arrange the throw over you a little better. I didn't mean to startle you."

"I could have hurt you."

"But you didn't."

"You were lucky this time. I've been a soldier a long time, Shannon. Used to sleeping under all kinds of conditions, and most of them dangerous. Over the years I've learned to remain halfway conscious in order to hear the approaching enemy."

"I'm not the enemy." Shannon said quietly, growing warmer as Ryan continued to hold her close. Their eyes simultaneously went to the hand around her wrist and his grip slackened. Then, as if in slow motion, his fingers relaxed.

"You're a thousand times more dangerous," he said so softly that Shannon was sure she imagined it.

Her lips parted on a gasp as his thumb caressed the pulse at her wrist. Did he know what he was doing? His expression was too hard to read. Ryan was good at guarding his emotions so that no one knew where they stood with him. She knew *that* much about him. The look in his eyes unnerved her, turning her warm inside.

"Are you okay?" She couldn't think of anything else to say. Her eyes went to his mouth and her heart skipped a beat. *Lord, did she want him to kiss her?* The thought terrified Shannon, and she guiltily met his eyes again, praying he didn't suspect her feelings.

"No," Ryan said simply. "I'm hurting like hell and probably a little high on the meds I took an hour ago. I was awake most of the night."

"Anything I can do to help?"

He closed his eyes, sucked in a deep breath and released it slowly. "It would help if you would just leave me alone. I need peace and quiet Shannon, down time from the action I see as a Marine every day."

Shannon could understand that, but that didn't make the tone of his words hurt any less. Before she exposed her reaction to them, she wordlessly turned and walked away from him.

\*

As the silence grew between them, Ryan unwillingly opened his eyes, afraid of what he'd see in Shannon's. He'd been purposely blunt, but that still hadn't prepared him to find her gone. He hadn't heard her move. A quick inspection of the room told him she'd vacated. Damn! *Well, that was what he wanted, wasn't it?*

He turned on his side and closed his eyes with the intention of going back to sleep, but after five minutes he released an angry breath and sat up, running his hands through his short hair. The thought that he'd hurt Shannon weighing heavily on his mind. He was taking out his frustrations on her. He didn't know what was worse, the pain in his leg or lying awake all night with a hard on, knowing Shannon was in the next room. Both were

a constant source of aggravation.

Ryan knew the sounds coming from the kitchen were his mother and sister. The fact that it was *too* quiet indicated Dawn and Kelly were probably outside playing in the snow. A hunch told him he wouldn't find Shannon there. He got to his feet, about to head upstairs to her room when a small sound reached him, coming from the connecting den. Brows furrowed, he turned and headed there.

He stopped in the threshold, his eyes taking in everything at once, the ladder beneath the hanging antler chandelier and the brown paper bag on the floor. Shannon was balancing herself on the top of the ladder while tying a piece of mistletoe to one of the antler points, stretching as far as she could on the tips of her toes. For a moment, Ryan was mesmerized by her womanly profile.

His eyes traveled from the top of her fiery hair twisted back and held by a decorative comb, down the slender column of her neck and shoulders to the full roundness of her breasts as they thrust against the soft sweater she was wearing. Full hips flared out from a slender waist, the faded jeans fitting snugly over her rounded ass. Ryan's gaze followed the line of her thighs and legs before traveling back up to her breasts.

He clenched his teeth and closed his eyes just for a second. It was too easy thinking about those legs wrapped around his waist while his hands and mouth caressed her breasts. His cock sliding in and out of her tight body, while his thumb stimulated her clit until she screamed. Damn, he had to stop that. But it was a fantasy that tormented him a lot as of late.

Shannon was visually arousing. He opened his eyes and watched her slight movements without an ounce of remorse before allowing his gaze to shift to her face. The glistening tear tracks lining her rosy cheeks were sobering. They were there because of him. As she finished tying the string a sob escaped her and then she wiped at her eyes, he was certain she swore beneath her breath.

His movement into the room caught her attention and Ryan didn't stop until he was standing directly beneath the ladder, ready to catch her if she should fall. Their gazes met and held. Shannon made an obvious attempt at a smile. "Ryan, I didn't know you were there. I—" she paused, drawing in a breath. "I'm in charge of the mistletoe this year." Another pause before, "I'm sorry if I bothered you earlier."

*If she only knew to what extent she bothered him.* "Shannon, I'm the one who's sorry. That was an incredibly mean thing I said to you."

"That's okay," she insisted, her eyes still bright. "We don't know each other and I, ah, know you're not feeling well."

That had nothing to do with why he'd said what he had but Ryan couldn't seem to tell her the truth. "I'm not used to being around people," he began, holding her gaze. "*Normal* people anyway," he clarified.

His comment drew a natural smile from Shannon. "Soldiers aren't normal?" she teased in a shaky voice.

Digesting her question, he replied, "Maybe in the beginning we are, but the longer you're in the Marines the harder you become." He'd seen enough of his buddies die of horrible deaths protecting their country. After a while, you condition yourself not to feel because otherwise it would consume you.

"I believe that, Ryan," Shannon surprised him by saying. "The last time David came home I'd noticed some subtle changes in him too."

The mention of David's name brought back the memory of that fateful morning when he'd lost his life. Except for his mother, no one knew Ryan had been with him, had held him in his arms until he closed his eyes never to open them again. He hadn't been able to share it with anyone else because of the guilt eating him up inside. He'd survived, unable to protect his younger, less experienced brother.

It had been a top-secret mission but Ryan knew that wasn't the reason he'd remained quiet. He didn't want to face the questions he knew would come his way. And he sure as hell didn't want to see the accusation in Shannon's eyes, even if he could justify the reason for it. She was the one with a daughter who was going to grow up fatherless.

"What is it?"

Her soft voice pulled him back to the present and reminded him that she was still atop the ladder. "You obviously didn't read the instructions on the side of the ladder."

"I know I'm not supposed to be up here, but in case you haven't noticed, I'm kind of short. I don't think Mom would have given me this very important job if she'd realized that."

There was a teasing quality in her tone, and Ryan found himself smiling. "Are you done?"

"With this one I..." Whatever she had been about to say was cut short when Ryan put his hands on her waist and easily pulled her down. Gasping, her hands automatically went to his shoulders until her feet were planted firmly on the ground. "Thank you," she said shyly, lowering her eyes.

Her subtle perfume enveloped Ryan almost immediately and his hands tightened, pulling her body closer. His breathing accelerated, drawing her gaze up to his. She parted her lips as though in invitation. He wanted to feel the fullness of her breasts against his chest, rub his aching shaft against her belly. His hands began to slide down. Ryan had every intention of cupping her sweet ass to do just that.

"There you are, son. Helping Shannon hang the mistletoe? We just took the first loaf of bread out of the oven and I remembered how you liked the end while it was still warm so I buttered you a piece." Marsha waltzed into the room, a radiant smile on her flushed face, carrying a plate with a slice of bread on it. "Would you like a piece too, dear?" She asked Shannon, glancing at her. His mother was totally oblivious to their intimate moment.

Ryan let Shannon step away. "No thanks, Mom. I had a hard time getting into these jeans this morning. It smells good though." She closed the short ladder and grabbed up the bag. "I think I better check on Alivia before hanging anymore mistletoe."

Ryan watched her leave the room before meeting his mother's eyes, his heart sinking by what he saw in their kind depths. Even after all these years, she could still read him like a book. "Don't—"

"What are you going to do about this, Ryan?"

"About what? I don't know what you're talking about." He swung around because he knew his mother would be able to see the lie in his eyes.

"Ryan, I know how you feel. I've known it since the time I glanced up from your father's gravesite and saw the way you were looking at Shannon."

"Mother," he said, his tone guarded.

She ignored him. "But I knew there was nothing to worry about because you loved your brother. You would never do anything to hurt him. Now that he's gone—"

“Don’t say it,” Ryan growled, clenching his teeth so hard his jaw hurt. “It does matter. She’s David’s widow and in my eyes she will always be his wife.”

He could tell his mother didn’t like what he said because she just stared at him, speechless for a moment. “That’s nonsense, Ryan, and you know it. Shannon’s a young, healthy woman. Do you think she’s going to go through the rest of her life without someone to share it with? In time, she’ll meet someone who’ll replace David. He’d want her to go on.”

“Then she’ll meet someone else,” Ryan retorted firmly, squaring his jaw. “And this conversation’s over.” He swung back to face her almost angrily.

She opened her mouth, and then closed it again setting the plate on the desktop. A sad sigh escaped her as she walked quietly to the door, but upon reaching it, she glanced back. “You deserve the same happiness your brothers and sisters have found, Ryan.”

Ryan watched his mother turn and leave, knowing life was more complicated than that. For him anyway. *The Marines were his life.* That’s all he needed.

## Chapter Five

As far as Marsha Hayes was concerned the holiday season didn't begin until she had her whole family around her, filling the big house with the noise of laughter and chatter of conversation as they caught up with the year's events.

Shannon knew the true meaning of happiness and fulfillment when she looked at Marsha's radiant expression. Her ageless eyes filled with sparkling life and contentment as she sat back watching her loved ones interact.

They were all there. Arriving almost at the same time as if it had been planned. For an hour, it seemed the front door had opened every few minutes to admit new smiling faces and happy, noisy children. Now gathered in the family room, every available chair and sofa was occupied while some relaxed on the floor. All excited that Ryan had made it home, and talking at once. It was impossible to follow any one conversation unless you were part of it.

Shannon met Marsha's eyes and they exchanged smiles. Then Marsha patted the space next to her for Shannon to join her. She cast a glance at Alivia to make sure she was okay in the circle of cousins surrounding her before vacating her chair, knowing she would lose it. No sooner had she stood when Donna, Amber's oldest, jumped into it.

Marsha took Shannon by the arm and pulled her down, making room for her. "Isn't this nice?" she said with quiet excitement in her voice. "This is when I'm happiest, Shannon. When I have my family around me."

"Yes, I enjoy this time of year too," Shannon admitted, hoping it would be like that for her someday too.

She and David had planned to have more children. They'd talked about having three. Not that she was looking, but she supposed someday she'd meet someone else and re-marry. She didn't want Alivia growing up without a father and siblings. Shannon had grown up without anyone. Though they'd been kind at the orphanage, it hadn't replaced a real family.

Shannon supposed the other orphans had been her family. However, every time one of them had been adopted it had been like having a little piece of her heart torn out. She'd cried for weeks, missing them terribly. After a while, she'd learned not to get too close to anyone. It didn't hurt as much when they went away.

Her eyes moved about the room, always going back to Ryan. Instincts told her something had been about to happen between them in the den earlier that afternoon, before Marsha interrupted. Thinking about the possibilities made her quiver inside and turn warm.

"We're kissing!" Someone called out. All eyes followed the direction of the voice to watch Richard and Sandi kiss passionately beneath the mistletoe hanging beneath the rounded archway leading to the den. It was a passionate kiss and they were both slightly breathless when they pulled apart.

"Good thing number four is already on the way!" Someone joked loudly.

Shannon's gaze returned to Ryan as everyone laughed. Her blood turning warm when she realized he was watching her. However, he glanced away so fast that she must have imagined it. Feeling hurt, she sought out her daughter, who was squealing with

delight over the attention of her cousins. Soon she would be getting tired.

"Anyone want a cup of cider while I'm at the punch bowl?" Amber's husband Tom asked, ladling some into a paper cup.

"Cider! I could use something stronger," Richard joked, resting on the arm of the chair his pregnant wife was sitting.

Tom shot him a stern look beneath his shaggy brown eyebrows. "I was talking to the children," he clarified, handing a cup to Donna. As if a whistle had been blown, the kids jumped up and rushed to the table.

Sheila laughed. "That *could* mean some of the adults in this room."

"There's wine in the cabinet, beer in the fridge. Anything stronger than that and you'll have to go into town and get it," Marsha added.

"That's an idea! Why don't some of us ride into town?" Mark called out. Though he never insinuated he didn't enjoy spending time with the family, Shannon got the impression that country living was a little too tame for the big city doctor. "I could use a shot of bourbon and a game of pool, anyone interested?"

"I'm game," Tom piped up.

"Me too," said Richard. "Although I'll pass on the whiskey." He shot a glance to his mother. "Do you mind if we desert you for a little while, Mom?"

"Of course not, the girls and I have a lot of catching up to do. And the kids will be going to bed shortly." She glanced at Ryan, who seemed content to remain quiet in the background. "What about you? Or are you going to stay here and protect us women folk?" she teased.

His eyes shot to Shannon and away again so quickly that if anyone blinked they'd have missed it. "I could use a shot of whiskey," he admitted, not committing himself to go though.

"Okay then. Let's all meet at the front door in ten," Mark said, heading out of the room with excitement.

Shannon glanced at the clock on the mantle over the stone fireplace. It was time to bathe and put Alivia to bed. In addition, she could take a long hot bubble bath, something she didn't seem to have time for much these days.

"Wait a minute you guys," Richard's wife, Sandi said, rising slowly to her feet. "What about us ladies? What if we want something a little stronger than wine or beer? How come we get left behind?"

"But you can't drink in your condition," Richard retorted after getting over his initial surprise.

Sandi was a pretty lady, tall and thin but for the rounded belly beneath her maternity top. She had a head of strawberry blonde hair and the prettiest blue eyes Shannon had ever seen. Her movie star complexion wasn't from makeup; she was one of the lucky ones coming by it naturally. "I can still climb up on a bar stool or play pool," she insisted.

"Yeah, what about us?" Sheila chimed in, raising a brow at her husband.

Shannon's eyes went to Mark, smiling when she saw the comical expression flash across his face. He glanced at the other men in the room as though looking for support. "But, ah, what about the children?"

"They have *two* parents," Amber joined in, crossing her arms. "You guys don't think anything of just taking off somewhere for a little fun and assuming we don't mind being left behind."

“But Mom wants to visit with you girls,” Richard reminded them. “Girl talk and all that stuff, right, Mom?”

Suddenly all eyes were on Marsha, who was clearly amused over the exchange between her children and their spouses. Shannon knew Sheila, Amber and Sandi well enough to know they were teasing their husbands about going with them into town. So she felt safe in saying, “Come to think of it, pool sounds like fun. I’ve been cooped up with Alivia for so long that I’ve forgotten how to interact with adults.”

“That settles it then—”

“Wait a minute, ladies,” Mark cut in, interrupting his wife. “Seems to me we go through this every Thanksgiving Eve.”

He was right. Shannon’s gaze went to Ryan, realizing he didn’t know what he was seeing was a playful family tradition. In the end the men would go, leaving their wives to visit with Marsha and get the children off to bed. By the time they returned home the house would be dark and quiet. Therefore, it came as a big surprise to everyone when Marsha finally broke her silence.

“You know what I think? I think the women have a point. They deserve to go out and have a good time occasionally too. When’s the last time any of you went out without the kids?”

“There’s no way we’re leaving you alone with ten kids,” Richard said firmly.

Marsha crossed her arms and raised a brow, clearly not liking what her eldest son said. “You think I can’t handle ten little angels?” she asked in a voice that spoke volumes. “And Donna and Laura are old enough to help me this year.” Her gaze went to her two oldest grandchildren. “Aren’t you girls?” They nodded simultaneously, their expressions suddenly eager over the possibility of doing something so grown up and important.

“And I’ll be here to help,” Shannon added.

“No you won’t, dear, you’re going too.”

“But—”

“No buts. Look at Alivia, she’ll be asleep in a few minutes anyway.”

Shannon glanced at her daughter, surprised to see she’d pulled a pillow off the sofa and was lying on the floor watching them with droopy eyes. “But...”

“She’ll be fine without you for a few hours,” Marsha insisted in response to the worry in Shannon’s tone. “Ryan, run upstairs and get the playpen and bring it down. We’ll keep Alivia down here with us until you all come home.”

“But—”

“Goodness dear, you really must go and spend time with someone your own age if this is the extent of your vocabulary,” Marsha teased.

Everyone laughed and Shannon watched as Ryan left the room to do his mother’s bidding.

“You might as well give in, Shannon. Mom always gets her way,” Amber said, heading for the doorway.

“We’ll get pillows and blankets and lay on the floor and I’ll put in a Christmas tape DVD. We’ll have a good time.”

Shannon returned Marsha’s smile, watching as everyone began leaving the room to go get ready. The kids had gathered around the punch table and were helping themselves to the cookies and candy Marsha had set out earlier. “I better run up and get Alivia’s



pajamas and blanket then.”

Shannon had no doubts that Marsha could handle her grandchildren, but that wasn't why she had qualms about going out. Ryan's face swam before her eyes as she dashed up the stairs as fast as she could, wondering if she was inviting trouble by spending time with him in a non-family situation. Everyone else had a partner, leaving her and Ryan to pair up if the need arose.

She rounded the top of the stairs and entered her room, coming to a dead halt upon seeing Ryan. She'd forgotten Marsha had sent him up there for Alivia's playpen. He halted too upon seeing her, and as their eyes met and held, a smile spread across Shannon's face at the picture he presented with Alivia's blanket draped across his shoulder and her teddy bear tucked beneath his arm. Dangling from his big hand was the folded playpen.

“What's wrong?” He wanted to know, his expression as hard and unreadable as it always seemed.

“Nothing,” Shannon responded, slightly taken back.

“You're smiling,” he pointed out suspiciously.

Shrugging, she quipped, “That is what people usually do when something amuses them.”

His eyebrows raised a fraction higher. “I amuse you?”

Shannon bit the inside of her lip to keep from smiling wider. “Well, ah, not exactly. However, it is amusing to see a big strong Marine carrying an armload of baby things. You look very, ah, domesticated right now.”

“Oh yeah?”

Shannon nodded, slightly mesmerized over the faint flicker in his gaze that indicated his amusement. “Don't you ever picture yourself with a family someday, Ryan?”

As fast as the twinkle appeared, it disappeared. “No.” He moved closer and just like that, Shannon knew their conversation was over. He was going to leave.

She didn't know why but the finality in which he spoke saddened her. She knew she couldn't let him go without asking, “Why, Ryan?” He halted close enough for her to smell the light scent of his after-shave. Something masculine as it was seductive. “Don't you want to be happy?”

A fierce frown changed his handsome face. “What makes you think I'm not happy?” he asked in a harsh tone.

Shannon held his furious gaze, recognizing that she was seeing the hardened Marine Ryan had become. Unaware what she was doing, she reached up and touched Ryan's face, watching the flare of awareness enlarge the dark pupils in his eyes.

“Because I've noticed you never smile. It's like you've forgotten how, or are afraid to.”

“Maybe I haven't had much to smile about the last few years,” he said, pulling back until Shannon had no choice but to drop her hand. “Don't try to analyze why I am the way I am, Shannon. And don't pity me. I live the way I want to live. I'll see you downstairs with the others.”

Shannon stepped aside so he could leave. His meaning couldn't be any more apparent. And his reaction to her kindness and caring couldn't be any clearer either. He didn't have to say the words. It was obvious he wanted her to leave him alone. Could she do that?

She didn't think so.

## Chapter Six

“Okay now, how are we going to do this?” Shannon heard Richard say as she made her way back downstairs. It looked like she was the last one to join the group. “I can only take seven in the suburban.”

“That leaves one of us to drive into town alone, surely we can squeeze in one more,” Sandi said while slipping into her coat.

“You forget, dear wife of mine, but two of you are quite big with child,” he teased.

“Town isn’t that far, one of us can sit on someone’s lap.” Sheila said, giving her husband a playful wink.

“Don’t look at me, darling, I don’t want any more kids.”

“Well, you’re not much of a doctor then if you think sitting on someone’s lap can get you pregnant.”

Everyone was laughing by the time Shannon stepped off the bottom step. As far as she could tell, Ryan was the only one not present. Maybe he’d changed his mind. She scooted into the great room with the intention of putting Alivia’s pajamas on, coming to a halt when she noticed her daughter sound asleep in her playpen.

“If she wakes I’ll put her jammies on,” Marsha told her from her chair, two of her younger grandchildren sitting on her lap, their eyes glued to the TV. “She’ll be okay. You go and have a good time.”

Shannon nodded with a smile, kissing her fingertips and placing it on Alivia’s soft cheek. “Are you sure you don’t want me to stay behind to help?”

Marsha chuckled. “Goodness no. Most of them will be asleep before the movie ends.”

Shannon’s gaze ran over the children who had made themselves comfortable on the floor with mounds of blankets and pillows. The sight brought a nostalgic smile to her face, recalling a memory of one Christmas Eve in the orphanage when the rules had been broken and they’d been allowed to gather in front of the TV like regular children.

“We’ve come to an understanding...” Both Shannon and Marsha turned toward the doorway and motioned at Mark to hold his voice down. He took one look at the playpen and made an apologetic face before continuing quietly. “Since we can’t agree on who’s doubling up we’re drawing toothpicks. Short one loses.”

He walked toward Shannon, his hand extended, clearly holding two wooden toothpicks. “You’re the last one to pick, sister dear.”

Shannon stared at his hand warily. “And who’s the unlucky lap if I lose?” she questioned, glancing past Mark to the others crowded into the threshold to watch.

“Ryan,” Amber answered, grinning mischievously. “You can’t sit on our husband’s laps and you can’t expect any of us to sit on his.” She shrugged. “Just makes sense.”

Oh, Lord. Shannon crossed her fingers, closing her eyes before making her selection. There was no way she could sit on Ryan’s lap with his injury. She didn’t know what it was but suspected it was one of his legs. Maybe she wouldn’t lose. When she opened her eyes again they landed on Ryan, who’d joined the others by the door.

“What’s going on?” he questioned, looking handsome in a bomber style jacket of soft worn leather.

“In order for us to all go together we drew toothpicks to see who doubles up and Shannon lost.” Sheila wrapped a scarf around her neck. “And so did you, brother, because it’s your lap she’ll be sitting on.”

“But I can’t...”

Ryan’s gaze flew back to Shannon with a silent warning in them, and the barest movement of his head told her not to say anymore. She knew he didn’t want anyone to know about his injury and respected his wishes. It was obvious he didn’t want them worrying about him and he hadn’t come home to be mothered. He was too tough for that. And in spite of his large family, a loner.

Suddenly it seemed like all eyes were on her, quietly waiting. “You were going to say?” Amber encouraged.

“Well, I ah, put on some extra weight lately.” The excuse sounded lame even to her. She offered a smile she was far from feeling, casting a glance back at Alivia, maybe it wasn’t too late to back out.

Snickers filled the air. “You’re still no bigger than a minute,” Amber replied. She was right. Shannon was the smallest one in the group. “And Ryan’s a big tough man. If he can’t put up with an additional hundred pounds on his lap for the thirty minutes into town he has no business being in the Marines.”

Shannon wondered what was going through Ryan’s mind. His expression gave nothing away as usual. His jaw was set, eyes as hard as stone. Was he wondering how they were going to pull this off without giving his condition away?

“Riding without a seatbelt on these roads is dangerous as hell,” he finally said, pulling his gaze away from her to include everyone. “Shannon and anyone else who wants can ride with me in my jeep.” His words were clipped and final and as hard as the man himself.

“Ryan’s right. The road into town is dark and slick with ice.” Marsha spoke up from her chair. “There have already been several accidents this year, no need taking unnecessary chances.”

“Well then, that settles it. I’ll get the truck and meet the rest of you out front.” Richard’s voice cut into the silence as he turned and opened the door.

In the end, Shannon was the only one who climbed into Ryan’s black jeep. She was secretly glad because it would give them a chance to become better acquainted. She was curious as to what kind of man, who obviously came from a loving family, chose to distance himself like he did. Making a choice in life that kept him away from home for long lengths of time.

David had kept in touch and come home as often as he could. Would he have become the hardened, unfeeling Marine as time went on? Shannon didn’t want to think so. She liked to think that having her and Alivia to come back to had kept him focused on why life was worth living. Besides, he hadn’t intended to make it a career as Ryan had.

She cast a glance at Ryan’s dark silhouette. He was focused intently on the road, both hands clenched on the steering wheel as though it was a lifeline he was afraid to give up. So far, they hadn’t said two words since leaving the farmhouse. How was she going to find out what made him tick if they didn’t talk? *How was she going to help him?*

Gnawing silently on her bottom lip she looked out the window. Since they were further up the road, the taillights of Richard’s suburban were barely visible. Marsha was right, it was pitch black and the slick pavement was a winding snake through the

countryside. Snow had come early this year, leaving small snow banks along the shoulder where it had been plowed. She shivered, pulling the collar of her coat tighter around her.

Without speaking, Ryan leaned forward to adjust the heat, attuned to her needs even if he pretended he was alone. She suddenly couldn't take the silence any longer and this was the perfect opportunity to break the ice. "Thank you." Her voice sounded loud in the silence of the truck. He acknowledged her with a brief glance and for a moment, Shannon was able to make out the glitter of his eyes before he turned his attention back to the road.

"You don't talk much," she breathed after a while, seeing the lights of town looming ahead of them.

A heavy sigh followed her comment. "What do you want me to say, Shannon? If you don't like the quiet I'll be glad to turn on the radio. Frankly, I'm enjoying a little peace right now. It's a rare commodity from what I'm used to."

He was talking about war. "I can imagine how it must be for you."

He pounced on Shannon's statement with the ferocity of a hardened soldier who had the facts and knew firsthand what he was talking about. "Really? Can you imagine waking to the sound of random gunfire throughout the night? Or the sound of bombing twenty-four hours on end wondering when you'll be next? Can you imagine the screams and cries of innocent people caught in the middle of war, and the not so innocent? The children—"

She couldn't bear to hear him talk about the children and interrupted him quickly. "David wrote about some of the hardships in his letters home. The inhumanity broke his heart."

"We all start out that way, Shannon," he said in a flat tone. "Thinking we can make a difference. That we're fighting for a good cause. But no matter what we do it just doesn't seem to be enough. There's always someone out there who's bigger and stronger to beat you down."

"Then what happens?" She asked, before realizing she probably didn't want to know.

She sensed Ryan looking at her. "Me, that's what happens. It was either get out, get killed, or become bigger and stronger. That's all I know."

Shannon didn't want to believe him. Yet he sounded so cold, so final. As though he accepted his fate and could care less what else might be out there for him. A better way of life, one that was happier. "Is that why you don't come home very often?" She sensed his hesitation, wondering at the cause of it. "Ryan?"

"We're here." He pulled into the parking lot at Barney's Bar and parked in the first available spot. Shannon looked around the unlit parking lot until her gaze landed on where Richard had parked. All four doors were open as everyone spilled out onto the slushy ground.

She turned back to him as he switched the key in the ignition cutting the engine. With the lights off, it seemed darker than ever, and uncomfortably intimate. She was vaguely aware of voices as the others headed in their direction.

She unbuckled her seatbelt. "Are you going to answer me?" She didn't know why but his answer was important to her.

"It's not important." He reached across her lap and opened the door and for a moment, their faces were so close, Shannon could feel his warm breath upon her cheek. She held hers, tried to ignore the flutter in her belly. "Tell the others I'll be in shortly."

Shannon knew she was being dismissed and there was nothing she could do about it.

She couldn't make Ryan talk if he didn't want to. And it was obvious he didn't like her and couldn't wait to get rid of her. She stepped into the cold, closing the door with the distinct impression she was closing the door to something much more important than Ryan's jeep.

\*

Ryan leaned back against the seat and watched Shannon and the others turn toward the bar door. The subtle fragrance of her perfume lingered in the air, stimulating his thoughts and senses. It made him hungry for something he hadn't had in a long while or even thought about. He knew he'd made a big mistake offering to drive when no one else had volunteered to come with them. If he'd thought for a moment he was going to be stuck in the quiet confines of his warm jeep with only her for company he would have pleaded a headache and gone to bed.

His mouth twisted at his cowardly solution. *A big strong Marine going to bed early with a headache?* That would have been a first, and his family would have laughed him out of the house. He couldn't recall the last time he'd given into *any* kind of weakness, where it controlled his decisions or actions. It had only taken a month as a prisoner of war to cure him of many things. But it hadn't cured him from wanting Shannon.

In fact, she was the one thing during those weeks of abuse and torture that had kept him going. Being able to close his eyes anytime he wanted and see her beautiful face had diminished the pain until it was bearable. The thought of never seeing her again, even as David's wife, had given him strength and stamina to endure.

How many times during those days had he fantasized about being with her? Holding her naked body against his, claiming her? How many times had he begged God to forgive him for coveting what could never belong to him? He thought about David, thankful he'd never known his betrayal.

A loud noise reached him on some level, he looked toward the door, watching until Shannon and his family disappeared inside the bar. The door was open long enough for him to see the place was packed and jumping, the laughter and music playing inside loud enough to reach him.

He shuddered realizing the interior of the truck was turning cold and opened the door to get out. Gravel crunched beneath his boots as he made his way to the door, opening it with a feeling of dread. Wondering how long before Shannon tried to draw him into another conversation. He knew she was just trying to be nice to him, but nice wasn't what he wanted from her.

His eyes fell on her as soon as he entered the place. She was sitting on a barstool amongst his sisters and sister in laws, deep in conversation with them. The bartender placed a glass of wine before her and she smiled, thanking him as she picked it up and brought it to her lips.

Good. Maybe they'd keep her busy and he could avoid her the rest of the evening. His gaze roamed around the room until he found the men at the pool table, already setting up for a round. He stepped in that direction when he was suddenly cut off.

"Well, hello handsome. You must be new around here."

The woman would have been passably pretty if it wasn't for the heavy makeup she was wearing, some of it smudged beneath her eyes. "No, ma'am. I've lived here all my life. Now if you'll excuse me." He tried to step around her.

"What's your hurry?" she purred, taking a sip of the drink in her hand, something

strong by the smell of it. “Why don’t you dance with me?”

Ryan tried to hold on to his temper. He didn’t like aggressive women, especially when they were drunk. And there was nothing about the one standing in front of him that interested him. “As tempting as that is, ma’am, I’m here with friends.” Again he moved, only to have her block his way.

She actually reached out and ran her hand down his arm. “Come on handsome- ”

“Hey! Are you messing with my woman?”

Ryan’s gaze homed in on the owner of the voice, a man zipping up his pants as he exited the men’s room. Without offering a response, he turned back to the woman, who didn’t make any attempt to cover the smile on her face. He knew immediately there was going to be trouble. The attention she was showing him had been a deliberate ploy to make her boyfriend jealous, that was all.

Suddenly the place grew quiet, except for the music playing in the jukebox. Ryan took a deep breath and slowly shook his head. “I don’t want any trouble,” he said, directing his response to the man, who was around his age.

“You should have thought of that before messing with my woman.” The guy stumbled slightly, releasing a loud burp before running his hands through his overlong hair.

“Look Stan, she walked up to him,” someone said from a table nearby. “He was minding his own business.”

“If there’s going to be any trouble, take it outside,” the bartender warned.

Ryan met Shannon’s eyes. She looked scared and slightly pale, her lips parted. Was she worried for him or over the possibility of a fight in general? Making a decision to ignore the whole thing he stepped around the woman with the intention of joining the others at the pool table. He took no more than a step when he was grabbed from behind and pulled around.

He should have seen it coming, angry with himself for underestimating the guy as soon as he realized he wasn’t too drunk to throw a punch. Angry because he let the fear in Shannon’s eyes cloud his instincts. He knew the guy was going to try something stupid and had turned his back on him anyway. Something he’d learned long ago never to do with an antagonist.

Someone screamed, the bartender issued a warning, the woman jumped out of the way, as a fist hit Ryan smack in the mouth. His head snapped back with the force, he felt his lip split against his teeth and his mouth fill with blood. Then anger rushed to the surface as his military training kicked in, and the instinct to survive. He didn’t think, just reacted, as he was taught to do.

He curled his hand in the front of Stan’s beer-stained shirt, doubled his fist and pulled his arm back before hitting the man square in the nose, knocking him to the floor. People scrambled to get out of the way, women screamed. The woman at the root of the trouble cried out and dropped down to where Stan lay, trying to staunch the flow of blood pouring from his broken nose with a used napkin.

“Someone call the police!” she cried, shooting Ryan a look of hostility. “Look what you’ve done!” she wailed, glaring up at him. Stan was out like a light.

“I warn you, Missy, if we call the police it will be you and Stan being carted off for jail,” the bartender interjected gruffly, his bushy brows drawn together with irritation. “I’m tired of you coming in here every weekend and stirring up trouble. Pete, Tom, help

her get Stan out to their truck.”

“But look at him...” she started to insist.

“It’s your own damn fault,” he barked, waving her off. “I don’t want to see either of you back here tonight.”

As though a light switch had been switched off it was over. Everyone went back to what they’d been doing before as if nothing had happened. Ryan reached up and explored his cut lip; gesturing to his siblings, he was okay. They’d long ago stopped running to his defense after realizing he could take care of himself, knowing too if he’d been in serious trouble they’d have been there in a heartbeat.

“Ryan, wait a minute, you’re hurt.”

He hadn’t seen Shannon leave her stool yet there she was, intercepting him on his way to the bathroom. He pulled up short and nearly keeled over backwards to escape the damp cloth she was bringing toward his face. But she wouldn’t be denied and the next thing Ryan knew she’d backed him into a dark corner. His heart slammed in his chest as she closed in.

He felt the cool cloth against his mouth, ignoring how good it felt against his stinging lip. But it was her tenderness that unnerved him the most and for a moment he didn’t know how to react. It had been twenty years since anyone, including his own mother, had touched him with such tenderness and care. His gaze shot around the room, relief flooding him when it didn’t appear anyone was paying them undo attention. The girls at the bar were chattering like magpies again and the men were joking at the pool table as Tom moved into position to hit the ball.

He gulped nervously, his gaze met Shannon’s. “What are you doing?” It didn’t help that he could tell she was holding back a smile.

“You’re bleeding,” she said, stating the obvious. “I thought...”

Ryan’s hand encircled her slender wrist, pulling her away. Their eyes clashed in the darkness and awareness of her slammed through him like a freight train out of control. If he thought he could get away with it he’d pull her into the bathroom with him and fuck her standing up against the vanity. He sucked in a deep breath, fighting the arousal flooding his loins. *Shit!* He couldn’t take much more of this. He wanted her too damn bad.

“Ryan?” Her voice was soft and uncertain, arousing him further.

Without words, he slowly uncurled his hand, setting her free and fled into the men’s room.



## Chapter Seven

Shannon declined a second glass of wine when the bartender motioned to her if she'd like more, half listening to the discussion between Amber and Sheila about the piano babies Amber had picked up at an estate sale for her shop the week before. Sheila had recently taken to collecting them, and they were working out a deal for Amber to ship them out to California. Sandi was sipping a virgin mudslide and listening intently, absentmindedly running her hand over her belly.

None of that mattered to Shannon at the moment. She was looking in the mirrored wall behind the bartender, her gaze glued to what was going on behind her at the pool table. To be precise she was watching Ryan and trying not to be obvious about it. She couldn't seem to pull her gaze from his powerful physique as he sat on a stool against the wall with a beer dangling from his hand, quietly observing the others in the room.

He wasn't playing pool and she couldn't help wonder why he was so content to remain aloof from everyone else. Hadn't he come there to relax and converse with a family he hadn't seen in years? It saddened her to think he actually enjoyed being alone. He seemed to remain on guard at all times. Restlessness surrounded him, as though he couldn't wait to leave.

As he brought the beer to his mouth, their gaze met in the mirror and for a second his movements faltered. Shannon quickly glanced down, praying he didn't realize she'd been staring at him. She counted to ten before looking up again, feeling her cheeks fill with heat and thankful the dimness of the room disguised her reaction. Ryan hadn't glanced away at all. She picked up her glass before realizing it was empty. Lord, why did he make her feel so nervous?

Truthfully, she knew the answer. She was attracted to him. In spite of acknowledging that surprising fact, Shannon offered him a friendly smile. He was, after all, her brother-in-law. His expression remained stone-faced yet he had the courtesy to nod his head slightly in reciprocation.

"Which one of you lovely ladies would like to dance?"

Shannon was so absorbed with watching Ryan that she hadn't noticed the guys walking over to join them. Tom, Mark and Richard halted directly behind their wives, who swiveled on their stools in unison to face them.

"We thought you'd never ask." Amber smiled, holding her hands out to Tom. She got to her feet, Sheila and Sandi followed suit without a word. As they led the three women out onto the dance floor, Shannon suddenly found herself alone.

"You sure you wouldn't like a refill on that wine, miss?"

She shook her head no, smiling in the face of the withered old bartender. The kindness in his tone didn't match the expression on his face or the hardness in his muddy-colored, bloodshot eyes. "One's my limit, thanks."

"You here alone?" he asked, removing her glass and wiping the bar down. Again she nodded. "It's a shame, pretty young woman like you with no one to dance with."

"That's- "

"Maybe the pretty young woman would do me the honor of a dance," a man sitting a few stools down from her cut in. She estimated he was in his mid-twenties, dressed in a

suit and loosened tie, which indicated he'd probably stopped in for a drink on his way home from work. He hadn't even attempted to hide the wedding ring on his left hand. Well, if he were a player he would have removed it, right?

She responded naturally to his contagious smile but there was no way she was going to dance with him. However, he must have taken her grin for encouragement because the next thing she knew, he was sliding from his stool and heading her way.

Shannon decided the sooner he knew where he stood the better. "I'm sorry but I'm not..."

"The lady's with me."

She gasped upon hearing Ryan's authoritative voice. *When had he moved up behind her?* He reached around her to place his empty beer bottle on the bar before taking her hand. It didn't cross Shannon's mind to protest as he led her out onto the dance floor. Within seconds, he turned, pulled her gently against him and began to move to the slow beat of a western ballad.

"I would never have guessed you knew how to dance," she teased with mild humor, pulling back just enough to meet Ryan's eyes.

"Slow is the only speed I know," he warned, looking everywhere but at her.

While his movements were fluid and natural, Shannon felt the tenseness in his body. She wondered at the tick working in his lean jaw, deciding not to question it. For some reason he was very uncomfortable. Maybe he hadn't danced in a while.

"I didn't need rescuing you know, he was only being nice to me," she said, believing that was the reason behind his impromptu actions.

Ryan's eyes dropped to hers. "I don't care what the other man's intentions were. The thought of him touching you—" he stopped abruptly. "The man has been ogling you since we arrived here. I watched him down a few shots of whisky before working up the courage to approach you. Once the others deserted you it gave him the perfect opportunity to move right in."

"I'm sure you're mistaken- "

"Look, I don't mean to make the man out to be a leper, but I've been living by my instincts long enough to sense oncoming trouble. It's better to nip it in the bud before it becomes a problem."

Shannon was surprised over his remark. "You make it sound as if he had something more devious on his mind."

"He did, sex. Sorry for stating it so crudely. Take it from someone who recognizes the signs, Shannon. He was expecting a hell of a lot more than an innocent dance with you before the end of the night."

Shannon glanced back at the bar, where the man had moved on to a pretty blonde sitting alone. "But he was wearing a wedding ring." A laugh escaped Ryan before he could rein it in. "What I mean is he didn't even try to hide it."

"So you let down your guard and felt almost safe with him, right?"

Her eyes rounded. "How did you know?"

"It's a ploy that works, Shannon. Most women aren't expecting a married man to make a move on them and be so obvious about it. The fact he didn't hide his wedding ring put you in the frame of mind he wanted you to be in. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised to find out that he isn't married at all."

"He only asked me to dance, Ryan." She pointed out with humor.

He shrugged. "A married man stopping at a bar for a few drinks before heading home for the night, an innocent dance to help unwind, one thing leads to another- "

"You're very suspicious," she cut in. "Is this a little technique you know because you've tried it yourself?"

"I've never been married," he reminded her briskly, obviously uncomfortable with where their conversation was going. His gaze shifted around the room.

*Was he worried one of his siblings would overhear them?*

"I know, you're married to the Marines," she said unnecessarily.

"It's not a crime. And stop attempting to draw me into one of your soul-searching conversations. Why are you trying to get inside my head?"

Shannon thought about that, surprised he'd recognized her attempts. *Had she been that obvious?* It was clear he didn't appreciate her intentions, though. She already knew enough about Ryan to realize he didn't like talking about himself. The smart thing to do was change the subject, but he beat her to it.

"That could have been you," he said flatly, nodding in a direction that caused Shannon's gaze to follow.

The blonde had accepted the invitation to dance and the two were so entwined it was hard to say where one began and the other ended. The man's hands were all over her as he nuzzled her neck.

A chuckle escaped Shannon. "She doesn't seem to mind."

"Would you have minded?" he shot back sharply.

"I wasn't going to dance with him." Their gazes held for a long moment before Shannon asked softly, "Can I ask you a question, Ryan?"

"Sure."

"Is the only reason we're dancing now because you felt duty bound to protect me?"

His surprised expression revealed it was the last thing he expected her to ask, as they swayed slowly beneath the dim lights. The wood dance floor was crowded, forced them to remain in a tight circle, and Shannon closer against him. The masculine scent of soap and man assailed her senses, drugging her until she was under his spell. Desire began to weave slowly through her system, intensifying when she felt his growing erection.

"What do you think?"

She took a deep breath, as though to draw courage from it. "I think you're a very honorable man. And because of that you'd protect anyone weaker than you, even someone you don't particularly like."

His gaze narrowed on her like a hawk zeroing in on prey. "You think I don't like you?"

Shannon's first thought was to say no, only how could she say that when his hard-on was pressing against her? "I'm not sure what you feel about me, after all, we don't know each other very well. But I get the impression that you don't *want* to like me. Does being around me remind you too much of David? I know it must be painful..."

The mention of his brother's name turned his expression to stone. A muscle began to twitch in his taut jaw. "Don't mention David's name again when you're in my arms, Shannon," he muttered through clenched teeth. The glare in his eyes held her captive. "You think I don't like you? My cock's hard as stone right now." He thrust it against her. "All I can think about is sliding it inside you and letting your pussy drain it dry."

Shannon trembled from his words and lust rippled through her body in pleasurable

waves. Her nipples hardened and tingled against Ryan's chest. Desire soaked her panties. She was speechless, unsure if she should be offended or thrilled. She averted her gaze, afraid he would see the effect he was having on her.

As they continued to turn slowly around on the dance floor, her gaze sought out the rest of the family, thankful no one was paying them any mind. Ryan's shaft throbbed against her relentlessly, turning her knees weak, and she clutched to the front of his leather jacket to keep from sinking to the floor. Her breathing accelerated. She was thankful the lighting in the bar was dim and when the song ended, she stepped out of Ryan's arms.

*Before she made a fool of herself.*

He glanced over her head. "Looks like the others are making their way in our direction."

His gaze came back to Shannon. Guilt consumed her because she hadn't been thinking of David at all. Ryan's closeness had bewitched her until all she'd thought about was hard muscular body and how good it felt being in his arms. Before she could attempt a response, his family surrounded them.

"Looks like we're going to call it an evening." Richard was the first to speak, an arm around his wife. "It's been a long day and Sandi needs her rest."

"Oh great, blame it on me," she chastised lightly, giving him a stern look that didn't so much as cause an inkling of worry in his amused eyes.

"Are you tired?" he asked in an exasperated tone.

"Yes," she responded. "But that's beside the point." After varying degrees of verbalized humor within the group she continued. "Don't let us leaving spoil anyone else's fun. If Ryan's staying some of you can catch a ride home with him."

"I really think it's best if I get home to Alivia too." Shannon turned to head back to the barstool where her coat was hanging.

"I think it's a good idea if we all head home." Amber was right behind her. "Mom's been alone long enough with the kids. And even if they're asleep by now, knowing her she won't turn in until we're back."

"Yeah and tomorrow's the big day, you ladies will be busy in the kitchen and we'll be watching the ga—"

"Kids." Sheila's comment wiped the smile right off her husband's face. "You might not realize it but you're going to need more rest than we will."

"That's not fair," Mark complained, trying to remain sad-faced but everyone could see he was on the verge of grinning. "I don't get to watch football very often." Although Sheila blew him a kiss, her expression clearly said she didn't care.

"Watching the kids will be a piece of cake," Tom joined in, pulling out several bills and dropping them on the counter. "The drinks are on me this year."

"Yeah, we have it covered." Richard backed him up with confidence. "We'll keep the kids amused. And what's Thanksgiving without the traditional football game out on the lawn, huh? Maybe this year with Ryan home we'll even win against you gals."

Sheila and Sandi rolled their eyes and Amber groaned as though in severe pain. Shannon just grinned, buttoning her coat. She enjoyed watching the playful banter between the three couples. It was obvious they loved each other very much. She glanced at Ryan to see how he was taking it all in, wondering if he ever missed not having the same kind of closeness with someone that his sisters and brother had with their spouses.

“Are we going back the way we came?” Amber asked as they all headed for the exit.

“Might as well,” her husband responded, speaking for everyone.

Shannon glanced at Amber in time to catch her and Sandi exchange a secretive smile, wondering what they were up to. Sheila didn’t appear to be part of it and the men were oblivious as they discussed whose turn it was to get the drumsticks this year.

“We’ll see you back at the house,” Sheila said, tossing Shannon a smile as she wrapped her scarf around her neck. “Drive careful, brother.”

Shannon acknowledged her with a brief nod, veering off with Ryan in the direction of his jeep as the others made their way to Richard’s suburban. She couldn’t help wondering if the trip home was going to be any different than the ride there. Ryan had remained quiet so she had no way of knowing how he felt about being stuck with her again.

As she neared his jeep, he opened the door and turned to wait for her to get there. She smiled meeting his eyes but he remained stone-faced, with only a flicker of acknowledgement in his gaze. Shannon tried to keep her disappointment from showing, when it dawned on her nothing had changed. He seemed just as determined to remain aloof.

Realizing he was patiently waiting for her, Shannon picked up speed, a mistake that immediately became obvious. Her foot slid upon the icy ground and she flailed her arms wildly in an effort to regain balance. A cry escaped her as her leg shot out from under and she felt herself going down.

“Ryan!” Shannon wasn’t sure if she was calling out for help or just warning him she was coming his way. The momentum of her slide brought her directly toward him and all she could think about was his injured leg.

Surprisingly, he stepped forward instead of away, reaching out to catch her against him. The force of her awkward fall carried them back against his jeep. She prayed his grunt was the result of the wind being knocked out of him and not added pain to his leg.

He took the brunt of the impact. “Oh God, Ryan, I’m sorry!” Shannon gasped. “The ice...” His back slammed against the jeep. She slammed against him and tried to right herself and step back. “I’m not usually this clumsy.” *Why couldn’t she move?* Then it dawned on her his arms were still locked around her. “Are you okay?”

She was able to pull back enough to glance up. What she saw on Ryan’s face nearly took her breath away. Not the look of pain she was expecting, but an expression of raw desire was stamped upon his rugged features. Then, as if he couldn’t help himself, he turned with her and pushed her up against his jeep.

“Stop me, Shannon...” It was a plea that didn’t carry any weight. He lowered his head and slammed his mouth down upon hers.

It didn’t cross Shannon’s mind to push him away. All she could think about was the firm, sensual lips on hers and the feeling she’d experienced on the dance floor returning ten-fold. She returned Ryan’s kiss with just as much enthusiasm and ardor in a moment of crazy madness she *wanted* to explore. She allowed his tongue to force its way inside her mouth and instantly the night around them filled with moans of longing.

Shannon was unprepared when he released her suddenly and stepped away. She felt as if she’d imagined the explosive heat that just happened between them beneath the dim parking lot lights. But her swollen wet lips or the smoky taste of Ryan inside her mouth told her the truth.

Without words, he opened the passenger door, waited for her to slide inside the jeep, and closed the door behind her. Shannon buckled up, watched him as he walked around to the driver's side. As he took his place behind the wheel their gazes met briefly, and then he turned the key to start the jeep, and backed up.

Uncomfortable silence filled the jeep the entire ride home. The air so thick you could cut it with a knife. Shannon suspected that Ryan wasn't handling his loss of control very well. He was a complex man and she already knew him enough to realize he didn't like to expose his feelings. Or could he be thinking about why she'd allowed him to kiss her?

She had to wonder about his motives, too.

## Chapter Eight

*“Watch out! No! David, no!”*

Shannon bolted upright in bed, disoriented and wondering what had woken her from a sound sleep. Her eyes immediately flew to the crib where Alivia slept; a mother’s instincts to check on her child upper most in her mind. The small nightlight provided just enough brightness to see that her daughter was resting peacefully. Relaxing somewhat, Shannon ran her hands through her hair, wondering again what had disturbed her. Everything in the house seemed quiet.

*“David!”*

She jumped, the agonized groan reaching Shannon through the wall. Her heart sank when it dawned on her that Ryan was in the throes of a terrible nightmare. She lay back against her pillow, and strained to hear more. Sadness surrounded her heart that only in sleep was Ryan able to reveal his emotions and let them go. She could hear his faint stirrings, and only once in a while did he actually call out loud enough for her to understand what he was saying.

*“David, God please, nooooo!”*

Tears sprang to her eyes as she lay there listening to his suffering, unsure what she could do to help him. Would he welcome an interruption? She doubted it. After a few more seconds, Shannon couldn’t take it any longer. She couldn’t just lay there and do nothing.

She pulled back the covers and flew from the bed, deciding to go through the connecting bathroom door. Thankful to find Ryan’s door unlocked, she quietly opened it and slipped into the room. It was dark, so much so that she had to stand there a moment to let her eyes adjust. Once she was able to make out the direction of his bed, she made her way there.

*“Nooooo!”*

The low, agonized sound sounded like the wail of a dying man. Shannon was uncertain what to do as she stood staring down at his twisting form, recalling his reaction when she’d woken him in the den. Yet her heart went out to him, and when he cried out David’s name again, she gently called out his name.

“Ryan.” Hopefully that would be enough to wake him and she wouldn’t need to touch him. “Wake up, Ryan. You’re having a bad dream.” He didn’t acknowledge her. “Ryan...” She bent slightly so her whisper would reach him.

His reaction was swift and unexpected. Shannon barely had a chance to blink when he threw back the covers and bolted from the bed, advancing on her before she could recover. Alarm raced down her spine and she stumbled back. She caught her breath, realizing Ryan was disoriented and didn’t know what he was doing. She intended to move out of his way but he had other plans, backing her up against the very door she’d entered the room.

Suddenly Shannon became the enemy.

“It’s me,” she whispered desperately, as one hand encircled her throat and the other flattened against her chest, pinning her against the door. “Ryan...” She began to panic when his fingers tightened, threatening to cut off her air supply. Her hands came up and

wrapped around his wrist in an effort to pull him away.

“Ryan...”

He stilled. The change that came over him was tangible. His fingers slackened and he slowly removed both hands, but didn't step away from her. She didn't move, he barely breathed as the tense moments continued. Shannon remained frozen, afraid if she moved it would snap him back into Marine mode. Because there was no doubt in her mind that for a moment, when he'd first awakened, he thought he was back in Iraq and facing the enemy.

He sucked in his breath slowly. “What did I tell you about sneaking up on a soldier?” he growled in a low tone.

She swallowed with difficulty, tried to ignore the warmth of his breath against her face and the smell of the minty toothpaste he'd used before going to bed. “You said it was dangerous to wake one—”

“It's the same thing, Shannon. I've been a Marine a long time. I'm used to the enemy sneaking into our camps at night while we're sleeping. Not beautiful women.”

*He thought she was beautiful?*

“I was trying to be careful, Ryan. You were having a nightmare and I couldn't, I couldn't bear to hear you suffering.”

“I have nightmares. And I've gotten through them before without you,” he pointed out.

Shannon could tell he was barely holding on to his control. Unable to tell if it was anger or something else controlling his emotions. With Ryan, it was hard to tell.

“It was about David,” she explained sadly. “I'm sorry if I disturbed you.” She was trembling against him, noticing things she shouldn't. The old pair of flannel pajamas she wore was thin and didn't keep her from being aware of the hardness of his naked chest. Or that it was naked. With every breath Ryan took, her nipples brushed against him and tingled with pleasant sensation. “I wanted to help you.”

A long moment passed between them. “In what way?” He surprised her by asking.

“I used to have nightmares about David too,” she confessed in a low tone. “But then I started talking to someone- ”

“Like you?” he said incredulously. “David is only half the problem, Shannon. I suggest if you don't want to find out what the other half is, you return to your room.” Without warning, he turned and headed back to the bed.

Shannon had no idea what he was talking about, but knew she couldn't let him walk away from her again. She had to convince him it was okay to share his feelings, his fears, talking about them was chicken soup for the soul.

Without thinking about the consequences, she went after him, and placed her hand on his muscular arm. “Ryan, wait...”

He turned on her like a mad dog. “Don't you ever give up?” His hands curled around her upper arms and he jerked her close, until they were almost nose-to-nose. “Your stubbornness can be very dangerous, lady, don't you know that yet?” he breathed harshly.

“I want to help you,” she insisted in a whisper, wondering why she was so determined. Except, Shannon knew it was important that she save Ryan from himself. He was a prisoner of his soul.

“At three o'clock in the morning?” he snorted with heavy sarcasm. “You have no idea how to help me.” His hands tightened as if he couldn't help it.



“Let me try,” she insisted, undaunted by the grit in his voice.

Shannon’s hands came up to rest upon his chest. She waited for him to push her away, but he didn’t and she was forced to endure the scorching heat of his hard flesh. She felt his muscles flex beneath her palms. Recalling their passionate kiss outside the bar stirred her blood until a volcano erupted inside her. *Was helping him just an excuse to enter his room?* Maybe she wanted another kiss, or more, his hands on her. Intimate and exploring her into a mind blowing orgasm.

Why didn’t he push her away?

“Why does it matter so much to you, Shannon?”

“That’s what family is for.” Her voice was hoarse with emotion. “We’re here for each other.”

He stared down at her for a long moment. Shannon wondered what he was thinking. “Family?” His harsh laughter seemed out of place in the dark. “I can look at you until my damn eyes fall out and I’d never see you as a sister. Even now—”

He cut himself off, as if it occurred to him that he was about to divulge something too personal, or perhaps a weakness. A long time went by when all Shannon heard was the sound of their breathing, and the screech of an owl off in the distance. The house was deathly quiet. Finally, she couldn’t stand it any longer.

“Are you okay, Ryan?” Shannon wanted to reach out and touch him, but she was afraid.

“You want to help me, Shannon?” Something in his tone warned her she should turn and run back to her room, but that same something excited her into staying. “*This* is the only way you can help me.”

In one smooth move, Ryan pulled her over to the bed with him and pushed her down, following her until he covered her with his half-naked body. Gasping with surprise, Shannon found her mouth being ground beneath his. She struggled, but if he noticed, he didn’t let that or his split lip stop him from stealing her breath. Then his hands took hold of her wrists and pinned them to the bed. Against her will, she responded when he arched his hips into the lower half of her body.

His thick, hard cock slid into the crevice between her legs and brushed against her clit.

Shannon moaned and became aware of other sensations brought upon by her squirming. She arched in hunger, thrust against his erection with sharp accuracy, wishing they were naked and he was sliding into her. She moved her hips again, rewarded when Ryan ground his shaft against her.

He groaned and shuddered, slid his tongue inside her mouth, swallowing her sound of pleasure. For a spellbinding moment, they were caught up in the heat of the moment. She was no longer interested in freedom. Her hands weren’t pushing against his chest, but had gone to his shoulders and roamed his back in heated caresses, nails lightly scraping defined muscles. Her hips strained upwards to meet his as he ground his hard-on into the sweet, hot place between her thighs.

She welcomed his hand beneath her pajama top as he claimed her breast, palming the globe and flicking his thumb over the burgeoning nipple. Her response was wild and wanton, encouraged him to continue, as she silently begged him to do even more. Ryan tore his mouth from hers, pushed her top out of the way and took her nipple into his mouth.

“Oh, God!” Shannon hissed beneath him, in nothing more than a whisper. She arched her back, holding his head against her flesh. She was throbbing below, where his shaft provided enough friction on her clit to make her burst with sweet release.

His mouth returned to hers, and he kissed her savagely while his hand skimmed down her body, snaking inside her pajama bottoms and cupping her bottom. And Shannon thought, this is it, he was going to slide her bottoms down and take her.

All at once, a muffled noise penetrated their sounds of hunger. Ryan froze. And during those brief seconds of listening for the sound again sanity returned to both of them. Realizing she’d been about to let him make love to her, Shannon closed her eyes and willed the whole thing away. There was no way she could ignore Ryan’s hard body or his warm breath against her mouth. His warmth, coupled with the stimulating scent of their passion, would remain long after she went back to her room.

“Hell, Shannon. I’m sorry. I got carried away.”

“I guess we both did.” She wasn’t about to let him take all of the blame. “I ah, don’t know what came over me, Ryan. I...I’ve been so lonely. It’s, been a long time.”

“For both of us.” He rolled away. “I think I hear Alivia.”

“Yes, she sometimes wakes during the night.” Shannon scooted off the bed and looked down at him. Ryan continued to lie there silently, folded his arms behind his head. “Do you think we can be friends?”

He released a long breath. “Sorry, I don’t think you and I can ever be friends.”

“Why?” That wasn’t the answer she’d been expecting. “Is sex all you’re looking for in a woman?”

“Does that shock you? I’m a Marine on the go, Shannon. I don’t have time to build relationships. I never know when the opportunity for a good lay will arise and have to get it when I can.”

“I don’t believe you,” she shot back with strong disappointment. She refused to think he was that cold hearted.

“Why would I lie to you?” There was indifference in his tone.

Shannon thought about it for a moment. “I know why,” she said sadly.

“Why?”

“Because you’re scared,” she breathed softly. “Goodnight, Ryan.” She turned and left the room.

Not until she was back in her own room with the door closed did Shannon begin to breathe normally again. How was she going to face him in the morning and look him in the eye?

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she buried her face into her hands and began to cry. Something was happening between them and she wasn’t sure what. No matter how much Ryan tried to make her believe it was only sexual, she knew it went much deeper than that.

Now all she had to do was make him see it.

## Chapter Nine

No matter how hard she tried, Shannon couldn't get back to sleep after returning to her room, replaying the steamy episode with Ryan over in her head. She lay there, fidgety with arousal, wondering what would have happened if Alivia hadn't disturbed them. Would they have gone all the way? Most likely, she wouldn't have stopped him and was a little surprised at how quickly she'd responded to him.

The only man she'd ever made love with had been David. *No!* She shook her head violently, pushing him from her thoughts, refusing to compare the two brothers. It wouldn't be fair to Ryan. And she was honest enough to admit David hadn't been in her thoughts while in Ryan's arms.

*Why didn't she feel guilty over that?*

With a pent-up breath, she turned on her stomach, punching the pillow beneath her head before settling down again. Her body felt like a live wire, still tingling in places Ryan had manipulated into arousal with his strong hands and firm mouth. His slightly callused palms had brought her immense pleasure and his mouth on her breast had stolen her breath and set her blood on fire. How would she be able to face him after the astounding passion they had shared?

One thing was certain, she couldn't avoid him. Maybe she should just act as though nothing happened. Turning, she glanced at the clock, doubtful that anyone would be up at this hour. The house was too quiet. Except for the noise in the bathroom that indicated Ryan was taking a shower.

*A cold shower?* She pictured the water running over his powerful body. Caressing his warm flesh as, in a weak moment, she'd let her hands do. In those mindless moments, she'd discovered how truly powerful Ryan was. Making love with him would...

Oh! Shaking her head with disgust at where her thoughts had wandered, she ripped the sheet back and jumped off the bed, deciding to head down for coffee. She slipped into her robe, and checked Alivia as she tied the sash securely around her waist. Once she was satisfied that her daughter was sound asleep, she quietly left the room.

Shannon made her way downstairs without turning the lights on, but as she neared the kitchen, she could see a light beneath the door. Someone was up. It didn't surprise her to find Marsha on the other side. She was busy stirring something in a large bowl, spices all around her. The Thanksgiving turkey was in a large roasting pan in front of her.

"Good morning, you're up early," Marsha said before Shannon had the chance.

"So are you." Shannon yawned, following the enticing aroma of coffee toward the two coffee pots. They were all coffee drinkers. "Goodness, I didn't know turkeys came that big."

"Good thing, with my brood." Marsha glanced up from what she was doing, returning Shannon's smile. "Couldn't sleep, dear?"

Shannon had to think fast. "Alivia was kind of restless during the night." It wasn't exactly a lie.

Marsha nodded with understanding. "Poor dear, she's probably missing her own bed."

She began spooning the doughy mixture into the turkey, which Shannon guessed was

a twenty-five pound bird. “That’s going to take a long time to cook.” She took a sip of her coffee, closing her eyes with enjoyment. She loved good coffee and Marsha always had the best.

“Most of the day,” Marsha agreed. “We’ll have a big breakfast once everyone is up, a snack around one and eat dinner at six.”

Just like every year. Shannon smiled behind her cup. Marsha thrived on tradition. Once the whole household was up the kitchen would become grand central station, with everyone assigned a job to help out, right down to the smallest child. Marsha made sure her grandchildren weren’t left out and were made to feel important. Later in the evening, after their hearty dinner had digested a little, they’d decorate a huge Christmas tree.

Having Ryan home this year also meant an extra special holiday season. Shannon suspected that was the reason behind the extra shine in Marsha’s tireless eyes. Losing David had nearly killed her. And then the thought hit Shannon at that moment, was that why Ryan had come home this year? To take David’s place?

“I think I hear someone at the front door.” There was surprise in Marsha’s rounding eyes. “Would you mind checking, dear?”

“Course not.” Shannon put her cup on the counter turning to exit the kitchen, wondering who would be coming to visit so early, and on Thanksgiving morning of all days. She exited the kitchen, in time to see the front door closing behind someone and rushed toward it to see who it was.

She pulled back the curtain, her eyes rounding when she recognized Ryan’s form heading down the front steps with his bag in his hand. *Was he leaving because of her?* That would crush Marsha! Without thinking, Shannon whipped the door open and stepped onto the porch.

“Ryan!” If he heard her, he ignored her, and continued walking toward the garage. “Ryan!” Shannon picked up her robe and dashed down the steps and into the snow. The cold immediately went through her slippers. “Ryan, please wait!”

He rounded the garage and disappeared. Shannon couldn’t believe that he didn’t hear her. She rushed to catch up with him, almost falling when she stepped on an icy patch of snow. She entered the garage just as he opened the door to his jeep. “Ryan!”

He stiffened but didn’t turn around as she expected. Shivering, Shannon stepped in front of him, putting herself between him and the open door. She didn’t know what she was going to do; only that she had to stop him in some way. “What are you doing?” she asked, flinching from the unwelcome coldness in his eyes. It was just getting light enough for her to see his expression, hard and set as usual.

“I would think that’s obvious,” he said flatly, a tick appearing in his jaw. His gaze was focused somewhere over her head.

“Your leaving will ruin everyone’s holiday. Every year, all they ever talk about is you coming home.” His gaze zeroed in on hers with deadly accuracy. He looked so angry, as if he was about to explode. Shannon felt the urge to reach up and kiss away the firmness of his mouth until it was soft and friendly. “Are you leaving because of, ah, what happened?” She didn’t have to spell it out; they both knew what she was referring to.

“I think it’s better this way.”

“I’m not blaming you,” she began. “It’s something that just happened, a moment that got away from us.” Trying to sound as if it was insignificant didn’t come off as

convincing as Shannon wanted it to. She could barely look Ryan in the eye because of the heat filling her cheeks.

“What makes you think it won’t happen again?”

Shannon’s eyes rounded in surprise. The little thrill his words caused evaporated quickly when she realized he wasn’t happy about his earlier loss of control. *Would it happen again?* She didn’t have the nerve to ask. Deep down part of her wanted it to. She could tell he wanted to leave, but she was in his way.

“Ryan please, if you can’t stand being under the same roof with me then I’ll leave. Just, please, don’t hurt your family this way.” It surprised Shannon that his leaving would hurt her, too.

Their gazes held for a long moment. Shannon wasn’t beneath begging to get him to change his mind. She loved Marsha and the rest of the family too much to cause them undue pain. “Please, stay.” To her mortification, she felt the hot sting of tears fill her eyes. It occurred to her that she was asking as much for herself as for them. Did he feel the pull between them? The intensity of it astounded her.

“Why? Why does it matter so much to you?”

Shannon swallowed the lump in her throat. “Love, Ryan. Because I love them.”

*Had he forgotten what love was?*

A tear slipped down her cheek for the man in front of her. He was flesh and blood, wasn’t he? Shannon reached up and smoothed her palm over his cheek to find out, surprised when he didn’t try and stop her. She knew he didn’t like being touched. “Don’t you feel anything, anymore?” Her whispered words hung between them.

Something flared in Ryan’s eyes, a brief flicker of life. He dropped his duffle bag, sucked in a harsh breath, then reached for Shannon and pulled her sharply against him. Her head fell back and she met the burning heat in his eyes. Her lips parted on a gasp. Another tear spilled over.

“Damn you!” Ryan swore under his breath. His expression was a mixture of anger, and desire. He was battling something fierce inside and losing. Shannon sensed it. “Right now, my gut is twisted in knots because of you. You want to know what I feel, Shannon? I can’t get near you without getting a raging hard-on. If I stay—” He cut himself off.

She was feeling, too. Her breasts crushed against his chest and the tingling in her nipples had them hardening with desire. Their bodies were aligned from the waist down and his strong arousal caused a flood of sizzling heat through her body. The image of them in his bedroom earlier that morning was all it took for Shannon to quiver wildly against Ryan. *This is wrong!* Yet she couldn’t convince her body of that.

“I...” Shannon didn’t know what to say. His confession was the last thing she expected. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I.” Then, in a gesture so unlike the tough Marine, Ryan reached up and tenderly wiped the tears off her cheeks with the pads of his thumbs. “Don’t be afraid of me, Shannon.”

“I’m not.” It was the truth. Her gaze ran over his strong boned face before returning to his watchful eyes. She trembled, her lips parted as a little whimper escaped her. The sound of betraying hunger was rewarded by a low sound from Ryan, right before he lowered his head, and took her mouth in a hard kiss.

Protesting didn’t enter Shannon’s mind. Desire for this man overwhelmed her. Instant and intense, she moaned weakly with the feelings he was drawing from her body,

*her very soul.* She kissed Ryan back just as passionately, willingly opened her mouth and invited his tongue inside. Hesitation didn't enter into it as he took her up on the offer immediately. Their tongues explored each other vigorously, fueling the hunger in their blood. It didn't take long for the situation between them to escalate out of control, and beyond.

Ryan buried his hands in her loose hair and ground his mouth against hers with a groan. Shannon responded by arching into his arousal, letting the moment consume her. When his hands fell to her breasts, she thrust them eagerly against his palms, sighing when he kneaded them roughly through her robe. Then to Shannon's surprise, his hands went to the edge of her robe and parted the material. She didn't have to wonder for long if he was going to let her pajamas keep him from claiming his prize. He made quick work at pulling her top up and exposing her breasts.

*Ohmygod!* Cool air, then fire licked at her flesh when Ryan's hands stroked her breasts until they ached with sweet tenderness. Without warning, his mouth moved there, loving them and teasing her taut nipples with his teeth and tongue. Shannon cried out with pleasure, clutched his head to her. The lower half of their bodies rocked against each other, reaching for fulfillment that seemed to teeter on the very edge. Shannon wanted to explore Ryan's body but his leather jacket kept him from her eager hands.

Moans of protest, then pleasure, exploded around them when Ryan's hands began to explore Shannon's body all over. Her belly and back, over her rounded hips and then dipping below the waistband of her pajama bottoms to the naked flesh below. Rough palms smoothed over her bottom before squeezing the flesh that filled his hands, and then bringing her closer to his throbbing shaft. He held her there tightly and moved against her, groaning low.

"Shit!" He shuddered, breathing hard.

"*Oh!*" His hands began to travel over her with definite purpose. Shannon's knees almost gave way when she felt his hand nearing the wet curls between her legs. Unexpectedly, the overwhelming urge to feel him there blinded her to anything else. Right or wrong, she didn't care. She tried to convey her silent wants with the movements of her body. The breath caught in her throat when his warm hand cupped her weeping mound.

"*Ryan!*"

"Easy, baby." Ryan kissed her and slipped a finger inside her wet heat. Shannon whimpered, thrusting her tongue back against his. She shamelessly arched against his plunging finger, feeling the pressure build when he manipulated her clit with his thumb. Her hands went to the rock hard bulge at the front of his fatigues. She wanted to touch him, give him pleasure, too. She pulled away.

"Ryan—I can't." It frustrated Shannon because his clothes were in the way. "I want—",

He hushed her, kissing and nipping the side of her neck, and slipped another finger inside. *Oh my God, I'm going to come!* A kaleidoscope of sharp pleasure spiraled through her body toward Ryan's fingers. Her head fell back by the force of his ill-timed kiss and his mouth swallowed her cry of release. As her body convulsed wildly against him Shannon pulled away and sank her teeth into his strong neck.

"*Oh hell!*" He rasped, shuddering. As though in the throes of his own climax. Only Shannon knew that was unlikely. She hadn't been able to do half the incredible things to

his body that he'd done to her. As her breathing gradually slowed back to normal, she was able to bring her body under control. Ryan slowly slipped his fingers from her, creating an emptiness that was almost unbearable.

A shaky breath escaped her and she became aware of the cold as it touched her where she was naked. *Oh my god, what have I done?* She'd lost control, that's what. Her body was sated but with that pleasure acute embarrassment followed, and unbelievable guilt. Ryan had to be hurting. *How can I look him in the eyes?* Knowing what she just let him do to her?

The awkward moment and the continued silence unnerved her. Aware that she was still plastered against Ryan, she slowly stepped back, only to come up against his jeep. She kept her eyes glued on his chest, wishing the ground would open up and swallow her. "I, I..." Shannon swallowed. "I'm so embarrassed."

"No!" Ryan's hand moved beneath her chin, and he tilted her face so their eyes could meet. "Don't ever be embarrassed about what just happened, Shannon. We both needed that."

Shannon started to shake her head but caught herself. Lying about it would only make it worse. He was right. She *had* needed an outlet for her pent up emotions. Only she hadn't realized how wound up she'd been until now. And Ryan, what about him? He was like a keg of dynamite getting ready to blow. She shivered and wrapped her robe around her. "What about you? I know you're hurting."

"I'll survive. Go back inside, you're freezing," he said harshly, his breath cloudy. His gaze made a quick trip down her body before meeting her gaze again.

Shannon sucked in a deep breath, the cold burning her lungs. She let shyness keep her from doing what she really wanted to do. And that was finish what they *both* wanted. Only it appeared Ryan was going to ignore what happened between them. Maybe that was his way of putting her at ease, by pretending that she *hadn't* just experienced a mind-blowing orgasm with his fingers inside her.

"Not unless you promise me that you're staying," she said stubbornly, remembering her main reason for following him. She shivered again, more for show this time, but sensed he was weakening.

The slightest softening of his mouth gave him away. "You're a headstrong woman," he observed.

Shannon detected a thawing in his tone. "When I have to be." She was able to move when Ryan stepped back. "I can be out of here by noon. I'll think up some excuse—"

He grabbed her arm to keep her from walking away. "No." His tone was curt and decisive. "You'll stay."

It was Shannon's turn to open her mouth.

"I mean it Shannon. If you want me to stay, then you will, too."

The look in his eyes warned her that she had no choice. She sensed Ryan didn't say things he didn't mean. *Talk about being stubborn!* Giving him a brief nod, she turned and left the garage.

She'd stay and so would he. Shannon couldn't help wondering if they were both making a huge mistake. They wanted each other.

Would they be able to make it through the holidays without giving in to the lust coursing through their blood?

## Chapter Ten

Ryan snatched up his bag and followed Shannon, but once he reached the garage opening, he paused and watched her make her way back to the house.

She had a sexy walk. The curve of her full hips and that tight ass made his mouth water. The satiny softness of her flesh when it had filled his hands kept him hard. Hell, it wouldn't have taken much to lower her into the jeep and screw the hell out of her. It had surprised him how willing she'd seemed when he slipped his fingers inside her body. He could still feel her wet heat, smell the excitement of her sex...he slammed the brakes on his thoughts when he noticed the window curtain next to the door was pulled open. It surprised him to see his mother peering out. In her arms was Alivia, *his niece*. Damn!

He sucked in a deep breath and rolled back out of sight, trying to calm his racing heart. His body was still clamoring for release, his cock hard and balls full and tight against his body. When she'd sunk her teeth into his neck he'd nearly come in his pants. He reached down, tried to rearrange his aching flesh and sucked in more deep breaths. If it worked at dimming the pain in his leg, maybe it would work on diminishing his hard-on.

*Shit, I have to get a grip.* Ryan knew he couldn't have Shannon. Not the way he wanted her. It crossed his mind that he should just forget his promise to her and leave anyway. She couldn't stop him. He eyed his jeep, tempted. He had a buddy in Maine who'd been bugging him to come and visit. He could hole up with him until the holidays were over.

He thought of the disappointment it would cause his family. Besides, when had he ever broken a promise? Running from Shannon would also break the one he'd made to David. He moved back into the opening in time to see her disappearing into the house. The curtain closed and he could only wonder at her explanation to his mother. Reluctantly, he began making his way back toward the house. If he was going to make it through the next few weeks he was going to have to fight his attraction to Shannon, and the only way he could see doing that was to avoid her as much as possible.

*Yeah, I have about as much chance of that as a snowball in hell.*

He bound up the porch steps and was reaching for the doorknob when it was pulled out of his grasp by someone opening it from the other side.

"Well, good morning, brother." It was Richard. He closed the door behind him, his gaze falling to the bag in Ryan's hand. "Going somewhere?"

"No, I left a few things in the jeep. You look like you're going somewhere, though."

"Morning walk. Sandi likes to take one every day. She's getting the kids ready. Why don't you join us? We're going down to the river."

There was a noise behind Richard, someone else was at the door. "No thanks. I get enough exercise when I'm on duty." It wouldn't do his leg any good. The walk to the river was at least a half a mile away.

"You ought to think about settling down one day, brother. Get yourself a wife and start a family."

*Where did that come from?*

"The Military is my life. It's all I need." Ryan knew Richard meant well, and kept



from revealing his irritation, at bay. He knew when he'd decided to come home for the holidays that he'd be faced with comments about his life. Coming from a unit where family meant everything, it was hard for his mother, and siblings, to understand why he was different. Five years ago, he might have considered it, until he laid eyes on Shannon and knew there would be no one else for him.

"That might be good for now, but what about when you're old and gray? Wouldn't you like someone by your side?"

Ryan released a breath of annoyance he couldn't help.

Richard chuckled. "Okay, okay, I'll mind my own business. It's your life."

"Thanks."

The door opened. Sandi and their three kids came out, laughing and chattering. "Good morning!" She smiled, meeting Ryan's gaze before turning her attention to Richard. "We need to wait. The others have decided to come along, too. Are you joining us, Ryan?"

He shook his head. "Not today, thanks."

"Who's staying behind to help mom?" Richard questioned.

"Grandma's coming with us!" Suzie and Shelby said in unison, running down the porch steps. They immediately scooped up handfuls of snow and made snowballs.

Sandi chuckled. "Everything is done. The turkey is in the oven and—"

"Are we all here?" Sheila and Mark walked through the doorway, followed by the twins.

"Not yet," Richard responded.

"Are you going somewhere?" Sheila noticed the bag in Ryan's hands.

He smiled. "No."

The door opened again and Tom and his four kids joined them. "The rest are right behind me."

"Why don't you go with us, Ryan? It will be a nice family outing."

Ryan met Sheila's smiling eyes, deciding the best thing to do was excuse himself before Shannon and his mother joined them. His mother would know why he didn't want to join them and he didn't want to see the pity in her gaze.

Forcing a smile for his younger sister's sake, he shook his head. "Not today, okay sis? I don't get enough peace and quiet so let me bask in it when I can." It sounded like a good enough reason, even to him.

Her grin grew wider. "Okay, next time."

With the sound of the kids playing in the snow and the low conversation going on between Richard and Tom, Ryan turned and headed inside. He made a bee-line for the stairs, thankful no one else was around. He wasn't in the mood for conversation. Maybe he could catch up on some of the sleep he'd been deprived of the night before. *After* a cold shower.

Halfway up the stairs a sharp spasm gripped his leg. He sucked in his breath, and was forced to stop or fall. He clutched the banister to keep from going down, clenching his teeth so hard it was a wonder they didn't break. Sweat broke out on his brow the pain was so intense. Remembering to breathe in slow and deep, he waited until the muscle in his leg relaxed enough for him to continue the ascent. At least the spasms were getting further apart.

He made it to his bedroom just as he heard the front door open and close, leaving

behind a silence in the house that told him he was alone. Leaning against his closed door, he dropped his bag. *I'm a coward!* With disgust, he pulled his jacket open and slid out of it. He tossed it onto the unmade bed, and pulled his sweater over his head. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he kicked out of his boots and yanked off his socks. His hands made quick work at unbuckling his belt and unzipping his jeans. Those too were tossed on the bed as he stood.

On his way to the bathroom, he paused at the window, drew back the curtain. His gaze was instantly drawn to where his family was disappearing around the corner of the barn toward the woods. His hand massaged the dull ache in his thigh as he turned and walked to the bathroom door. He turned the knob and entered without knocking.

He had no reason to think anyone would be in there. Only he was wrong.

He sucked in a sharp breath, his heart lodging in his throat. *Sweet Jesus!*

Shannon, completely naked and unaware she had an audience. Apparently, a shower had been in her plans too, and it looked as though she'd just finished. Humming, worked a towel through her long, dripping hair, her full breasts bouncing with her movements. Even from where he stood, he could see her nipples were hard, probably from the cold.

Ryan didn't care. He had a hard time tearing his eyes off those enticing globes. After a moment, he lowered his gaze and took in her flat stomach and the gentle curve of her shapely hips. The rounded shape of her ass gave his dick a good reason to stand up straight.

She was beautiful and had a woman's shape that teased his senses into full alert. She twisted slightly to dry her legs, and rewarded him with the sight of her glistening black mound. *Sweet Jesus!* His cock jumped with the hunger to be inside her body. He recalled how tight and deliciously wet his fingers had found her. By the time, Ryan's gaze traveled back up to her face she was looking directly at him like a deer frozen in the headlights of an approaching car. Her expression was slightly fearful and lowered the towel until it shielded half of her from his exploring gaze. She might look uneasy, but Ryan couldn't help but notice her eyes were bright and eating him up, too.

Right or wrong, the decision was made for him. He walked slowly toward her. Then, a thought struck him. "Where's Alivia?"

She hesitated, her reply softly spoken. "With mom and the others."

*Thank God!* Ryan didn't know if he had the strength to turn around and go back the way he'd come if her answer had been something else. As he advanced toward her, she gasped and backed up. His intentions must have shown on his face.

"Ryan, no."

"No can mean a lot of things, Shannon." He stopped when she backed herself up against the wall. "No, you don't want to feel the attraction between us?" Ryan slowly reached forward and cupped the back of her neck. "No, you don't want me to kiss you?" He gently pulled her away from the wall. "No can also mean yes." A soft breath passed through her lips when his other hand ripped the towel from her hands. Finally, they were flush against each other. "We both know we want this, and God help me, I can't walk away this time."

Ryan groaned. Her lush breasts were crushed against his chest, her hard nipples raking his skin like little daggers. His rock hard flesh sliced through her wet curls, strained toward the entrance of heaven. He pulled her in tighter for a hard kiss that spiraled into something hot and needy. Shannon melted against him with a moan of

acceptance, bringing her arms up to wrap them around his neck. He couldn't help thrusting his hips, creating friction as his cock glided over her clit. It felt too damn good brushing his hard on between her plump, wet pussy lips, a prelude to something more pleasurable, and hotter, to come.

Ryan knew he was being a little too rough. He couldn't help himself. The woman of his dreams was in his arms and she returned his passion willingly. *Eagerly*. He wasn't about to question it and give her time to come to her senses. Their mouths worked against each other, tongues battled ferociously, filling the small bathroom with sounds of mutual pleasure. When Shannon arched her hips into his shaft, Ryan dropped his hands to her curved ass and pulled her up, entering her in one powerful thrust. Her eyes widened, and a cry of surprise echoed around them, but she wrapped her legs around his hips and held on.

This wasn't the way Ryan wanted it. He'd dreamt so many times of making long, slow love to Shannon. But the years of wanting her, waiting, added with the years of celibacy caused his control to snap. He wanted to screw the hell out of her, over and over again until he made up for all the lost time between them. Surprisingly, she didn't seem to mind the speed in which he was taking her. The force that, even now, he tried to curtail. Sliding his hungry cock inside Shannon's tight, hot depths was sweeter and more fulfilling than he'd ever imagined.

With her legs locked around his waist, her soft hands moved over him. Exploring his shoulders and down his biceps, caressing his straining muscles as he supported her full weight. Her mouth and tongue moved along the side of his neck, up to his ear, teasing him until he shuddered with desire. He sucked in his breath. Sounds of pleasure and heavy breathing filled the steam-dampened room. They kissed hungrily, roughly exploring each other's mouths, the lust in his loins spurring Ryan to move faster. Several times, he took his cock in hand and caressed her clit with it until she trembled wildly.

*"Ohmygod!"*

He felt her quiver, sensing she was about to come. "Let it go, sweetheart." She gasped, clinging to his neck. "It's okay, baby. *Come for me.*" Ryan felt his own orgasm churn hotly in his balls.

Shannon cried out softly, sinking her teeth in the side of his neck like she had in the garage. Only this time Ryan had no reason to hold back. Tightly gloved inside her slick body, he growled as control finally abandoned him. Clenching her to him he ground his cock in as far as he could, holding it there as jets of cum filled her. Coupled with her explosive release the pleasure equaled nothing he'd experienced before. It drained him to the point of weakness, and he sank back against the bathroom wall with her in order to remain on his unsteady feet.

"Damn, baby." Ryan said on the last wave that gripped his body. He felt Shannon slowly collapse against him, her breathing still ragged like his. Every once in a while a tiny whimper escaped her. Her body trembled with the after effects. "Are you okay?"

She took a deep breath and whispered. "Yes."

Ryan pulled back slightly so their gazes met. Her eyes were glazed with passion. Her lovely face flushed and her mouth swollen by his rough kisses. A small bruise was evident against the milky skin on her neck. The enormity of what they'd done washed over him. He groaned as guilt began to sink in. Shannon wasn't some nameless tramp he'd just screwed the hell out of. This was a woman he'd spent the last five years wanting

and trying to forget.

“Oh hell, Shannon.” Ryan closed his eyes, wishing the last couple of moments all away. Only the hunger that had been eating him up inside for so long was satisfied. He’d emptied his balls, yet his cock was still slightly hard inside her pussy. Closing his eyes was the wrong thing to do, when it just intensified the situation between them.

He was aware of her soft breasts crushed against his chest. Aware of her legs still wrapped around his waist and the soft flesh of her ass in his hands. As he held Shannon to him tightly, his flesh lengthened and hardened inside her, as if they hadn’t just made love. He sucked in his breath, his arousal intensifying with the smell of their combined sex in the small room. A tiny moan caused his eyes to open, and he was lost in the depths of her smoky gaze. Renewed desire simmered there. He took her mouth in a sweetly tender kiss.

“God forgive me.” He said against her lips then pulled an inch away. “But I want you again.”

“Then God forgive us both, Ryan.” She surprised him by nibbling at his bottom lip, slipping her tongue inside his mouth and imitating the act of making love. Her muscles tightened around his sheathed cock, milking him without moving.

The feeling against his sensitive flesh caused him to shudder. He spun them around.

“Where are we going?” She uttered the softly spoken words against his neck, where she laid her head.

“To my bed.” Before his leg gave out. If he was going to make love to her again, he wanted to take his time and love *all* of her. Like so many times in his dreams. He selfishly pushed all other thoughts out of his head. He’d think about the consequences of his actions later.

He dreaded lowering her to his bed because it meant withdrawing from her body. It was almost painful, but gave him the time to stand above her radiant beauty and examine her the way he’d always imagined.

The image of her naked and twisting on his bed, *for him*, was what got him through the last few years, even if it had only been a dream. His eyes drank her in, glided over her full breasts and flat stomach, following the graceful curve of her hips and thighs before zeroing in on her mound, wet with his cum. His lips twitched when he noticed two tiny stretch marks on her belly. To him she was perfect.

His gaze shot up to hers. Her lovely eyes were half closed as she, in turn, was looking him over. The sight of her eyes on his cock made his flesh jerk, and a glistening pearl of pre-cum drip off the tip. Her breathing caught and he almost lost it when she licked her lips, as if imagining what he would taste like there. He doubted she knew what she was doing. It took great effort not to fall on her and take her like a rutting bull.

When their gazes finally met, Ryan saw the truth in hers. She wanted him as much as he wanted her. At that moment, there were no ghosts between them, no thoughts of right or wrong. Only a moment where two people wanted, *needed*, each other.

She held her arms out to him and he fell upon her. Slanting his mouth over hers, he kissed her long and passionately. Their hands wasted no time in exploring one another. Moans and sighs of pleasure became sensual music in the room, encouraging them to continue. Words were unnecessary between them as they communicated in the most raw and basic way. There was no hidden agenda at what their desires were.

Ryan’s mouth followed the line of Shannon’s delicate jaw up to her ear, taking the

fragrant lobe in his mouth and nibbling at it carefully. She caught her breath and arched beneath him, drawing his interest to her lush breasts. The beautiful mounds were a temptation he couldn't ignore and lowered his mouth to rein kisses over them. Her weak cries urged him to give extra attention to the taut crowns. He complied by sucking on them strongly.

"Ryan," she whispered, writhing beneath him. Her hands held his head against her, her hips moved in a graceful rhythm that teased his throbbing cock mercilessly. It would be so easy to give in to the demands of his seeking flesh, only he'd waited so long to love Shannon. This time he was going to take things slow.

He continued down her body, kissing and nibbling at her flesh. Letting his hands glide over her curves, and smiling each time she sucked in her breath. By the time he reached her belly she was twisting and gyrating with pleasure. The closer he got to her sex the stronger her movements became. It didn't stop him from reaching the treasure. Like sweet honey, drawing a hungry bear, her heady nectar bewitched him. Before Ryan knew it his tongue was buried deep inside Shannon's sweet body.

"Oh God!" She bucked with surprise. He easily held her while he drank his fill. Using his tongue like a battering ram, Ryan was merciless in his attack. He manipulated her clit, sucking and tonguing the protuberance until her breathing escalated and labored. Sensing he brought her close to climaxing he moved up her body.

"I want you so badly I'm afraid of hurting you." He slammed his mouth down on hers.

"You won't hurt me, Ryan." Shannon gasped when he released her lips.

"God, I hope you're right." Deep down Ryan was more afraid of hurting her emotionally. Giving in to the pleasures of the flesh would be easier to forgive.

He rolled, bringing her with him until she was on top. Lifting Shannon easily, he positioned her over his enlarged cock. He held her for a moment, the muscles in his arms bulging. His gaze lingered on her lovely breasts, before traveling down her belly and to the black curls between her thighs.

*God she was beautiful!* Flushed with passion, her eyes half closed and her swollen mouth pouting as she panted. Slowly he lowered her, sheathing his flesh inside her welcoming body.

He groaned low and closed his eyes, savoring the intense pleasure. The woman he loved was finally his. And while shame for taking his brother's wife would come later, for now, he was going to relish every second of making love with her. Savor every kiss, every caress and every thrust that joined her body to his. Ryan knew if this was all he'd get of Shannon he would take it and be happy to meet his maker.

"*Fuck!*" He shuddered, trying to hold back the hot explosion racing all too soon toward his cock. He stilled their movements for a moment, willing his body to wait. Only Shannon surprised him by tightening her muscles, and taking control. He groaned, she laughed softly, teasingly. Their gazes met and Ryan lost it. He pulled her down for a kiss, rolling until she was pinned beneath him again. Thrusting his hips, he forced her deeper into the bed. His hands tunneled beneath her buttocks and clenched her to him tightly.

"*Oh!*"

Ryan felt her quiver passionately. "That's what you get for teasing me." He whispered against her mouth. There was no denying her climax. He could feel the ripples against his flesh, hear it in the way she caught her breath. He began to move his hips

again, slowly at first but then picking up speed when his own pleasure wouldn't be denied. He held nothing back, slamming into Shannon again and again until a powerful orgasm ripped through his body.

## Chapter Eleven

Shannon's gaze moved slowly over Ryan's magnificent body, surprised at her boldness, amazed at how easy she let him take her earlier. But when she'd glanced up in the bathroom to see him standing in the doorway watching her, naked, something wild and basic had set her blood on fire and taken over to rule her emotions. Her attraction for him pushed to the surface and demanded she do something about it. She suddenly found herself driven by a force she couldn't explain. It was too strong to fight.

Staring up at him now, they had shared too much for her to be embarrassed by her nudity. She could see Ryan was still aroused. He seemed insatiable. His strong muscled body was like a bronze statue, hard and unyielding, except for the life throbbing between his powerful thighs. He was thick and long, reaching out to her, teasing her with the promise of a pleasure she'd already experienced, several times.

She took in the jagged puckered scar running down the length of his thigh that reminded her of his injury. It was a recent wound. Different from the other scars that marred his flesh and were now faded memories.

*How had he found the strength to carry her all this way?* The answer came to Shannon almost immediately. *Ryan was a warrior.* Thinking about the tenderness he'd shown her the third time they'd made love, warmed her inside. He'd worshipped her body as if he loved her.

*And that's impossible, isn't it?*

Slowly her gaze moved up to his face, taking in the firm set of his jaw and his sensuous lips. His nostrils flared with desire. When their gazes met, she caught her breath. The fire burning in his eyes singed Shannon, claiming her as his. She ran her tongue over her swollen mouth, almost afraid.

"You're beautiful," he said, slowly lowering himself onto the bed, and her. He'd gone to the bathroom for a washcloth and was now careful not to put all his weight on her. "I've wanted you for so long, Shannon. Since the moment we stood across each other at my father's grave site, and our eyes met for the first time."

*No! That couldn't be!*

His words shocked her, almost as much as the wet wash cloth he placed between her thighs. It felt cold against her tender skin, yet soothed the fire burning there. A fire he'd started and put out several times, for it to only fan out of control without much effort again. It seemed every time they made love it only made them hungrier for each other.

She arched against his administrations as he tenderly ran the wet cloth over her sensitive mound. "No, Ryan. Don't say that."

"Yes," Ryan whispered against her mouth. "God help me Shannon, but I wanted you more than I wanted to live. You, my brother's wife!"

Before she could respond to his impassioned words, he covered her mouth with his. It was unlike any kiss she'd ever experienced before. Tender and sweet, yet powerful and persuading. She couldn't fight this attack on her senses. *She couldn't fight him!* As his mouth worked against hers, she pushed his words aside and responded, moaning deep. Then she opened her mouth and invited him inside, meeting his tongue with eager thrusts of her own. His low groan revealed his pleasure and his kiss became forceful. The cloth

between her legs quickly replaced with his probing fingers.

"I may never get enough of you."

Shannon wrapped her arms around his neck and arched her body into his, relishing in her power to please him. Surprised at how accepting of their situation she was. But she was hungry and had been for a long time, and so lonely. Slowly she let her hands smooth over his broad shoulders and down his back to where it tapered to his lean hips. Everything about Ryan was hard and threatening yet she had never felt so protected and safe. Her dreams of late had been answered in his arms, and the faceless lover was finally revealed. Only when she realized the impossible situation between them, tears sprang to her eyes.

*How will I ever face the rest of the family after this?*

Ryan halted and looked up. Their gazes met. "Am I hurting you?"

Shannon shook her head, biting down on her quivering bottom lip. She reached up and touched his rugged cheek, a tear running a hot trail down the side of her face. Noticing it, he reached up and gently wiped it away, then took a ragged breath.

"God—what have I done?" He obviously misunderstood her tears, and rolled away. His fist punched the bed between them. "Shannon—"

"Please don't say this was a mistake." Her quiet words drew a sharp surprised glance from him. "I could have stopped you and didn't. I wanted this just as much as you."

"You don't understand!" He sat up and turned his back to her, dropping his feet to the floor.

Shannon's eyes took in his sculptured backside, noticing the numerous scars marring his flesh. Years in the Marines hadn't been kind to him. "There's nothing to understand, Ryan. There's no right or wrong with what we did."

He shook his head no, yet remained silent. Shannon moved behind him. She knew there was something torturing him. Something other than his healing wound, something inside, buried deep. "Then tell me," she coaxed softly. Her breast rested against his back. She felt him tense and placed her hands upon his shoulders.

He snorted. "I was a prisoner of war for a time, Shannon, and they couldn't get me to talk. What makes you think you can?"

*Prisoner of war?* She didn't even want to think about what he'd endured. "The difference is that I don't want to hurt you."

"Purging my soul to you will only accomplish one thing." He turned his face enough to meet her gaze. "Your hate."

Shannon held her breath. What did it have to do with her? She opened her mouth to tell him she could never hate him. Hell, she was already half in love with him. But she didn't get the chance. A slight commotion downstairs indicated the others had returned. *God, she'd forgotten all about them!*

Ryan rose to his feet. "You better go back to your room."

And before Shannon had a chance to prepare herself, he hauled her up against his body and kissed her long and passionately. She melted against him. The flood of warmth flowing through her body showed how easily he aroused her. After heart stopping seconds, he slowly released her and turned away.

Shannon tried to swallow. Why did she get the feeling that in his own way he was saying goodbye? New tears filled her eyes, an emotion she couldn't explain overwhelmed her. She left the bed and moved to the bathroom, where she stopped and leaned against



the door to calm her racing heart. She laid a hand over it, and then dropped to her belly. They'd made love three times without protection. Everything had happened so fast, and their heightened arousal for each other had pushed all rational thoughts from their minds. A quick calculation told her it would be a miracle if she didn't end up pregnant.

*Well, there's nothing I can do about it now.*

"Shannon, honey?"

Marsha! Shannon rushed for her robe. "I'm in the bathroom, Mom."

"That's okay, dear. I just wanted to tell you that we're back. Poor little Alivia is all tucked out. I've laid her down for a nap."

"Thanks. I'll be out in a minute." She tied the sash of her robe and ran her fingers through her hair before opening the door. "Was she good for you?" Shannon paused at the playpen, surprised to see Alivia already asleep.

"Like a little angel. She had a great time playing in the snow." Marsha smiled, and then frowned. "Are you okay? You look a little flushed. I hope you're not coming down with something."

Shannon bit the inside of her cheek. *Only the hots for one impossible Marine.* "I feel fine. It must be the hot shower I took." She glanced back at Alivia, unable to look Marsha in the eyes with her lie.

"Well, I best get down and check my turkey, shouldn't be too long now."

"I'll be down as soon as I dress."

"No rush, dear."

Shannon walked her to the door. Her smile disappeared when the door next to her room opened and Ryan stepped out into the hallway. Their gazes met and he hesitated. Then he caught his mother's gaze and continued toward them. *Ohmygod*, he looked a little flushed in the face, too! Shannon prayed that Marsha didn't notice. It got quiet. Marsha's gaze moved back and forth between Shannon and Ryan, but remained silent.

"I ah, better get dressed." Like a coward, Shannon quickly closed the door. She was in trouble, if she couldn't even look at Ryan without giving away her feelings. Her attraction for him was double now that they'd acted on the physical aspect of it.

Alivia began to stir and Shannon went over to her. Smiling at her little rosy cheeks, she bent to cover her after she changed position and calmed again. She would probably sleep right through dinner.

\* \* \* \*

"*Ohmygod* I'm so full I can't move!" Tom sat back in his chair and rubbed his belly.

"You outdid yourself this year, Mom." Richard pushed his plate away while reaching for his water glass.

"Ditto!" Was called about the room a half dozen or so times.

"I could use a nap," Sandi piped in, covering a yawn. "You know what they say about turkey."

"It couldn't be because you're pregnant," Richard teased, gently rubbing her distended belly.

"It's your fault." She shot her brother Tom and his wife Amber a wink. "And all because you want a shot at the guesthouse out back."

"I knew it!" Amber laughed.

"Can we go out and play?" Nine-year-old Laura interrupted.

“Yeah, can we?” Her younger sister, Michelle chimed in.

“No one wants any pie?” Marsha asked.

“No!” Laughter erupted around the table.

“You know the rules, kids. Before anyone goes outside you have to take your plates to the kitchen and stack them in the sink.” Sheila rose with her plate in hand. The kids followed suit, one by one. “Glasses and silverware, too,” she added.

“Make sure you scrape any food left on them into the trash first.” Marsha called after them.

Ryan leaned back in his chair, the movement drawing Shannon’s gaze. She wondered if he’d purposely chosen a chair as far away from her as possible. “So Mark, what time do you need to be at the airport tomorrow?”

“I scheduled a mid-morning flight out, hoping to miss the crowd.” He turned his attention to Marsha. “I hate leaving so soon.”

She waved him off, smiling. “Don’t worry about it, dear. You’ll be back for Christmas, right?”

“You bet.”

“I’ll drive you in.” Ryan’s gaze moved down the length of the old farm table to Shannon. There was something in his dark gaze. Regret? She couldn’t be sure. They hadn’t spoken since she left his room earlier that day.

“Thanks. I don’t really want to worry about Sheila driving on these icy roads.”

Shannon pulled her gaze away and looked at Marsha, who was quietly examining her. *Did she suspect something?* Or was she just being paranoid?

“I guess I better get up and do my part before I take a nap.” Sandi rose to her feet and reached for Richard’s plate, stacking it on top of hers.

“You’ve been a little quiet, Shannon. Is everything okay?”

Shannon smiled for Marsha’s benefit. “I guess I’m a little tired, Mom.”

“Why don’t you take a little nap, too? I can watch Alivia.”

They both glanced at the toddler, occupied by Dawn and Kelly. It appeared she and the six-year-old twins had bonded. A nap sounded appealing, but what Shannon really wanted to do was talk to Ryan, alone. Her instincts told her he might be thinking about leaving again. That last kiss between them had seemed so...final.

She got up, taking her plate with her. “Thanks, Mom, but if I nap now I won’t be able to sleep tonight.”

“Mommy.”

Shannon turned at the sound of Alivia’s voice. “What baby?”

“Where you going?”

“Mommy’s taking her plate to the kitchen and will be right back, okay?”

Just as Shannon began to push the kitchen door in, it swung toward her and she jumped back to avoid being hit in the face. She laughed as several giggling kids darted past. Her laughter was cut short though, when she careened into someone directly behind her. She glanced up into Ryan’s unsmiling face and caught her breath.

“Oh! Oh! Look who’s standing beneath the mistletoe!” Sheila joked, sneaking past them. “Don’t break family tradition, kids.”

Her glance shot to the ceiling above them, drawing his interest there. Then Ryan shot his sister a glare she only laughed off. Shannon was perplexed. She didn’t recall hanging any mistletoe there. She looked back at the table. Would the guilty one give themselves

away? She knew where all the mistletoe was hung and purposely avoided the obvious areas.

She met Ryan's eyes and wondered if he was going to kiss her. A muscle was evident in his firm jaw and she fought the urge to smooth it away. Deciding to take the initiative and put an end to the awkward moment, she quickly stood on tiptoe and brushed her mouth softly against his, then turned to enter the kitchen.

"Oh no you don't!" Sheila scoffed. "You're not going to get away with a lousy little peck. Family tradition says you have to announce you're kissing, and then do it. A *real* one this time." She folded her arms and raised a brow.

Shannon glanced at Marsha, who was obviously trying to keep from smiling. But it was there, sparkling in her eyes. No one else cared if they got caught smiling and suddenly she and Ryan was the focus of attention.

"What's going on?" Sandi asked, walking past them back toward the table. Sheila just jerked her head up toward the ceiling. It didn't take Sandi long in figuring out what was going on after her gaze landed on the mistletoe. "Oh." She turned back to Ryan and Shannon, amusement on her face. "Got caught, did ya?"

"Well?" Richard asked. "You know what the penalty is for breaking a family tradition."

Shannon knew, but she wondered if Ryan did.

"Refresh my memory," Ryan demanded, not breaking eye contact with Shannon.

"Well, if you don't kiss Shannon then the first single, good looking man who walks through the door on Christmas Eve gets the privilege. I think Dr. Allen is coming, isn't he, Mom?" Sheila didn't wait for a response from Marsha. "He's drop dead handsome!"

It was a bold-faced lie. Not about Dr. Allen being handsome, because he was, but being kissed by the first single man to walk through the door wasn't the penalty for ignoring the mistletoe tradition. Shannon's gaze shot to Sheila, wondering what she was up to. No one refuted her, including Marsha.

Without warning, Ryan pulled her against him, grating the words in a low tone, "Like hell!" If anyone else heard his comment, they didn't reveal it. "We're kissing!" He announced to the room, right before slamming his mouth down on hers.

Shannon expected a brief hard kiss, judging by his current mood, and it started out that way. But then, as if worrying he might be hurting her, his mouth turned soft and coaxing, pulling a gentle moan of hunger from her. The hands gripping her upper arms relaxed slightly, but kept her close. Desire uncoiled in her belly, but all too soon, the kiss ended, leaving her breathless and wanting more.

Someone cleared their throat as they continued to stare at each other. Pretending her emotions weren't spiraling out of control, Shannon spun around and pushed the kitchen door open, disappearing on the other side. Ryan was right behind her. They found themselves alone in the kitchen. Shannon added her plate and silverware with the others in the sink and turned to leave, only to find herself trapped.

By a big, square-jawed Marine with desire blazing in his dark eyes.

Ryan reached around her to get rid of his plate. She held her breath. Their bodies were flush against each other, intensifying Shannon's desire for him.

She reluctantly raised her gaze to his. "You would have only had to take the trash out to the garage for the remainder of your stay." He must think her comment odd.

"I know," he surprised her by admitting.

Shannon forgot the tradition had begun years before she became part of the family.  
“Oh.”

“Just the thought of another man putting his hands on you makes me crazy. I don’t want to think it. And I *don’t* want to see it.” His kiss revealed the emotions racing through his big body. He leaned into Shannon, forcing her against the counter behind her, caressing her breast until her nipple peaked with pleasure.

Moaning, she arched into his caresses, yearning for him to feed the hunger in her body. He made her want him so easily. And Shannon knew he wanted her, too. His arousal was full and hard against her, straining against his zipper. Then, as if realizing where they were and what he was doing, Ryan jerked away. A mixture of anger and desire contorted his rugged face. His fist slammed the cupboard door above Shannon’s head, rattling the contents inside.

*“I want you.”*

Then why did he turn and walk away?

## Chapter Twelve

*Promise me, Shannon. Promise me that if anything happens to me you'll move on. Find someone and fall in love again. Promise me...*

Shannon's eyes bolted open and she was instantly awake. Words uttered by David the day he left for Iraq as clear as if it had been yesterday. Had he sensed he wouldn't be returning home? She remembered telling him that she would, making a promise she thought she'd never have to keep. And now...she shook away the direction her thoughts were heading.

She lay there for a moment listening to the soft snores of her daughter. The clock on the dresser revealed it was six o'clock. Hours before anyone would be up. Decorating the Christmas tree the night before had kept the kids up well past their bedtimes, *and* most of the adults. She tried to will herself back to sleep but it eluded her, thoughts of Ryan and their lovemaking spinning over and over in her mind. He was a thorough lover. Shannon became warm, reliving his firm mouth claiming hers, the tantalizing touch of his hands as they discovered her secrets. The strength of his possession.

Closing her eyes, it didn't take long before her sensuous thoughts had her tingling with awakened desire. As her hands smoothed over her aching breasts, down her quivering belly to her mound, she replaced the caress with Ryan's hands. When her fingers brushed over the silk covering her crotch the urge to slip them inside and satisfy her arousal was tempting. Only Shannon wanted Ryan, not her fingers.

Frustrated, she sat up and reached for her robe. She rose and slipped into it, casting a glance at Alivia. Then went to the bathroom to splash some water on her face and run a brush through her hair. She might as well go downstairs and make some coffee. She was patting the moisture off her face when she heard a noise from Ryan's room. Her gaze went to his door. *Is he up?*

They needed to talk. Shannon went to his door. "Ryan?" She put her ear to the wood and listened for movement. Nothing. Her fingers curled around the doorknob to find it wasn't locked. She hesitated with indecision, biting down on her bottom lip. Should she enter the lion's den? She wasn't afraid of Ryan. But after what they'd shared in his bed, she was fearful it wouldn't take much to get her back into it.

"Ryan?" She slowly opened the door.

"Come in at your own peril, Shannon."

His tone sounded like a man on the edge. He was moving to get out of bed. As he stood, the sheet tangled around his hips, came with him. It dropped, leaving Ryan completely nude. Shannon hesitated in the doorway, trying to meet his eyes in the soft morning light. She sensed his mood was unwelcoming, almost angry.

"Don't you think we should talk?"

"Talk?" A disbelieving sound escaped him. "Lady, the last thing I want to do with you is talk. Haven't you figured that out by now?"

*Is he purposely trying to be crude?* Shannon was momentarily at a loss for words. Neither of them made any movement toward each other. And as daylight began to filter through the sheers at his windows she was able to see his square-jawed expression. He was wearing a look she was all too familiar with. The hardened, battle scarred Marine

that didn't need anything or anyone.

Swiftly, Shannon realized what he was doing and she sure as hell wasn't about to let him turn what happened between them into a meaningless affair.

*What happened in his life that made him feel he didn't deserve happiness, or to be loved?* She fought back tears and walked further into the room, unsure where to begin or what to say.

"Shannon." The threat in his tone was obvious. He didn't move except for the tension in his body.

"I'm not afraid of you, Ryan. I'm afraid *for* you." Shannon could see in his eyes that her comment caught him off guard, but he quickly recovered.

"You should be afraid of me."

"Why? You said you wanted me." His body showed signs of wanting her now.

She had to admit the sight of his erection was a huge turn-on, but she hadn't come here for that. Suddenly, her eyes landed on his duffle bag. It was on the floor at the foot of the bed, opened. Shannon could see there were things stuffed into it as though he was in a hurry. She swung her disbelieving gaze his way.

"You *are* leaving!" Her instincts had been right. He remained quiet, though. "You promised- "

"That was before I screwed the hell out of you."

Shannon gasped. There was no emotion in his tone, none in his eyes. It was as if he'd turned to stone and was determined not to feel anything. What happened after that passionate kiss in the kitchen? Anger and hurt warred for control over her emotions. How could he put their lovemaking into words that sounded so insignificant?

She stepped closer to his rigid stance and slapped him across the cheek before thinking twice. She'd never resorted to violence before, and the action left her shaken. Ryan didn't so much as blink or turn his cheek from the force of her slap. The obvious fact that it hadn't affected him in any way fueled Shannon's anger into a second retaliation. Tears burned her eyes but she refused to let them fall.

When he only clenched his jaw, Shannon swung around to leave. She couldn't talk to him now. A sob betrayed her and she bit her lip to hold back more. She opened the bathroom door but it was slammed shut again before she could escape and she was sandwiched between the door and Ryan's hard unyielding body. He swung her around, grabbed her wrists and raised them over her head against the wood. As tears flowed down her cheeks, she felt his mouth against her ear.

"I'm sorry, Shannon. I don't want to hurt you but it seems that's all I'm doing." His low words were hot against her ear. In spite of her anger, a tingle of awareness raced down her spine. "That comment was uncalled for." His lips caressed the side of her neck. "I can't let you leave here thinking that making love with you didn't mean something to me, when it did."

"I don't understand..." Shannon could barely get the words out. She began to tremble from Ryan's closeness. His masculine scent enveloped her with the woodsy soap he used. She closed her eyes, letting herself drift on the sensual wave of building desire.

Ryan's breathing became heavy. He pressed himself closer to her until she felt his erection against her bottom. Thrusting back seemed as natural as breathing. Someone groaned low.

"I think you should leave now."

His hands slowly uncurled from around her wrists, and drifted, caressing down Shannon's arms toward her shoulders, continuing under her armpits. "Okay." Her voice was shaky.

With palms flattened against the door, she suffered the intense pleasure of Ryan's hands cupping her breasts through her silk pajama shirt. He wanted her to leave but wasn't making it easy for her. In fact, his hands began kneading her vigorously. She sighed with pleasure when his teeth grazed the side of her neck in a tender love bite.

Shannon's hips began to undulate; forcing her bottom against Ryan's hard-on. She relished his weak groan, knowing that she turned him on. The buttons to her top gave way with a gentle tug, and then his bare hands were on her breasts, his thumbs flicking across her nipples. A soft cry escaped her when he lost control and ground his cock into her. Their labored breathing sounded harsh in the quiet room and escalated with their movements.

"*Oh!*" Shannon caught her breath. Ryan turned her around but kept her pinned against the door. The next thing she knew he was lifting her and putting his open mouth on her breasts. With curtailed passion, he explored her swollen flesh, sucking and licking until his intimate kiss ended with a taut nipple in his mouth. As she panted above him he lavished the same attention on her other breast.

*Ohmygod!* "I...thought...you...wanted...me...to...leave," she gasped between breaths.

Ryan halted and glanced up at her. Shannon recognized the look of raw desire stamped across his hard face. "Hell, I don't know what I want. Do you want to leave?" Slowly, Shannon shook her head.

It was the truth. He made her feel so alive, and wanted. He leisurely lowered her against him, making sure her sensitive nipples raked down his chest. Then he kissed her fervently, thrusting his arousal against her. She wished she were naked as he was. She wanted to feel his hot skin against hers, and made due with smoothing her palms over the rough planes of his hard body.

Her hands traveled down his torso and circled around his lean hips to caress his buttocks. Ryan surprised her by breaking away, but all he did was pick her up and carry her to the bed. After laying her down, he stood for a moment staring down at her, eating her up with his eyes. Shannon's gaze roamed down his body to his erection, which jutted out with impressive force. She could hardly wait to have him inside her again, and raised her arms welcoming him.

"I've never seen anyone so beautiful." He dropped down beside her, and pulled her on top of him.

Their lips met, then their tongues. Shannon felt Ryan's hands move down her body to her bikini panties. She arched her hips, encouraging him. Accepting her invitation, he moved the fragile silk aside and explored the wet folds of her mound with his fingers. For a moment, he seemed content to flick his index finger over her clit, manipulating it until it was hard as a rock and she was ready to explode. Lost in desire, Shannon's hand searched for and found his throbbing shaft. Her intimate touch seemed to be his undoing, though.

"Damn!" He gently took her hand and pulled it away from his hot flesh. "I want to be inside you when I come," he panted.

"You will be," Shannon promised him, breaking free of his tender restraint. She

began to kiss him. Starting with his chin, she made her way down his throat and chest, following his defined abs until she reached his belly button. Ryan tensed when she reached his lower belly. She hesitated only a second before continuing toward the object of her intentions. The arousing, pungent scent of his sex drew her to take his cock into her mouth.

“*Oh fuck!*” His shocked tone clearly said he hadn’t been expecting that. Ryan’s hips bucked, forcing his shaft deeper into her mouth. She chuckled softly, running her tongue along the length of his pulsing flesh, savoring the pre-cum dripping from the slit at the tip. His hands clenched into the bed, his breathing sounded almost painful. Smiling, she gently raked her teeth along his flesh, and then broke away to give lavish attention to his balls, which were full and tight.

“Shannon...”

She ignored him, savoring the taste and velvet steel of his sex.

“Nooooo...”

Ryan sounded like a man in pain. Shannon almost stopped to look at him, fearing his leg was bothering him again. But since his hips were moving faster and faster she knew it was another sort of pain he was experiencing.

“Shannon...no...Oh God.”

Smiling inwardly, she thought she was in control until he grabbed her and pulled her up his body. At the same time he rolled, pinning her beneath him. Seconds later, he was buried deep inside her body, coming almost as soon as he entered her. Shannon didn’t realize how close she was to her own orgasm until her body exploded around him. Crying out, she buried her face into his chest, praying their sounds of pleasure didn’t carry beyond the room.

The realization hit Shannon that she was rapidly falling in love with Ryan. The question was...what could she do about it?

\* \* \* \*

Ryan braced himself against the shower wall and let the water beat down upon the back of his neck, shoulders and back for several minutes. He felt drained, both emotionally and physically. Making love with Shannon again only reinforced his love for her. And knew as long as he remained in the same house with her he would take her whenever the opportunity presented itself. The fact that she seemed eager to share his bed told him she must have some feelings for him, too. His gut told him that Shannon wasn’t the kind of woman who slept with someone just for the pleasure of it.

He had to get out of there. His mother was too intuitive, and knew he loved Shannon. It wouldn’t take her long to guess that there was something going on between them. He didn’t want to put Shannon in that position. *Hell, I don’t want to be in that position either.*

Sighing, he turned and let the water run down his chest. *How long can I hide out in the shower?* It had been an hour since Shannon had gone back to her room, gathered up Alivia and headed downstairs. It was almost nine o’clock, and they would be expecting him for breakfast soon. Soon after, he would take Mark to the airport. That would keep him away for most of the day.

He thought about the half-packed duffle bag in his room. It hadn’t taken Shannon long to conclude that he was thinking about leaving again. His unwilling promise not to



go was null and void as far as Ryan was concerned. She *had* to know that. *Damn!* He should never have acted on his desires. Angrily, he turned off the faucets and stepped out of the tub. He wrapped a towel around his hips and went to the sink. A glance in the mirror revealed he could use a shave, but he ignored it. He stared at his reflection for a moment. Seeing a man who wasn't so strong after all, but one made vulnerable by a woman.

He had to get a grip! As a Marine, he'd learned early on to mask his expression so not to give anything away. Especially to the enemy and right now Shannon was the enemy. Only keeping his feelings from her seemed impossible. He couldn't say she'd wormed her way into his heart because she'd been there for a long time. But she'd broken through his tough exterior with frightening ease.

Making a trip to Maine was looking better every minute. Spike had a cabin on a lake there, and they hadn't seen each other in years. They'd joined the Marines at the same time and had become good friends. After six years in the service, Spike decided he didn't want to make it a career, and left to get married. Since then he'd been bugging Ryan to come for a visit.

Hell, maybe he should just go. Get in a little hunting and fishing that Spike was always talking about in his emails. *And some alone time.* Something he got too little of. Could he do that to his family? Just up and leave after spending years away?

Then a thought struck him. Christmas was a month away. He could head to Spike's, spend a few weeks and be back in time for Christmas. It was a good plan. He took a deep breath and headed for the bedroom.

For now, he just had to make it through the day.

## Chapter Thirteen

Breakfast was over and the kitchen spotless.

Ryan and Mark were on their way to the airport. The rest of the adults were outside with the kids. Shannon had just put Alivia down for her nap and returned to the kitchen for a last cup of coffee. She pushed open the door to find Marsha on the other side, sitting at the island and nursing her own cup of steaming brew. Their eyes met, and they both smiled.

"Another cup of coffee is exactly what I had in mind." Shannon made her way to the fresh pot Marsha had obviously made. Clean cups were sitting next to it, along with creamer and sugar.

"I had a feeling." Shannon could hear the smile in Marsha's voice. "Alivia sleeping already?"

Shannon nodded, stirring creamer in her coffee. "All this activity tuckers her out; she's going to miss it when we return home." She didn't want to think about their quiet little townhouse, in their quiet little neighborhood. She was going to miss it, too, and didn't realize until lately how lonely their comfortable lives had become.

"I've been meaning to talk to you about that."

Shannon's brows rose with surprise, as she turned to join Marsha at the island. She wasn't sure what Marsha meant. "About what, Mom?"

"About you and Alivia moving here with me." Shannon's coffee cup paused halfway to her mouth. Her surprise must have shown on her face. Marsha chuckled. "It's not that bad, dear."

"I...you just caught me by surprise."

"I've been thinking about it for a long time." Shannon suspected since David's death. "There's no reason why you and Alivia can't relocate here. Your work is done at home. You could have the guesthouse. It's already set up as an apartment and would give you all the privacy you need."

It was clear Marsha had it all thought out. Shannon sipped her coffee, mulling over what she'd just heard. She valued her independence but could hardly use that as an excuse with the offer of the guesthouse.

*Is Marsha lonely?* For her to ask Shannon to give up the home she and David had shared, it was the only thing that made sense. Especially since, it was where Alivia was born.

"I appreciate your offer, Mom, but- "

Marsha reached across and placed her hand on Shannon's. "Just think about it, that's all I'm asking. No pressure, I promise." She smiled. "And there's no deadline on the invitation."

Relieved, Shannon returned her smile. "Thanks, Mom." She took a drink of coffee. "I will think about it. Alivia and I have a nice place but lately I've been aware we've gotten into a comfortable rut. Maybe a change is what we need."

They sat quietly and drank their coffee for a few moments. But once they made eye contact Shannon realized there was something else on Marsha's mind. Something she seemed hesitant to voice. A sinking feeling warned Shannon that it had something to do

with Ryan. Or, maybe she was feeling guilty over her situation with him, and was imagining things. She pulled her gaze away.

"There's something else."

There, it was said. Shannon steeled herself for what was to come next. Forcing a smile to put Marsha at ease, she waited.

Marsha's voice choked up before she even spoke. "I know you loved David."

That wasn't what she expected. "Yes, very much."

"He loved you so much, Shannon." Marsha appeared to be struggling to get the next words out. "But he's...gone." A shaky breath followed. Tears glistened in her eyes but didn't fall.

Shannon didn't comment, drinking the remainder of her coffee.

"He wasn't a selfish man, honey. None of my children are. When they love it's fierce and forever. But if something were to happen to one of them, they would want their spouses to go on."

*Oh God, what am I supposed to say to that?* Did Marsha suspect something between her and Ryan and this was her way of saying it was okay? She picked up her cup, only to realize it was empty so put it down again. She didn't protest when Marsha took her cup, rose and went to the coffee pot.

"You're awfully quiet, dear." She turned back to Shannon as she stirred creamer into the coffee.

"Well, I guess I'm a little surprised that we're having this conversation."

"What conversation?" Marsha grinned, placing Shannon's cup in front of her as she sat down. "I'm the one doing all the talking."

"Mom, if this is your way of asking if I've met someone, I haven't."

"What about the attraction between you and Ryan?" Shannon went completely still. Talk about dropping a bomb! "I might be old but I'm not blind," Marsha chuckled. "And I recognize the signs of two people attracted to one another."

"Mom, I never thought there'd be anyone for me but David. I didn't want to think about a life without him."

"None of us want to think about being with someone else when we lose the person we love. But life goes on, and eventually it does happen. Most people don't want to be alone." She hesitated. "Do you love Ryan?" Shannon glanced down, aware her silence could be construed as an affirmative. "You don't have to answer that, honey. It's really none of my business. I just wanted you to know that whatever happens, it's okay. David would want you to be happy. You're young. And Alivia should have siblings."

"I know that." Shannon hesitated, struggling to get the right words out. "David made me promise, Mom, that I would go on if anything ever happened to him."

Marsha patted Shannon on the hand. "Enough said." She got up and brought her cup to the sink. "I think this old gal needs a little nap. The last couple of days have caught up to me." She smiled back at Shannon.

Shannon continued to sit there after Marsha left. The house was extremely quiet for a change. And she had a lot to think about.

\* \* \* \*

"Hey, man, we've gone twenty miles and you haven't said a word. What's up?"

Ryan shot a quick glance at Mark before returning his gaze to the road. It was

snowing, and the road was slick and dangerous. The last thing they needed was an accident. He released a deep breath. "Watching the road."

Mark snorted. "Yeah, you expect me to believe that? Your eyes are on the road but your mind is miles back the way we came." Ryan frowned but refused to be sucked into a conversation he didn't want. "You want to talk about it?"

*About what?* "I don't know what you mean." He resisted the urge to reach forward and turn on the radio, knowing the gesture would be an obvious move to Mark to get him to shut up.

"Come on, Ryan. I'm talking about that kiss between you and Shannon, for one."

Even the mention of her name turned him on. He shrugged, trying for nonchalance. "It was just a kiss under the mistletoe, what about it?"

"Are you kidding? That wasn't just a kiss, man. It spoke volumes. Hell...it made *me* hot!"

After a moment of silence, a chuckle escaped Ryan. His gaze met Mark's and he shook his head. "Did Sheila put you up to this third degree?"

"What third degree? I'm just making conversation." Mark hesitated. "You love her, don't you." It wasn't a question.

*Hell, yes I love her.* There was no use denying it. And maybe it would help getting it off his chest. They were adults. It wasn't like Mark was going to blackmail him to keep silent, or run back to the house and tell everyone *his* big secret.

"Is that a problem?"

Ryan frowned. "What?"

"That you love her."

As far as he was concerned, it was. "She's my brother's wife."

"*Was* your brother's wife, Ryan. Sheila is right. You're letting the fact that Shannon was David's wife stand between you. But you're in denial, man. That kiss you two shared told everyone in the room how you two feel about one another."

"Maybe. It doesn't matter, anyway. Nothing's going to come of it." *Who am I kidding?* It didn't get much more personal than making love with someone. "I really don't want to talk about it. After I drop you off at the airport I'm on my way to a friend's place in Maine."

"What?" Mark's tone raised a notch.

Ryan glanced at him. "I'll be back in time for Christmas."

"I wondered when I saw you toss your bag in the back, what you were up to."

"I'm not up to anything." Mark's comment rubbed Ryan the wrong way. He suddenly felt like a coward, running away. "I'm simply heading to Maine to visit an old friend." He swerved to avoid a tree branch lying on the road. His leg was beginning to ache and he started to massage it. The sexual activity with Shannon had forced him to use muscles still on the mend.

Now was a good time to turn on the radio without it being obvious at why. With about thirty miles to go to reach the airport, Ryan wasn't in the mood for talking. He'd call his mother after dropping Mark off, and let her know his plans. She wouldn't be happy but with the explanation that he would be back in time for Christmas, she should be okay.

Ryan thought about Shannon. She would be angry when she realized he wasn't coming back. He didn't usually break his promises but he justified his decision with the

overwhelming need to survive. And getting away from Shannon was the right decision. All his years in the Marines had taught him everything he needed to know about survival, against every kind of enemy. His instincts had kept him alive.

That and thoughts of the woman he loved. Now that he'd tasted her unbridled passion, he didn't know where he was going to find the strength to leave her alone. Mark was right. He focused his gaze on the road but his mind was back at the house, reliving every satisfying moment of possessing Shannon's body.

Damn. If he didn't get a grip he was going to get a hard-on sitting right there next to Mark. He tried to switch his train of thought to his quick trip to Maine, and meeting Spike's wife for the first time. But no matter how hard Ryan tried he couldn't get Shannon out of his mind.

"Face it brother, you're hooked."

For a moment, Ryan had no idea if he was imagining it or if someone had actually spoken the words, until he remembered Mark. He didn't bother looking at him. He didn't want to see the amusement in Mark's eyes that he detected in his tone. He refrained from asking him what he meant.

"I've been talking to you for two minutes."

"Sorry." He slowed down to make the turn onto the back road that would take him to the small, private airstrip where Mark was catching a plane. "What were you saying?"

Mark chuckled. "I asked you how much longer you planned on staying in the Marines."

Ryan shrugged. "I never gave it much thought, why?"

He glanced at Mark long enough to catch his returned shrug. "Just curious. It's gotta be a hard life."

"It's a job."

"Don't you ever think about settling down and having a family?"

"Sometimes." *All* the time when he thought about Shannon. Ryan was thankful when the Smyth's Airport came into view. "When are you planning on flying back?"

"A couple days before Christmas."

Ryan parked his jeep next to the small building Mark would have to go through to catch his flight. "I'll be home about the same time." They exited the jeep and met at the back. Ryan lifted the hatch and grabbed Mark's suitcase. "Want me to wait with you?"

Mark shook his head. "No thanks. Plane takes off in fifteen minutes." He took his suitcase from Ryan. "Have a good time in Maine."

Ryan grinned. "Have a good flight." They exchanged a handshake and both turned and went in opposite directions. Back in the jeep, Ryan pulled out his cell and flipped it open to call his Mom.

\* \* \* \*

"Ryan's heading to Maine to visit with an old friend for a few weeks."

Shannon watched Marsha replace the phone into the receiver. She'd overheard her end of the conversation and had guessed as much. Though Marsha's tone didn't give her away, there was no denying the disappointment on her face.

Their gazes met. "He'll be home for Christmas, though." A small smile formed on her lips.

"Mom...I'm sorry. I think this is my fault." Shannon felt the sting of tears gather in

her eyes. At the questioning look in Marsha's gaze, she glanced away, overwhelmed with guilt. How could she begin to explain without revealing the intimacy she'd shared with Ryan?

"Nonsense, dear. Ryan is a grown man and does what he wants."

"You don't understand, Mom."

"I understand that you two are attracted to each other and aren't dealing with it very well." There was nothing Shannon could say to that. Only it went a lot deeper than attraction. "I know my son and how much he loved David. David looked up to him. The guilt is probably eating Ryan up inside."

"Guilt?"

Marsha reached forward and brushed the hair behind Shannon's ear. "Of loving you."

*Ryan loves me?*

"And watching his brother die."

*What!* "Ryan was there?" Shannon could barely get the words out above a whisper.

For a moment, it seemed Marsha was at a loss for words. "You didn't know?"

Shannon shook her head. "Oh Shannon, I'm sorry! But yes, Ryan was there with David at the end. I'm glad. I wouldn't have wanted David to be alone."

Shannon didn't realize she was crying until a hot tear rolled down her cheek. She reached up and brushed it away. "Why hasn't he said anything to me? How did you find out?"

"Ryan told me after the funeral. He blamed himself for David's death. It was eating him up inside that he'd been there and had been unable to protect him. We talked a long time the night before he left for base."

"Oh, Mom..." Shannon turned away, biting down on her bottom lip to hold back a sob. That explained a lot. She recalled the nightmare he'd had that night, when he'd called out David's name. He was still tormented by his brother's death and witnessing it. Oh God. Her heart ached for Ryan. He blamed himself for David's death, and adding to his guilt, he wanted her.

*How much did he hate her for that?*

## Chapter Fourteen

It was the day before Christmas and still no sign of Ryan. The occasional phone call seemed to satisfy Marsha, but left Shannon feeling lonelier for him more than ever. She'd spent hours, mostly during Alivia's nap time, walking and dwelling on *them*. Her nights and dreams were filled of the two of them, reliving every blissful moment they'd spent in each other's arms. The depth of his passion had surprised her, because he held nothing back. But his thoroughness as a lover didn't. Ryan didn't do anything halfway. He was too disciplined for that. She supposed that was the Marine in him.

She wasn't exactly sure what word described their relationship. The most obvious came to mind, physical. It was definitely that. During the past few days she'd come to accept the fact that she'd fallen deeply in love with Ryan. And if what Marsha had said was true and he loved her too, what did that mean for their future?

*Will his guilt over David keep Ryan from wanting a future with me?*

Shannon's heart went out to the tough Marine because that's what Ryan was. In war he faced death every day, and probably unflinchingly, but she had a feeling what he was forced to face in civilian life was a thousand times harder. He seemed almost uncomfortable with his family at times. Like someone who'd been away so long they were out of the loop, and no longer had anything in common with the others. At times, he sat back and remained quiet, just watching.

She wrapped her wool scarf more closely around her neck, thankful the barn was within sight. During the day, the warm sun took the bite off the freezing temperature but as late afternoon moved toward evening the sky became blotchy and the temperature dropped. Lately it snowed in the evenings, much to the kids delight when they woke the next morning to snowball fights and sledding.

As Shannon rounded the corner of the barn, the first thing her gaze fell on was the house, and then Ryan's jeep. *He's back!* She halted abruptly, her heart skipping a beat. Elation at seeing him again, then fear of the unknown filled her senses. What would he be like after a month away? She couldn't deal with the stone-faced, almost unfriendly man who'd walked through the door that first night.

Tears clouded her vision, and Shannon knew there was no way she was going to be able to face him, or anyone, and try to explain them. She couldn't explain them to herself. She glanced at the barn. There were several bales of hay just beyond the entranceway. She could wait it out there for a few minutes until her emotions were under control again. But the opportunity to escape notice passed when Ryan suddenly appeared. He opened the door to his jeep, removed something off the seat and then shut the door again. As he turned to head back inside he glanced over, and their gazes met.

He halted mid-stride. Shannon held her breath, unable to look away. His hard expression didn't give away anything of what he might be feeling. It crossed her mind that she looked like an idiot just standing there, watching him. She reluctantly forced her feet to move, fixing a smile on her mouth. Pretending nonchalance didn't come easy, especially when her heart was racing inside.

"Hi." His response was a curt nod and the slightest softening in his eyes. "I'm glad you came back, Ryan."

"I keep my promises." His gaze shifted down Shannon's body. She must look like a shapeless woman to him, bundled up in heavy snow clothes and boots.

"Even David's?" Shannon could tell her comment caught Ryan by surprise. She hadn't said it to hurt him, but a flash of pain crossed his face so fast that she might have imagined it. She didn't let fear of what his reaction would be prevent her from reaching up and touching his chiseled jaw. "We all make promises." Was that her husky tone?

His jaw clenched, a muscle twitching. "For three weeks I couldn't get you out of my mind."

"Nor I you," she whispered.

"You don't understand."

"I understand more than you know."

"No." He shook his head. "But you will. Later, when we're alone, we'll talk."

That was a good idea. They needed to talk. Needed to get everything out in the open and go on from there. Then Ryan surprised Shannon by lowering his face and planting a soft kiss upon her lips. She strained into it, wanting a deeper more satisfying pressure, only he pulled back. The slight grin on his face was promising and tugged at her heartstrings.

"And there'll be more time for that later, too."

Shannon didn't know where she found the courage to ask, "Promise?"

The pupils in his eyes darkened. "You can bet on it."

The door opened and a half a dozen kids rushed through, too bundled up to be recognizable. They ran down the steps and skirted around Shannon and Ryan screaming and giggling, heading toward the garage where Shannon knew they'd retrieve their sleds. They had an hour before dark and dinner would force them back inside. Her gaze followed them until they disappeared inside the garage.

Neither of them was aware the door was still opened until a voice cleared and drew their attention. "Are you two coming in or are you going to stand there staring at each other?" Amber stood in the doorway, a smile on her face. Three more children squeezed around her to get out.

"Mommy."

Shannon glanced down at her daughter. "Hi, peanut."

"She just got up." Amber stepped aside for Shannon and Ryan to come in. "I made a fresh pot of coffee a few minutes ago."

"Great! I need thawing out." Shannon kicked off her boots on the mat next to where Ryan had slipped his off.

"Want to help me fix mommy and Uncle Ryan some coffee, sweetie?" Amber held her hand out to Alivia as she spoke. Nodding eagerly, the toddler went with her to the kitchen.

Shannon unzipped her jacket and slipped out of it with Ryan's assistance. His hands dropped to her shoulders and turned her around. Facing one another made her uncomfortable. They were close, she could smell his musky aftershave and combined with his natural scent, it a powerful aphrodisiac. His powerful neck was in front of her and she tried to focus her attention there, until the gentle tug of her scarf forced her to raise her eyes.

His nostrils flared. "Damn I missed you."

She found herself pulled up against him. His indrawn breath drowned out her gasp.



“Are we going to talk now?” she teased softly.

“No.” He slowly lowered his head. “But I have to have a kiss now, baby. I’m not strong enough to resist you.”

She offered her mouth because it was as natural as breathing. Expecting another gentle kiss like the one outside, Shannon was taken aback when Ryan’s mouth moved over hers with thorough roughness. The longer he kissed her, the closer he drew her against him, until she was aware of every straining muscle beneath his clothes. His powerful thighs flexed against hers, his chest flattened her aching breasts and his biceps tightened beneath her fingers where she was gripping him.

It didn’t seem to matter that anyone could enter the room and see them entwined. With a persistent nudge from Ryan’s tongue, she opened her mouth, eagerly letting him slip inside. Exploring tongues caused their desire to escalate and burn out of control. Shannon whimpered weakly beneath his kiss, lost in the moment. Eager for it go further, knowing that it couldn’t. When Ryan finally broke the kiss, they were both shaking and out of breath.

He leaned his forehead against hers. “It’s a damn good thing there’s a house full of people or we’d be making use of that couch in the other room right now. I want you, Shannon. Hell, I want you up against this door.” He pulled slightly away to meet her eyes. “But until we talk and there’s nothing left unsaid between us, it’s not going to happen.” With a deep breath, he stepped away. “It can’t.”

*Is he talking about being with David when he died?* She wondered if he thought she’d blame him for that in some way, or that it would shape her feelings for him. Shannon could tell him the truth that Marsha had already told her. But she sensed it was important for Ryan to tell her. He needed to get it off his chest, and start the healing process. It was obvious he did blame himself for David’s death.

She yearned to tell Ryan that she loved him. That she probably had for a long time. Looking at him now, seeing his determination, strengthened Shannon for what she had to do. They both had secrets to share.

“When?”

“Tonight, when everyone’s gone to bed and the house is quiet.”

“Where?”

He grinned. “In the family room. I wouldn’t dare for you to come to my room.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“Oh, baby,” he chuckled, “I don’t trust *me*.”

His husky admission caused a ripple of pleasure through her.

“Coffee’s getting cold you two!”

Ryan nodded toward the kitchen door. “We’ll be right in.”

Shannon felt his gaze follow her until she pushed the kitchen door in and it swung shut behind her. Amber was sitting at the island, playing patty cake with Alivia, who was sitting on top in front of her. Two cups of coffee were off to the side.

“You and Tom need another baby.”

“Hey, I’ll take as many as God wants to give us.”

“Mommy!”

Shannon went over and gave Alivia a kiss on the cheek. “How’s my little girl? Are you playing patty cake with Aunt Amanda?”

“Ya.” She put her little hands over her eyes” Peek-a-boo!”

Shannon mimicked her. "Peek-a-boo! Where is everyone?"

"Tom and Richard are on their way to pick up Mark at the airport. The women folk are wrapping gifts for Santa tonight. Once the kids are down, we'll put the presents under the tree. I'm the lookout. The kids won't come in until I call them."

"Should I start dinner?"

"Nope. We finally convinced Mom to let us order in pizza. The kids love it and that way she won't have to cook both tonight and tomorrow, and *we* won't have the cleanup."

"Mom likes tradition," Ryan said upon entering the kitchen.

"Yeah, but Mom was the one who brought it up in the first place, brother dear. The whole family, *who was here*," she added, "took a vote and pizza won."

Shannon had to agree with Ryan. That didn't sound like Marsha, *unless* she was having one of her migraines. She took a sip of her lukewarm coffee and watched with interest as Alivia held her arms out toward Ryan. He scooped her up into his arms and tolerated her little hands running over his jaw. He snapped at her fingers, pretending to bite them, and she squealed with delight.

"Besides, Mom's fighting one of her migraines." Amber confirmed.

"Is she in bed?"

"Most likely. She wants to be well and ready for the tree in the morning. Did she know you were coming home today?"

Ryan nodded. "I called her last night. I'll wait and see her in the morning."

"I better go call the brood in, it's turning dark. By the time they get their winter wear off, baths and jammies on, the pizza should be here."

"Can I help?"

Amanda paused at the doorway. "You both can. Baths will go faster if we divide the responsibilities. I'll dry. You two can fight over who washes and who dresses."

Shannon couldn't help smiling at the look on Ryan's face. "Something tells me this will be a new experience for you."

His gaze dropped down her body and back up again. She wondered what he was thinking. Aware she'd looked better; she tried to ignore her food stained turtleneck, thanks to Alivia, and faded jeans that fit a little too snug. But the way Ryan was staring at her said her disheveled appearance didn't matter. He made her feel desirable.

"I've learned to adapt to almost anything over the last few years. I'll do my best to keep up."

## Chapter Fifteen

“Last one,” Shannon laughed, rinsing Alivia off and handing her to Amber. Amber wrapped her into a large towel and began to rub her down, while Shannon pulled the plug and prepared to clean the tub. Ryan was in the process of helping Michael pull his pajama top down over his damp head. The older kids hadn’t needed supervision with their baths and now all of them, with the exception of Alivia, were on the floor in front of the TV watching Christmas shows with their mothers below. Contentedly eating pizza.

“She’s all yours, brother.” Amber handed Alivia to Ryan. “Now it’s my turn. I’m going to grab a quick shower. Then I’ll be down for dinner.” She didn’t give them a chance to protest, if they were going to. Without another word, Amber headed for her part of the house, the coveted guesthouse.

Finished with wiping the tub down, Shannon turned to watch Ryan and Alivia. He’d managed to get her top on, but now that it was time to put on her diaper. She wondered if he would ask for help. Her eyes rounded when he took care of it as if he’d done it hundreds of times. Then he pulled on Alivia’s bottoms and snapped them to her top. He pulled her to her feet and into his arms.

“All done, princess.” Alivia laid her head on his shoulder and rubbed her eyes.

Shannon caught her breath at the picture of Ryan giving her daughter a gentle kiss on her forehead. The tender moment made her heart swell.

“She’ll be asleep in a few minutes. A bath this time of night always does the trick. Want me to take her?”

He met her eyes. “If I can manage her mother, I think I can manage her.”

Shannon’s mouth dropped and she could only stare when Ryan turned and headed toward her bedroom. She caught up with him in time to see him cover Alivia up with her favorite blanket and slip the pacifier into her waiting mouth.

He stood and walked back to her, his eyes eating her up the whole way. She really looked a mess now, as a glance in the bathroom mirror earlier had shown. But the look in Ryan’s eyes made her feel sexy. Her blood turned warm with aching need. It seemed a lifetime since they’d last made love. *Is that how their night was going to end?* Every look, every move revealed he was like a tightly strung bow, *ready for action*. Shannon knew when they came together again it was going to be explosive. Just the thought caused an ache of hunger to throb between her thighs.

“You’re wet.”

*What?* His gaze lingered on her breasts and his meaning became clear. She glanced down and plucked the clinging sweater away. Her jeans were wet, too. She smiled. “I’m going to get a nice hot bubble bath.”

His eyes darkened. “I think I’d better leave while I can.” He reached forward and ran the back of his hand against Shannon’s cheek. “Nice.”

Shannon couldn’t help herself. She turned into his caress and brushed her open mouth against his knuckles. She trembled and closed her eyes. *God I want him!* Didn’t he realize that?

“If you only knew how much I want you right now.” He threaded his fingers through her tangled hair. Shannon moaned softly. “I can’t believe I’m going to walk away.”

Neither could she, but he did walk away. Shannon felt a cool draft and knew he was gone before she opened her eyes again. She leaned against the wall and willed her body to calm down. She glanced at the clock. It would be hours before they would be able to have that talk. She headed for the bathroom for her bath.

\* \* \* \*

Ryan took a sip of his drink and stared off into space, deep in thought. The children had gone to bed an hour ago. After a careful check to make sure they were all asleep, their parents were busy putting Christmas gifts beneath the huge tree. Light conversation and laughter filled the room. Someone had put on some Christmas music. A fire blazed in the hearth, giving the room a romantic atmosphere. Burning pine scented the air.

"Something to eat?"

He glanced at the tray in Sandi's hands. It was loaded with homemade cookies and candies but nothing appealed to him. He'd passed on the pizza, too, in favor of a glass of the good scotch Mark had brought back with him from California.

"Maybe later, sis."

"Hey, when we're done putting the gifts out let's play a game." The suggestion came from Tom.

Laughter followed. "Like what, spin the bottle?" His wife Amber teased.

"That's not a bad idea!"

"How about strip poker?" Sheila joined in.

"Yeah, wouldn't I look cute?" Sandi added, sticking out her belly.

"You are cute." Richard took Sandi into his arms and kissed her tenderly. "Will the prettiest woman in the room dance with me?"

"This is what came of the last time we danced together." Sandi smiled and rubbed her stomach.

"Well, you won't have to worry about that this time." They began to turn slowly to the music.

"Has anyone checked on Mom lately?" Next to the chair Tom was sitting was a table with a bowl of nuts on it. He grabbed a handful and popped one in his mouth as he waited for an answer.

"I just did." Shannon's soft voice drew Ryan like a powerful magnet. The sight of her turned him on quicker than a lightning strike. Their gazes met across the room. "She's sleeping peacefully."

She looked like an angel, all soft and sexy, her hair back into a loose ponytail. The scarlet robe she wore was cinched around her waist, flowed over her hips and revealing how shapely she was. A deep cleavage hinted at her full breasts. He wondered what she was wearing beneath it. She looked like a woman ready for love. The fragrance of her shampoo or soap, or both, reached him from across the room and sharpened his senses. *She smells like heaven.*

*Shit!* He was getting a hard-on, right there in a room full of family members. He swallowed the rest of his scotch and set the empty glass on the mantle.

"Hopefully she'll wake without a headache in the morning." Amber sank down on her husband's lap.

"I hope you don't mind but Mark and I are going to turn in." All eyes went to Sheila. "We haven't seen each other in a month and want to, ah, talk privately."

“Are you blushing?” Amber chuckled.

Sheila ignored her, smiling. “See you all in the morning.” Taking Mark by the hand, she led him from the room.

“Come on, sweet.” Tom nudged Amber to her feet. “Let’s have a dance before we turn in too.” They joined Richard and Sandi in the center of the room.

Ryan walked slowly to Shannon. Words were unnecessary. She went into his arms willingly and they began to move slowly to a nostalgic Christmas song. Her arms wound around his neck and his encircled her waist. He pulled her tight against him, needing to feel her close. It didn’t help diminish his hard on.

“Are you hungry?” It occurred to Ryan that neither of them had eaten dinner yet. He nuzzled her just beneath the ear, breathing in her scent deeply. Shannon shook her head, and then trembled when his tongue came out to lick her. “I just might have *you* for dinner.”

“I like the sound of that.”

His cock throbbed against her when she sank her teeth into his neck. Some pain brought pleasure and that move was definitely one of them. Ryan let his hands glide slowly down the curve of her rump and just for a moment forced her to ride against his hard-on. Their breathing escalated. *Damn...if I’m not careful I can come without half trying.* And they still needed to talk.

Shuddering, he released his grip on her. “David died in my arms, Shannon.” Hell, he hadn’t meant to blurt it out like that but it was too late to take it back now. He pulled away to look down into her eyes.

They stopped moving. And for the first time Ryan noticed they were completely alone. The others had gone and he hadn’t even noticed them leaving. In the field that kind of detachment gave the enemy the upper hand and killed men. He drew himself back to the situation at hand. Waiting for Shannon’s reaction terrified him far more than looking down at the barrel of a rifle. Her sorrowful gaze became bright with unshed tears. Would she blame him in some way?

He decided to plow right on. “Our unit walked into an ambush. In the space of seconds, everything went chaotic. No one had time to prepare. Gunfire was exchanged on both sides. David was hit almost immediately.” Ryan paused to take a deep breath. “He died shortly after.”

“I’m glad he wasn’t alone, but I’m sorry it had to be you.”

“I should have taken that bullet, Shannon.”

“Why do you say that?” She reached up and caressed his cheek. “Because you’re a big, tough Marine and conditioned to think that way because you’re a loner and have no wife or children? You think because David was a family man that he should have been spared? God has his plan for us, Ryan. Things happen for a reason.”

The single tear slipping down her cheek tore at his heart. He didn’t want her understanding. He’d had to live with David dying in his arms, and the thought that maybe he could have done something more to save him. *That maybe he hadn’t wanted to save him.* He’d loved his brother but survivors’ guilt had put that thought in his mind more than once. Until he almost believed it.

“You don’t understand.” Ryan hesitated, aware that what he was about to say would probably make Shannon hate him, or at the very least doubt his intentions. Only he knew there could be no future for them if there were any secrets between them. “I’ve wanted

you since the moment I saw you, standing over my father's grave," he reminded her. "Why do you think I stayed away all these years?"

Ryan gave her time to digest his words. He watched her carefully, as a gauntlet of emotions crossed her expression. The tears in her eyes didn't disguise the fact that she was searching for understanding.

"No- "

"David's last words were that I take care of you and Alivia. I promised him that I would. My God...his dying wish was my salvation. Don't you see that, Shannon?" She shook her head slowly, in denial. "I gained *everything* that day."

Tears made their way down Shannon's cheeks. *What was she thinking?* When she stepped away, Ryan let her go. His gaze followed her to where she sank down on the sofa. Drawing her legs up, she hugged her knees close to her body. Deciding she needed a moment, he went to the liquor cabinet and poured her a glass of wine. Then he sat down next to her.

"It nearly killed me the day I got the news David had been killed." She took a shuddering breath. "And now you're telling me that I'm the reason you've stayed away from your family all of these years? Mom, everyone, have missed you so much." Her gaze, swimming with hurt, sought his. "Why are you telling me this now?"

"You deserve to know the facts."

"Don't you mean the truth?"

"Isn't it the same thing?"

"Is that the only reason you're telling me?"

He clenched his teeth and remained silent.

"Tell me, Ryan. You said we needed to talk. So talk."

"It's one of the reasons. I told you that I've wanted you from the very beginning, Shannon. Think about it. With David conveniently gone..." He couldn't finish the thought. "Draw your own conclusions."

She just stared at him. But Ryan could see by her expression that she was working things out. He waited for dawning to register, and the accusations to begin. Not for a second did he believe that their intimate relationship would buffer her response. If she thought he let his own brother die, or at the very least didn't do anything to help him, so he could have her, he would know soon enough.

Ryan knew the second she was done analyzing everything. Fresh tears swelled in her eyes and she shook her head no slowly, as though in disbelief. "Why are you planting these seeds of doubt in my mind? Do you honestly believe what you're implying?" Ryan glanced away, clenching his jaw. Guilt had made him think it more than once but in the end he knew the answer was noHell no he didn't believe that, but he had to make sure *she* didn't believe it. He knew his silence condemned him but Shannon had to find the answer without his help. Only then would she believe it. "I'll never believe that you didn't do *everything* to save David. You loved him."

"Yes." He paused significantly. "But I wanted you more."

"Do you *want* me to believe that you let him die?" In spite of the tears, her tone was sharp with growing anger. "Do you know how angry that makes me?"

"I can't help what you believe." Ryan knew he wasn't doing anything to make himself look better in her eyes.

She took the wine with a shaking hand, and brought the glass to her lips. He watched

it pass through her lips, watched her throat work as she swallowed. But when he met her gaze he couldn't take the accusing hurt and anger reflected there. He leaned back, linked his hands behind his head and closed his eyes, feeling anything but nonchalant.

"It's as if you *want* me to believe the worst. Why aren't you fighting for yourself?" Ryan steeled himself, refused to let her trembling voice get to him. "I made a promise to David, too. That if anything happened to him I would move on and find someone else. I never *wanted* there to be anyone else." A sob escaped her and he felt her leaving the couch. "You know what I think, Ryan?"

He didn't open his eyes but she continued anyway. "I think this is your way of keeping the wall you've spent so many years erecting around your heart there. You might be a big tough Marine but you're really a coward."

Ryan's eyes snapped open at that. Instant anger surfaced and he clenched his teeth. Shannon was the only one who could call him that and get away with it.

"You're afraid of *feeling* something, aren't you? You've become a...a machine..." Emotion got the most of her and a sob escaped her. He wondered if she really believed what she was saying.

"You believe that crap?" His tone was sharp. "After what we've shared?"

"No, but I think you do. I think you want to believe it so you can go on with your life as you have been, detached and alone. Maybe you like the lonely life you've carved out for yourself after all these years. You don't have to be responsible for anyone but yourself. You don't have to *care* for anyone." She sobbed, and wiped angrily at her wet cheeks. "And making love isn't the same as loving someone. You don't need a heart for that. Just a willing woman and a hard- "

"Shannon," Ryan interrupted. It was taking all his will power not to grab her and prove her wrong. *He loved her!* If he didn't make love to her again, nothing would change how he felt about her. "Enough."

It was as if his sharp command took the fire right out of her. He watched her expression become blank, the emotion in her liquid gaze harden. "I need to be alone right now. I need to think." She walked away.

*Which is exactly what Ryan wanted her to do.* He let her go, even though he wanted to pull her down onto the couch and make her understand, and love her. But feelings for Shannon overruled his body's needs. Though she hadn't said it he sensed she loved him, too. And any future together, or lack of, would be decided on how she came to terms with the seed he'd implanted in her mind. Ryan knew that unless she was convinced David's fate had been in God's hands, he would continue to have his own doubts.

If he and Shannon were going to have a chance at happiness together the promise was the only thing that needed to be between them.

## Chapter Sixteen

Shannon twisted and turned in her bed, but it wasn't sleep that eluded her. She couldn't get her conversation with Ryan out of her mind. It broke her heart that she'd been the cause of his staying away from his family all these years. It saddened her that he doubted himself where David's death was concerned. And most of all, it tore her up inside that he'd made her love him, yet wasn't *fighting* for her.

*For them.*

He was a Marine for goodness sake! They fought for their country, didn't that include the women they loved? Had Ryan become so detached from his emotions, and for so long, that he didn't know how to be anything *but* a cold blooded fighter? Shannon refused to believe that. She'd seen him with Alivia, and his siblings. Ryan was a complex man. He held a lot of himself back, but when they were together, she saw the flesh and blood man with *all* his human traits.

She didn't for one minute think that if there'd been a way to save David he would have done it, and probably risked his own life or given it in the process. His integrity as a Marine and his love for David would have never allowed Ryan *not* to react to the situation. No matter how much he wanted her. No, she was convinced his guilt was based solely on surviving and for wanting her. Shannon believed that with all her heart.

She turned on her side and punched her pillow. Damn him! Since coming to bed, she'd gone back and forth from understanding to anger. Her world was turned upside down again and this time it was for the love of a hard-edged Marine. Who apparently didn't feel he deserved love, and was content to let it slip through his fingers when it did come his way.

The burn in her eyes warned Shannon she was about to cry again, more from frustration than anything else. He had a nerve, dumping his conscience on her and then letting her walk away. It would have been nice had he defended himself in her eyes instead of leaving her to figure out the truth on her own. Shannon wasn't a violent person but the longer she laid there thinking about it the angrier she became. She punched her pillow again before tossing it away and rolling onto her back. She glared up at the ceiling.

*If Ryan really loved me, he'd fight for me!*

She glanced at the clock. Would he still be awake? She didn't care! This was important and needed to be resolved between them. And it was clear she wasn't going to get any rest until it was. With a huff, she yanked back the covers and jumped to her feet. She had no idea what she was going to do, but knew that doing *nothing* wasn't the answer.

As quiet as she could without waking Alivia she stormed to the bathroom door, opened it and closed herself into the darkened room. She leaned against it for a moment, wondering if she was doing the right thing, if she even had the courage. Not bothering to turn on the light she took a steadying breath, made her way to the connecting door, and opened it. Her gaze zeroed in on Ryan's bed, where a ray of moonlight illuminated it, but he wasn't there.

Shannon hesitated, and tried to focus her gaze against the darkness, searching out the corners of the room. Movement drew her gaze to the window at her left, closest to the



door. Ryan stood there, silhouetted by the moonlight, staring off into the star-studded sky. His hands braced on either side of the window.

Her feet were quiet on the carpet as she made her way to him. She had no idea what she was going to say or do, only that she had to work out some of her emotions churning inside her or go crazy. As silent as she was something gave her away because Ryan slowly lowered his arms and turned his head. It was too dark to meet his gaze yet she knew he was looking at her. His stony stature lit the flame of the emotions Shannon was barely holding in check.

He turned slightly as though to greet her, yet remained quiet. A sob escaped Shannon and her anger disappeared instantly when her gaze met the glitter of his eyes.

*"I love you!"* Tears fell unchecked with her impassioned words. *"I love you!"*

Ryan pulled Shannon against him with a low sound of pain. Then his mouth swooped down on hers and she was lost. He seemed to absorb her into him. Every inch of her was experiencing his masterful, healing kiss. A sharp zing of arousal began somewhere in the center of her, branching out in all directions that exploded into tiny pleasurable waves. His embrace nearly squeezed the air from her lungs but she didn't care. She would easily die a happy woman in his arms.

*"I love you, Shannon. Never doubt that."* His mouth returned to hers.

Whimpering, she welcomed his tongue into her mouth and arched hungrily into his hard body. Shannon wanted so much more from Ryan and she wanted it fast. His response to her declaration fueled her desire and calmed any fears of what he was feeling. He held nothing back, barely tempering his rough passion as his hands began to caress her, following her curves down her back and bottom. His hands cupped her flesh and he pulled her closer to his growing arousal.

Shannon whimpered as a flood of desire soaked her crotch. Losing control, she sank her teeth down onto his bottom lip. Ryan lost control by taking the edges of her pajama top and jerking it apart, tearing the buttons off in his haste to expose her. He pulled away and put his mouth on her breast, nibbling and sucking his way to the erect nipple. Shannon's hands skimmed down to the drawstring of his bottoms. It didn't take much to pull it loose. Then she slipped her hand inside.

*"Shit!"* Ryan shuddered. He thrust into Shannon's hand.

*"So hot..."* Shannon murmured, exploring him from the base of his hard flesh to the tip with a lingering caress. *"Velvet over steel. I want you inside me."* She was glad it was dark. It gave her the courage to say things she'd never said before. *"Love me, Ryan. I want it hard and fast."*

*"Be careful what you wish for little girl."* His mouth moved on to her other breast. His hands made quick work at removing her top all the way. Without breaking stride, he moved onto her bottoms, slid them over her hips and down to the floor. His unexpected action forced Shannon to release his hard flesh. Only she wasn't complaining. On the journey back up her body, he took the time to explore her dripping pussy.

*"Oh!"* Her knees nearly buckled when his tongue darted between her legs, gliding directly over her throbbing clit.

*"So sweet."* He tasted her deeper. After a few more quick jabs, he rose to lift her into his arms.

*"Your leg..."*

*"We aren't going far."*

He reached the bed, laid her down and stood back. Shannon watched his movements in the moonlight as he removed his bottoms. Her breath caught when he turned and she caught the silhouette of his powerful cock jutting out from his molded body. Then he joined her on the bed. He reached for her and finally their naked bodies were flush against each other.

He kissed her. "Say it again."

She smiled. "I love you, Ryan."

He kissed her, longer this time. "I dreamed of the day I'd hear those words pass through your lips, Shannon. Until you came along I never wanted a life outside of the Marines, I never wanted a family. Within seconds of gazing into your beautiful eyes, it all changed. You made me want the world."

This time Shannon kissed him. She wanted to reassure Ryan about David, about *everything*, but there would be time enough for that later. There was no room in their bed for memories. "Love me, Ryan."

Groaning low, Ryan twisted until Shannon was beneath him, kissing her long and hard. All she wanted was for him to love her. The force of his kiss opened her mouth and their tongues meshed into the mating dance. Hot desire exploded through Shannon, turning her bones to mush. She spread her thighs and arched under him, straining toward the object of her pleasure. He was big, hard and pulsating wildly. *Why doesn't he enter me?*

Shannon thought she was getting her wish when he reached between them, but he only took his penis in his hand and brushed the head of it back and forth over her clit. It was pleasure beyond bearing, and he brought her to a quick orgasm.

"Ryan!" She cried out against his shoulder before clamping her teeth into his flesh. A mini orgasm claimed her and she strained more toward his teasing flesh. "Please...I need you!" She was trembling uncontrollably.

With a raw groan, Ryan thrust his hips, impaling her. A soft cry of fulfillment rushed through her open lips. She closed her eyes and took a moment to savor the feeling of being filled so satisfyingly by him. They were both panting heavily. When he didn't move she peered up at him.

Ryan supported his upper body, his arms braced on the bed on either side of her. Their gazes met in the darkness. "God, I love you." His soft declaration and the emotion in his voice brought fresh tears to Shannon's eyes. "You complete me, Shannon." He kissed her tenderly and pulled out of her to thrust back in again.

"I never thought it possible to find love twice in a lifetime." She tightened her muscles around him and squeezed.

He shuddered. "You keep doing that, sweetheart, and you'll push me over the edge."

"I like the sound of that." Shannon did it again. "I told you, Ryan, I want it fast and I want it hard."

"So you did." His hand traveled up her thighs, hips and waist until he found her aching breast. Her nipples were already hard and tingling and his fingers against them sent a quiver down her spine. His hips began to move, gradually picking up speed. "I aim to please."

Shannon groaned low each time Ryan entered her. Every time his cock slid into her body, the entire length caressed her sensitive clit, bringing her closer to another orgasm. He was a thorough, skillful lover and like the times before he made sure Shannon enjoyed

their coupling just as much as he did. She let her hands trail down his backside and over his taut buttocks, urging him even faster.

Ryan's mouth latched onto her breast. Shannon arched into his teasing caress, only to slam back upon the mattress when he pounded into her. Heavy panting filled the room as they both climbed the pinnacle of ultimate pleasure together. But just when Shannon thought she had reached it Ryan surprised her by withdrawing totally from her body. He kissed her roughly, and then flipped her over. With an arm beneath her waist he hauled her to her knees. Before she had time to grasp his intentions he entered her from behind.

*Ohmygod!* The position made him feel bigger and harder than ever. Added to the pleasure was the feel of his balls slapping against her with each powerful thrust. His speed took her breath away. As he pounded into her, his hands caressed her swaying breasts. Just as Shannon peaked to orgasm, his hands moved to her hips and he clutched her to him tightly and grunted, releasing a stream of hot cum.

"God, Shannon, if I hurt you..."

His shrinking flesh caused her to twitch wildly as it moved against her sensitive clit. Out of breath and exhausted, all she could do was collapse onto the bed with a dreamy smile. Ryan chuckled and fell with her, before rolling to the side.

"You did hurt me, Ryan." Shannon rolled onto her back. When he opened his mouth to speak, she reached up and put her finger against his lips. "No, listen to me." When she was sure he complied she lowered her hand again, but not before grasping his hand in hers. "I was so angry with you earlier, not for anything you said, but for what you were leading me to believe. For what I sensed *you* believed."

"Do you know what the truth is?"

"I think so." She brought his hand up and kissed his palm. "I'll never believe you let David die so you could have me. If I had any doubts, I wouldn't be here now. I believe being a Marine for so long has turned you into a hard man, but the right woman will take care of that."

"You think you're the right woman?"

His grin warmed Shannon's heart and gave her the confidence to answer. "I know I am." They exchanged a sweet kiss. "You need some softness in your life, Ryan."

"And how do you propose doing that?"

Shannon rolled until she was sprawled on top of him. "By loving you." She playfully nibbled at his chin. "And I do love you, Ryan. As much, if not more, than I loved David." She felt it was important that he knew that.

"Till death do us part?"

Shannon's heart stopped and she halted abruptly. The silence so thick you could have heard a dime drop. Their gazes locked. She was almost afraid to ask. "Is that a marriage proposal?" she whispered in awe.

"Will you do me the honor?"

After a second of digesting his question, elation overtook Shannon and she squealed with delight. "Yes! Yes! Yes!" She kissed him after each exclamation. Then Ryan took her by the head to still her movements, her mouth his obvious intention when he locked his lips to hers.

They kissed long and hard, instantly renewing the passion between them. Ryan locked his arm around Shannon's waist and her breasts crushed against his chest. The longer they kissed, the more they began to move hungrily against each other. When they

broke apart, Shannon lay her head down on his chest, blissfully content.

“What do you say about giving the family a special Christmas present in the morning by telling them?”

She smiled against his skin. “I love it.” She yawned, vaguely aware when Ryan reached for the covers and pulled them up over them. Suddenly she couldn’t keep her eyes open. The last thing Shannon remembered was the tender kiss Ryan placed upon her forehead and his whispered, “I love you.”

## Chapter Seventeen

Merry Christmases echoed throughout the household bright and early as everyone gradually made their way downstairs to the Christmas tree. Someone had set up a table with coffee and water for hot chocolate. Plates held decorated gingerbread and sugar cookies, scones, biscuits and jam for those who couldn't wait for the traditional big breakfast. A huge red poinsettia decorated the center of the table.

The Christmas tree lights were on, casting a colorful glow against the walls and highlighted the many gaily-wrapped presents beneath it. The warmth from the fireplace filled the room with the fresh scent of pine and coziness. Strings of colorful Christmas balls hung from the ceiling like streamers, catching the fire in the hearth.

The adults were making themselves comfortable in the various chairs and couches while the children dropped to the floor close to the tree. Everyone still had on their pajamas and robes. Like the many years before when Shannon walked into the room she was overwhelmed with emotion. This was kind of holiday scene she'd been without as a child but had dreamt of. A large and loving family. Her heart swelled with emotion. This Christmas she had so much more to be thankful for.

With a sleepy Alivia in her arms, she headed for a vacant armchair. *Where was Ryan?* She thought he would have beaten her there. She could still remember the strong arms that had carried her back to her own bed earlier, and had vaguely wondered why he'd done that but had been too tired to ask. With a soft kiss upon the lips, he'd left her.

"We're kissing!"

Everyone glanced to see Sheila and Mark kissing passionately beneath the mistletoe.

"When can we start opening gifts?" Obviously, Michael was unimpressed with his aunt and uncle's show of affection.

"Not until everyone is here," Marsha said with a smile. "And you know the tradition."

Shannon met Marsha's eyes. "Feeling better, Mom?"

"Headache's all gone, thank God." Marsha's gaze moved over Shannon, concern etched on her face. "Honey, you look tired. Did Alivia give you a bad night?"

Shannon smiled, barely able to look Marsha in the eye. There was no way she was going to admit the truth, but she couldn't lie, either, and get away with it. Marsha was too shrewd and would see right through it.

"We're kissing!" All eyes went to Amber and Tom. Waiting their turn behind them was Richard and Sandi. Shannon was relieved she was saved from having to answer Marsha.

"Awe gee, we're never going to get to the gifts!" One of the kids complained.

"Anticipation is the best part," Richard responded. He locked his arms around his wife and kissed her long and hard.

"Gross!" Michael grumbled.

"You won't think so when you're our age," his father, Richard laughed.

"Where's Ryan?"

All eyes turned to the head of the family. "All I know is he said he had something to do and wouldn't be long."

“Speak of the devil.” Amanda grinned when she saw Ryan in the doorway. “Where have you been, brother?”

Ryan’s eyes zeroed in on Shannon and she warmed inside. He looked different somehow, a little softer around the edges, more at ease. So unlike the stone-faced Marine that had walked through the door that first night, there was slight amusement on his handsome features, a light in his usually hard eyes that reinforced his love for her.

“I had something important to take care of.” Shannon wondered what that something was. He walked toward her and to her surprise sank to the floor at her feet.

“Does this mean we can open our gifts now?”

Laughter filled the room. “Soon, dear, just be patient a little longer. Anyone else want to kiss before we begin?”

*Why was everyone suddenly looking at her and Ryan?* Shannon felt heat fill her cheeks and did everything she could not to turn away. It suddenly seemed as if everyone *knew* about them. That was ridiculous! Wasn’t it?

“Then I guess we can begin. It’s sort of become a tradition that before the children opens their gifts we adults share something good that’s happened, or is going to happen to us, as our Christmas gift to the rest of the family.”

“Awe, Grandma...”

“Hush, Alisha,” her mother chastised lightly.

Marsha gave Alisha a wink before continuing. “Who wants to start?”

“We do.” All turned toward Sheila and Mark. “Our family gift is that we’re going to have another baby!”

“*Ohmygod!*” Marsha jumped to her feet the same time they did and met them halfway for an enthusiastic hug. “Another grandbaby.” Happy tears filled her eyes.

Congrats echoed around the room while the children sat in silence, patiently waiting for the go ahead to dig into the presents.

“We found out just before coming here. I’m surprised the twins kept the secret.”

“They knew?” Marsha tossed Kelly and Dawn a smile. “You rascals!”

“Momma said if we told you Santa might put us on the naughty list,” Dawn explained.

“We’re next,” Amber said when the commotion died down. “Even though this isn’t exactly a family gift I think everyone will see it as one. Tom and I have booked a two-week cruise to Europe and Mom is going with us.”

Marsha’s eyes grew round. “I am?”

“Yes and no arguments about it. Your ticket has already been bought and paid for and you have a room in the suite we booked.”

“I wasn’t going to argue- ”

“Not now but we know you,” Amber interrupted. “This farm isn’t your life, Mom, and it’s time you get out and experience some of the world.”

“She’s right,” Richard backed them up. “I think that’s a wonderful family gift.”

“You never go anywhere...”

“Okay, okay!” Marsha laughed. “Before you all gang up on an old woman, I’ll go.”

“You really had no choice,” Amber finished.

“I guess I’ll go next, then.” Marsha looked at Ryan.

Shannon wondered if he knew his hand had been caressing the back of her leg beneath her pajama bottoms the whole time. Alivia had fallen back to sleep in her arms

and was making sucking noises with her little pursed lips.

“Have I told you how happy we all are that you’re home with us this holiday season?”

“I should have come home sooner, Mom.”

“I understand why you didn’t.”

“Probably more than I did, at the time.” He stood, and glanced down at Shannon. Her heart ached with the love she felt for him. He was a tough, battle weary Marine but at that moment she sensed his vulnerability.

Tears burned in her eyes when he reached down and gently took Alivia from her. Before delivering the toddler to Marsha, he gave her a tender kiss. She barely acknowledged the move from her mother’s lap to her grandmother. Ryan turned back and took her by the hands, pulling her to up to stand before him. A lump formed in her throat when she realized the seriousness of the moment. Right before the family he was going to declare her his.

“Okay, what’s going on?” Tom wanted to know. No one answered him.

Shannon was vaguely aware that the children, in their impatience, had scooted closer to the tree and were pointing at various gifts with happiness on their faces. Their little hands were reaching for the presents closest to them, with no one to stop them, seeming oblivious to the hushed atmosphere in the room and the anticipation of the moment. The adults quietly watched and waited for Ryan to make his intentions known.

She held her breath.

“With the exception of Tom.” Ryan shot an amused glance at his brother-in-law.

“I think everyone in this room knows that I love this woman, have loved her for years.” His thumbs tenderly brushed the tears from her cheeks. “Well now she knows it. Last night she reciprocated that love and has agreed to be my wife.” As he spoke the words, he slipped an engagement ring on Shannon’s finger.

She gasped, and glanced down at the emerald shaped diamond. “How...?”

“An old friend owns a jewelry store.” He grinned, “He owed me a favor.”

“I love you, Ryan.”

“Thank you for saving me.” He whispered words meant for her ears only. Shannon accepted his kiss, and then she was swallowed up in his embrace.

The room exploded with excitement. Suddenly everyone was on their feet and they were pulled apart and into the arms of others. Shannon felt like she was being welcomed into the family all over again.

Her gaze sought Ryan the further away from him she got. He was being fussed over by his sisters. Their gazes met and her heart melted. Her stone-faced lover looked *happy*.

He mouthed, *I love you*.

Shannon knew the beginning of a new and wonderful life was a head of them. The promise they’d made to a man they’d both loved was locked inside their hearts, making them one.

**The End**

**About the Author:**

A little about Tory Richards...

Tory is a daughter, sister, aunt, mother, and grandmother. She's a multi-published, best-selling author who lives in Florida with her three crazy cats. She likes to travel, preferably by cruise ship. She collects antiques and art, loves chocolate (who doesn't?) and good coffee.

Tory has wanted to be a writer since she was a kid, but life got in the way of her dreams. A few years ago, with the support and encouragement of her family, she decided to get serious. Her romances are laced with humor, filled with suspense and sizzling sex.



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