

MADDIE'S MARINE

A (Very) Short Story

BY

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CHAPTER ONE

“Sex on the Beach and a Mai Tai, please,” Maddie Forester said when she reached the bar.

“Starting without me, Maddie?”

Maddie sucked in a breath. *No way, it can't be.*

She turned her head toward the voice. Oh, she took her time, but her heart was speeding like a downhill skier at the Olympics. She forced herself to breathe normally as she met his gaze. “Major Ryan Cavanaugh. What a surprise.”

Gorgeous green eyes narrowed, though the smile never left his face. “I bet it is.”

Maddie felt a pang of regret. “I tried to pull the story, Major.”

He tsked. “So formal now. As if you’ve never had your hand down my pants or your tongue in my mouth.”

Heat seared Maddie’s skin as she darted a look at the patrons surrounding the Hale Koa beach bar. The conversation didn’t miss a beat,

though a blonde with a fake tan and too-perky breasts smiled into her drink and shot an interested look toward Ryan.

And who wouldn't be interested in a six-foot-four Marine officer with a face and body guaranteed to melt all but the hardest of female hearts? Maddie swallowed. For one too-brief evening, she'd known what it felt like to press herself against that lean-muscle body, to want a man so badly she'd made a fool of herself and lost any credibility she'd managed to gain in the two months she'd spent embedded with the Marine Expeditionary Force in Iraq.

What the *hell* was Ryan Cavanaugh doing in Hawaii?

Maddie paid for the drinks, then shot Ryan a sweet-as-syrup smile that barely shook at the corners. "It was so good seeing you. Hope you enjoy your vacation."

Before she could escape, Ryan was on his feet, reaching for the drinks. "Here, let me. Least I can do is help."

Maddie didn't bother protesting. It wouldn't have done any good anyway. She led him across the patio, threading her way between tables until she reached Tom. He sat with his back to her, watching bikini-clad girls play volleyball on the beach a few feet away.

She cleared her throat and Tom turned, smiling. His smile faded.

"Tom, this is Major Ryan Cavanaugh. Ryan, this is Tom Tucker, senior editor for *The World Today*."

Tom shot her an alarmed look. "*The Major Cavanaugh?*"

Ryan set the drinks on the table. "Cozy, huh? Drinks with the boss in a romantic setting." He looked her up and down. "Anything for a new angle,

right Maddie?”

Tom wisely remained silent, though Maddie felt a twinge of annoyance that he didn't make any attempt to defend her. But what was he supposed to do with two hundred and twenty pounds of lethal, angry Marine just waiting for an excuse to punch something?

“Are you done?” Maddie demanded. “Because I'd like to sit down and have my drink and forget I ever met you, okay?”

As if forgetting was possible.

Ryan's face might have been carved from a block of granite for all the emotion she saw there. But she could feel the hostility rolling off him in waves.

“You might forget a lot of things, but I promise you won't ever forget that night you spent in my tent in Ramadi.”

“Madelyn?”

“It was a sandstorm, Tom,” Maddie said, infusing her voice with as much boredom as she could manage. “I was trapped.”

Ryan grinned then, and her heart did a somersault. “Yeah, trapped,” he said, and she knew he was remembering the storm raging inside the tent rather than the blowing sand outside it.

The way they'd torn each other's clothes off. The way he'd lowered her to the cot and pushed inside her while she wrapped her legs around his waist and urged him on. The way they'd slumped, utterly spent in the aftermath, and the way he'd kissed the tears from her cheeks and told her he wouldn't ever let anything happen to her.

“Sadistic guys like you have no business commanding troops in a war

zone,” Tom said. “I’m just glad Madelyn got the truth.”

Maddie closed her eyes and sent up a prayer that Ryan wouldn’t turn Tom into a pile of jelly. Her eyes popped open as a metal chair scraped against the concrete. Ryan sat close to Tom and leaned forward as if he were about to impart something vital. Tom didn’t flinch, though he also didn’t meet Ryan’s hard stare.

“You and your *journalist* here don’t care about the truth; all you really want is a sensational story that’ll sell your magazine and to hell with the Marines you might endanger. The truth is the last thing you care about, so don’t bother putting on that righteous act with me, you got it?”

Ryan picked up Tom’s drink and downed half of it. “Too sweet,” he said. “If you get any ideas about the real thing with the pretty lady here, remember that sex on the beach is illegal in Waikiki.”

Maddie let out her breath as Ryan stalked away. She felt empty inside, just like she’d felt the day the story hit the stands and Ryan ordered her and her photographer out of his camp.

She thought she’d never see him again. Just when she’d gotten used to the void of his absence, Ryan crashed back into her life and made her feel the pain all over again. How long would it take this time to regain her peace of mind?

“Madelyn? Madelyn?”

Maddie looked up and gave herself a mental shake. “Sorry. What were you saying?”

“I asked if you could get me another drink.”

“Oh, uh...sure.”

CHAPTER TWO

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but we can’t give out room information. Would you like to leave a message for Major Cavanaugh?”

“No, no message,” Maddie said. The desk clerk smiled and Maddie thanked her for her help. She took the steps down to the courtyard and gazed up at the giant banyan tree festooned with lights. Why had she come here? What on earth could she say to Ryan that would make any difference?

She hurried down the winding sidewalk and emerged on the beach to walk the short distance back to the Outrigger Reef hotel next door. After dinner, she’d decided to go for a stroll on the beach while Tom went to his room to work on a story that was due tomorrow. The next thing she knew, she was standing in the Hale Koa lobby and asking for Ryan’s room number.

The breeze off the ocean whipped her long hair from the pins she’d bound it up with, and then died down to a gentle caressing wind a moment later. She kicked off her shoes and walked into the sand. The path between hotels was well lit, but toward the water’s edge the beach darkened. A few

people played in the surf a little distance away. Maddie strode down to the cool packed sand and stood there while the waves rolled onto the beach and crashed over her toes.

She turned toward the sound of laughter coming from the bar a couple hundred feet away. That's when she saw Ryan standing farther down the beach. The light spilling from the sidewalk was just enough to make out his profile against the darkness. Her heartbeat kicked up. Had any other man ever made her feel so damn confused?

She should walk away now, before he saw her, go to her room and lock the door and forget she'd ever seen him. Her feet started to move, but not in the direction she wanted to go. He looked up as she approached, his expression hardening.

"Well, well," he said, "lover boy not up to the task?"

"Ryan, I'm sorry," Maddie said. "I tried to pull the story, but the magazine was already in press. I wrote a second article with a different slant, but it was too late—"

"And the first one was better, right?" He gazed out toward the whitecaps breaking two hundred yards offshore. "Painting me as Captain Bly to Lieutenant Dixon's Mr. Christian was a great move, Maddie. Too bad you didn't ask me for the truth."

Maddie sighed. "I did ask, Ryan. You told me the rules were different in a war zone."

He spun toward her. "You didn't tell me you were writing a story about al-Qurak. That happened *before* you arrived. Dixon was under investigation until you blew into camp and turned the whole fucking thing

around.”

Maddie dug her toes into the sand. Damn it, she hated that he was right, that she'd been so ignorant and green around the edges that she'd gone off half-cocked. That she hadn't told him she was investigating the al-Qurak incident when he'd had every right to know.

“I stated there was no evidence that you ordered that strike or that you ignored the warnings you'd be firing on other Marine positions.” Her defense was weak, she knew, but she had to say it anyway.

“But you said I ran the camp like a petty dictator, didn't you? Compared me to Hitler, I think?”

Maddie swallowed. “I made a mistake.”

“So did I,” he said softly, and she looked away, knowing he meant he'd made a mistake in trusting her. In risking his command by getting involved with a reporter looking for a story.

Water flowed over her feet and ankles as the tide rushed in. The current sucked at her as it rushed out again. She tried to move to higher ground, but lost her balance as the water pulled against her.

Ryan yanked her back as a little scream escaped her lips. She collided with him, her hands splaying over his chest as she automatically tried to push away.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

No.

She tilted her head back, focused on that beautiful mouth that had once given her so much pleasure. “Yes.”

The air sizzled between them, just like the last time he'd held her

close. She wanted to run and she wanted to stay. She wanted to kiss him. God, why did seeing him again have to hurt so much?

His expression changed, grew more intense. She realized his hands had slipped up her arms, across her shoulders. Down her back.

He pulled her against his body. “Dammit, Maddie, why do I still want you?”

She wondered if he meant to say it aloud, but then her eyes closed and his lips touched hers. Soft, teasing.

She strained toward him, tried to engage him in a deeper kiss, but he took his time, so much time that she thought he might push her away.

And then his tongue slipped into her mouth. She made a noise of surrender. He could press her into the sand and make love to her right here and she wouldn't refuse. Couldn't refuse.

She got her hands under his T-shirt. She could feel every ridge of his six-pack, the bunch and ripple of hard muscles as she moved her hands over him. She'd never seen a naked man with a better body than Ryan Cavanaugh's.

But the heat of him was suddenly gone. She stumbled, her eyes opening to find him a few feet away, staring at her and breathing hard. “Do you know what happened after you left?” he asked.

Maddie shook her head, unable to speak for the lump in her throat.

“I was relieved of duty and transferred.”

“I'm sorry,” she managed. Damn, was she a broken record or what? But what else could she say? She'd learned enough about the Marines in those two months to know that his career was effectively over. He'd never

get promoted now. Her fault.

“Yeah, me too,” he said.

Maddie picked up her sandals from where she’d dropped them, her throat aching with unshed tears.

“Better get back to lover boy.”

“Yes,” she said, backing away. She could have told him she and Tom weren’t really together, but what was the point? They might as well be. Tom had asked her out, she’d said yes, and so they were technically dating even if they weren’t sleeping together. And Ryan no longer cared whether she was dating another man or not.

Maddie turned and strode through the sand toward the Outrigger, swiping at the tears that spilled down her cheeks.

Damn Ryan Cavanaugh! Why did he have to show up now and remind her of everything she’d lost?

Maybe she should just go to Tom’s room and drop her clothes. She knew Tom had suggested this business trip to Hawaii with the hope they’d move their relationship to the next level, even if he hadn’t said that was the reason. If she took the leap now, maybe she could finally forget what it felt like when Ryan made love to her.

Except there was no spark between her and Tom.

She shoved aside those thoughts and walked toward Tom’s room after the elevator disgorged her on the fourth floor. She stopped in front of the door and stared at it, hand raised. Finally, she sighed and headed back down the hall to her own room.

It was no use. The only man she wanted no longer wanted her.

Maddie took a quick shower to get the sand off her legs, then wrapped a towel around her body before sitting on the bed and turning on the television. A knock at her door sent her heart into her throat. She muted the TV and went to look out the peephole. Tom stood on the other side.

Oh no. She gulped and opened the door.

Maddie clutched the towel, willing herself to drop it, to get it over with, but her fingers refused to open, her heart telling her with every thump that this was not the right man.

“Madelyn, do you have those stats on the commission’s findings? I can’t seem to locate them.”

“Uh, sure,” Maddie said, going to the table where her laptop was set up and rifling through some folders. “Here.”

“Thanks, babe,” Tom said, and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. “Nice towel,” he said. “Maybe we could—”

“I thought you were on deadline.”

“Right you are. Maybe later then.” He winked at her and disappeared through the door. Maddie sighed with relief.

Two minutes later, he knocked again. Maybe he’d forgotten to ask her if she’d fetch him a drink from the bar. She was still steamed he hadn’t paid for his drinks earlier since he earned a whole lot more money than she did. He’d told her to expense it, the cheap bastard. She was getting damn tired of fetching and carrying on this trip.

“What is it now?” she asked as she whipped open the door.

“Catch you at a bad time?” Ryan said.

CHAPTER THREE

Maddie gripped the doorknob, frustration roiling her stomach.

“What do you want, Ryan? Because I can’t take any more of this...this—whatever this is between us.”

“Did you really write a second story?”

“Yes.”

“Before or after that night in my tent?”

Maddie sighed. “Before, though you probably don’t believe that.”

“You mean because I gave you a hard time when you arrived.”

“We didn’t exactly get along.”

“You know why.”

“You didn’t think a woman had any business that far forward in a battle zone.”

“No, not any woman, Maddie.” His gaze caught and held hers and she felt a trickle of heat slide down her spine. “You.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked softly, trying to keep the

hurt from her voice.

“It means you aren’t a Marine. A female Marine could take care of herself, but you? Not a chance.”

Maddie stiffened. “I think I should be offended.”

“Don’t be. I’d have felt only marginally better about a male civilian.”

“You never said that.” Tears pricked her eyelids. She’d charged out into the desert wanting to be a war correspondent like her dad, and she’d taken every criticism personally. And when they came from the biggest, baddest Marine she ever met, they hurt more than they probably should.

“You never gave me a chance,” he said.

“That’s not true. You had plenty of chances, like when you were busy yelling at me for going out on the wrong Humvee or for not fastening my flak vest while walking through camp.”

He blew out a breath. “Yeah, okay, you got me. I could have told you, but I resented the fact you were there and that you were a distraction from the mission.”

Maddie shook her head. “Oh no, I was very careful not to distract your men when—”

“I didn’t mean them, Maddie.” He closed the distance between them and she backed away instinctively, sensing that he would follow. The door closed behind him with a soft thud. “You’re still distracting me.”

Maddie’s heart kicked into overdrive as he came so close she could smell the sea breeze on his skin. If she touched her tongue to the base of his throat, would she taste the salty tang of the ocean?

He ran a finger along the top of her towel and she shuddered deep

inside. "Tell me to go and I will."

She tilted her head back, met eyes that were hot and intense. "Say it now, Maddie, while there's still time."

"I can't," she whispered.

He reached for her at the same time as she flattened herself against him, seeking his mouth. He lifted her, tugging the towel away as he did so. She wrapped her legs around his waist, fusing her mouth to his as he carried her toward the bed. He laid her in the middle of the queen size mattress, his body pressing into hers as he kissed her like he'd been starving for her. Finally, he broke away and stood to yank his T-shirt over his head.

Maddie's heart thudded in her throat as she watched him, loving the sight of him unzipping his shorts, the slide of material down those lean hips, the insistent bulge of his erection against white cotton before those disappeared too.

And then he was back, on top of her, hot skin to hot skin as she wrapped her arms around him and thrust her tongue in his mouth.

"Now, Ryan," she said when he finally broke the kiss.

"Not so fast," he said, his breath a hot whisper against her skin as he moved down her body. "We've got time."

Maddie gasped as he flicked his tongue over her nipple, arching toward him. He drove her mindless for long minutes with his skillful fingers and tongue. When he finally licked his way down her torso, she held her breath.

Until he touched her where she most wanted to be touched.

"Ryan!"

Oh God, he was every bit as good as she remembered. Maddie's fists closed around the sheets as he took her higher with the magic of his tongue. How could she have ever thought another man could make her forget Ryan?

The world faded away, returning in a rush of color and sensation that exploded around her and left her gasping and happy. And vaguely unsatisfied.

A minute later, he settled between her legs and she wrapped them around his waist, pulling him closer, not in the least surprised to realize he'd been prepared. A man that looked like he did probably didn't step foot out his door in the morning without two or three condoms in his wallet.

"What's wrong?" he asked, stroking a finger down her cheek.

Maddie knew she could drown in those eyes, especially when he looked at her like he was now. Like she meant everything to him. Like she was one half of his soul.

"I want you so much," she said. Too much. She knew she was projecting her own feelings onto him, hoping he felt the same way about her as she did about him.

The realization hit her like a plunge into icy water: she was in love with Ryan Cavanaugh. With his strength and beauty. And with his tenderness, the tenderness that held her close during a raging sandstorm and promised to keep her safe in a landscape that threatened death at every instant. The same tenderness that cradled a dying Iraqi woman for long minutes, refusing to leave until she'd passed away.

Maddie sucked in her breath. Had she really ruined all that with her carelessness?

He smiled and her heart broke into a thousand pieces. “Patience,” he said, sliding into her so slowly she lifted her hips in frustration, seeking more.

“Ryan,” she said, and something of her desperation must have come through, because he moved hard inside her then. If he’d had any control, it was gone now, and Maddie reveled in the power of him as his thrusts drove her across the bed, the pleasure spiraling higher and higher.

When the tension inside her snapped this time, she melted into a pool of warm satisfaction. She was aware of his climax soon after hers, of the way he rolled away from her and left the bed. She considered protesting, but her limbs were too heavy to move.

Maddie yawned as Ryan returned and looked down at her. She expected him to climb back in bed, but when he reached for his clothes, alarm blazed a pathway through her nerve endings, reenergizing her.

“Where are you going?” she asked, climbing to her knees as he pulled his T-shirt down that gorgeous chest.

If she didn’t know better, she’d say he looked wild-eyed. But when his gaze tangled with hers again, all she saw was heat and determination. “I shouldn’t have let that happen,” he said. “It does neither of us any good.”

“But Ryan—”

“We both know that sex, no matter how incredible, isn’t enough to fix what’s wrong between us.”

“So what do you think is wrong between us, Major?” She tried to keep the anger and frustration out of her voice. Failed.

He zipped his shorts and speared her with a look. “How can I trust

you, Maddie? How can I ever know whether something I tell you won't end up in a newspaper? I can't take that chance."

"I made a mistake, Ryan. It won't happen again."

He gripped her chin and tilted her face up for one last kiss.

Embarrassingly, she moaned, the sound a plea for him to stay.

"Better if we don't risk it," he said, and left her in the middle of the bed, wondering what she'd ever done to deserve the kind of pain caused by falling in love with a stubborn Marine.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ryan unlocked the door of the house he'd rented near the Kaneohe Marine Corps Base and wondered for the millionth time if he ought to get a dog. At least then he wouldn't come home to an empty house each day. But, being a Marine meant he'd likely be on his way to a war zone again soon. Dogs were out of the question. Even fish were a risky venture.

Ryan tossed his keys on the kitchen counter and sorted through the mail. His blood slowed to a crawl when he saw the return address on the plain brown envelope. He'd assumed it was another catalog.

He ripped it open and pulled out the pages she'd photocopied. 'Death and Duty in Iraq' blared the *Washington Post* headline. He read the article, amazed again at her skill in describing what life was like in the Iraqi desert. But this time, the picture she painted was fair. He wasn't Sir Galahad, but he wasn't Hitler either. He wasn't sure he agreed with the portrait of Lieutenant Dixon as a good Marine who chose poorly in bad circumstances, but he couldn't argue it was possible that's what happened.

Dammit, he'd been too inflexible with her. What happened had been fated, whether she blundered into the middle of it or not. He was the one ultimately responsible for those under his command. Dixon screwed up, true, but Ryan would have paid with or without Maddie Forester and her story. He should have relieved Dixon before al-Qurak, but he hadn't. A bad call on his part.

He set the article down and grabbed a beer from the fridge. Damn, but he missed Maddie. In the two months since he'd walked out on her, he'd picked up and dropped the phone a dozen times a day. He'd even tried to date other women, but he invariably ended up dropping them off with nothing more than a peck on the cheek and a promise to call again.

Which he never did, of course. He had to get out of this rut—and soon, before the testosterone killed him. Except he only wanted Maddie.

“Stupid son of a bitch,” he said, then peeled off his cami shirt and tossed it over a chair. He sat down to remove his boots, but the doorbell rang before he untied the first lace.

“Hi,” an apparition that looked like Maddie said when he opened the door. Ryan blinked. And shit, she looked good, her long golden hair clipped up in a bun, her dark eyes sparkling, her gorgeous body encased in a short Hawaiian print dress that showed plenty of leg and sent the blood rushing to his groin. If he'd dreamed her up, he couldn't have imagined anything better, except maybe a naked Maddie sprawled across his bed.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded as his blood began to sing.

Maddie drew in a calming breath, though her heart pounded so hard she felt lightheaded. “Did you get the article?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

He was still staring at her, so maybe that was a good sign. “Can I come in?”

“Sure,” he said, standing back so she could get past him. He closed the door and she took a seat on the couch, watching him. God, how she loved a Marine in desert camis and combat boots.

No, she loved *this* Marine, with or without his clothes.

He picked up a beer and took a long drink. “Want one?” he asked.

“Okay.”

He returned from the kitchen and handed her a cold bottle. She took a sip, hoping the alcohol would calm her nerves. Was she out of her mind showing up like this? What if he had a girlfriend already? What if she was in his bedroom, waiting for him to return?

Get a grip, Maddie. If he had a woman back there, he wouldn't be standing here in his combat boots would he? And no doubt the woman would have emerged by now to find out where he'd gone.

“So how's lover boy?” he asked.

“Fine, I guess,” Maddie replied. “I haven't seen Tom in several weeks now. I quit *The World Today*.”

The bottle stopped halfway to Ryan's lips. “You quit?”

Maddie nodded.

“Why?”

“Because it’s not what I want anymore,” she said. “I was living my dad’s dream, not mine.”

He looked stunned. “So what are you doing in Hawaii?”

Maddie shrugged. “I’m working on a book. I thought Hawaii might be a nice place to live while I write.”

“What’s the book about?”

She took a deep breath. “It’s about a war correspondent who falls in love with the Marine commanding the camp she’s embedded in. I think it’s a touching story, really.”

He stared at her with a look so confused and hopeful she almost laughed.

“Truth or fiction?” he said, his voice half strangled.

Maddie felt happiness suffusing her, heating her bones from the inside out. He loved her, whether he knew it or not. She could see it in his face, feel it in the way he looked at her like his life depended on the answer. “Oh, it’s definitely true.”

He grinned at her, and the look of wicked intent in his eyes made her tingle in all the right places. “You wearing any panties under that dress?”

“Yes,” she said, laughing.

He held out his hand and she took it, let him help her up. “I think we better take care of that right away. In fact, I think you’d better take everything off.”

“What do you intend, Major?”

“As much as I can get away with, Maddie.”

Maddie put her hands on either side of his face, gazed at him until he

turned and placed a kiss in one of her palms. “Do you love me, Ryan?” she asked, suddenly unsure of herself.

His smile made her world light up. “Don’t you know I’ve been yours since the minute you rode into my camp on a Humvee?”

“I always wanted my own Marine,” she said, swallowing the ache in her throat.

Ryan took her hands and kissed them, then pulled her into his arms and rubbed his cheek against her hair. “You got one, Maddie.”

Her breath shuddered in her chest. He squeezed her tight. “I’m sorry,” she said, “sorry I cost you your command—”

“It’s not your fault,” he said. “It was never your fault.”

She tilted her head back, looked up at him through a blur of tears. “Oh Ryan,” she said.

“I love you, Maddie.” His lips met hers, teased her with a light kiss. “I love you,” he said again softly. And then he showed her.

THANK YOU!

Thank you for reading *Maddie's Marine*! I hope you enjoyed it. Please consider telling your friends about this story, and feel free to share it with others.

If you like this story, and my sexy Marine, you may be interested to know that I'm writing a military romantic suspense series about the Hostile Operations Team (HOT), a group of seriously sexy special operations soldiers who go the extra mile to protect and defend their nation – and their heroines!

The first book in the series, *Hot Pursuit*, releases in June! To be kept up to date about all my books, visit me at <http://www.LynnRayeHarris.com>. Or sign up for my spam free newsletter at this link: <http://eepurl.com/c5QFY>

If you'd like to try a sample of *Hot Pursuit*, turn the page and keep reading.

Sneak Peek: *Hot Pursuit*



<http://www.LynnRayeHarris.com/hot-pursuit>

The last man she ever wanted to see...

Evie Baker's luck just ran out. Thanks to an ex-partner with organized crime ties, she's lost her restaurant, her money, and nearly all her self-respect. Forced to return to her hometown and work as a shampoo girl in her mother's salon, she doesn't think her luck can get any worse.

But then someone starts shooting at her, her sullen baby sister is suddenly missing, and the high school heartthrob who stole her heart—and her virginity—is the only man big enough and bad enough to help.

Might be the only one who can save her...

Captain Matt "Richie Rich" Girard can't afford to get involved. He's already on the verge of a court-martial after a Top Secret op gone wrong, and he's been ordered to stay out of trouble while he's home for his sister's wedding.

But when Evie's ex-partner turns up dead, staying out of trouble is the last thing on Matt's mind. He failed Evie once before; he can't fail her again. If he's going to protect her from a killer, and find her sister before time runs out, he'll have to risk his entire future—and both their lives—to do it.

Things are about to get HOT in the bayou!

Hot Pursuit (excerpt)

“I think you lost your drink.”

Evie knew that voice. It slid over her like hot silk and she spun to find Matt Girard standing behind her, holding the bottle she’d just ditched. Why did her heart skip the second he showed up? And why did he have to look so *delicious*?

“I didn’t lose it.”

He stood there in faded jeans and a dark T-shirt that molded to his hard pecs and biceps. But it wasn’t his clothing that got her attention so much as his eyes. There was something in them, something she didn’t remember seeing when he’d been seventeen. He’d been part of this crowd long ago, much more than she had, but he no longer looked like he belonged—in spite of the longing looks some of the women cast in his direction.

His gaze dropped over her before rising again, slowly, and her body reacted as if he’d brushed his fingers over her. There was something hot and sharp and thrilling in that gaze—and she was way more susceptible to it than she wanted to be.

Once, she would have given anything for him to look at her like that. Now, she wasn’t certain she’d survive the experience.

“Great dress.” His voice was silky.

Evie swallowed. She was tingling and that wasn’t a good thing. The last time she’d tingled over this man, it had not turned out so well. “Thanks. I think.”

He grinned. “It’s definitely a compliment.”

Evie crossed her arms and tried to look cool. “Thought you weren’t coming tonight.”

“Now what made you think a thing like that?”

Her blood slogged like molasses in her veins. “I believe you said ‘probably not’ in response to Julie’s query.”

His teeth flashed. “Yeah, but that’s before I knew you’d be here.”

“What do you want, Matt?” Her heart thrummed like she was sixteen again.

His gaze dropped once more. “Maybe I might like to see what’s under that dress.” His voice sounded low and sexy. It pooled in her belly, sent hot waves of need spiraling outward.

“Forget it,” she said with a conviction she didn’t quite feel. “As I recall, the last time didn’t turn out so well for me.”

“I know, and I’m sorry.”

“You said that earlier.”

“I did.”

She tossed her hair over her shoulder. “So why’d you come then? I heard you the first time.”

He sighed. “Evie, Jesus.” He raked a hand through his hair, and her blood hummed at the ripple and flex of muscle. “I just got back from the desert. Life out there is...unpredictable. It makes a man think. And I’ve decided that I don’t like feeling like a shithead for something that happened ten years ago. I want to clear the slate.”

Evie let out a breath. She’d been so hurt, and then she’d been angry. But it was a long time ago and she couldn’t hold a grudge forever. Even now, she recognized that most of her feelings about the incident were still tied up with having her love so cruelly flung back in her face. The other stuff, while definitely unpleasant at the time, hardly mattered anymore.

“We were kids, Matt.”

“I hurt you.”

She didn't flinch from his gaze. "You did. But I'm not sixteen anymore. And like I said today, it was my fault too. I asked you to do it. And I told a couple of my friends about it, so it wasn't just you telling the boys." She shrugged with a lightness she didn't quite feel. "What happened was probably inevitable. The guys thought I was easy. The girls who were jealous said I was a slut. They made my senior year difficult in some ways. But what hurt the most was never hearing from you again."

There, she'd said it. She'd told him what really hurt, and she'd given him a window into her feelings back then. He'd have had to be an idiot not to know, but it was always possible he hadn't.

"I should have called you."

The music changed, the beat slowing. Evie took a step backward instinctively, but Matt caught her hand and held it tight. She tugged once, and then stopped. They faced each other across a few feet of space. Around them, couples began to slide together, fitting into each other like pieces of a jigsaw.

Evie's pulse beat harder. Her skin sizzled where they touched, his big hand engulfing hers, his palm calloused in a way that shocked her. He was a Girard, rich, entitled—and he had a workman's hands.

"One dance."

Her insides melted a little more. "I'm not sure it's a good idea."

But what she really wanted to do was say yes.

His eyes were bright. "Why not? We're adults now, Evie. No one's getting hurt here."

He said it like it was so easy, but was it really? Wasn't she still vulnerable on some level? She was down on her luck right now, feeling like a loser, and here he was, the same gorgeous, cocky, beautiful creature he'd always been. Except, no, he was more than that, wasn't he? There was something behind his smile now. Something dark and sad. Pain flared in his grey eyes and then was gone so quickly she wondered if she'd imagined it.

It shocked her. She suddenly wanted to know what had happened to him. She'd heard about him being held captive by terrorists. How could he not be affected by something like that? Of all the things she'd expected Matt Girard to do with his life, putting himself into danger had not been it. He had everything. Why would he want to risk his life that way?

She remembered when his mother had died. He'd been twelve. Mama had taken her to the wake out at Reynier's Retreat. There were so many people crowding the beautiful rooms of the mansion. The house was heavy with sadness and thick with grief and it had scared her. She'd escaped to run down the wide lawn. She'd known where to find Matt. He'd been curled inside the hollow of a tree they'd found a few years before.

He'd been dressed in a black suit, his dark hair slicked back carefully, his grey eyes wide and wounded as he looked up at her. Her heart had lifted into her throat then. She'd only been eleven, but she'd felt something in that moment that rocked her world—and would continue to rock her world until she was sixteen and shattered by his casual cruelty.

But not that day. That day, she'd slid into the hollow and sat down beside him. When she'd put her arms around him, he'd turned his face into the crook of her neck and wept.

Evie sucked in a breath. How could she walk away from him now, knowing there was something behind those eyes? Something that hurt him?

"One dance, Evangeline," he said softly when she hesitated. "Make a soldier's night. I just got back from the desert a few days ago. I'd like to dance with a pretty woman and forget about that hellhole for a while."

Evie swallowed. "That's not fair."

He grinned. "Because you can't say no now?"

She nodded.

"Good for me then."

"Just one dance and we go our separate ways, got it?" Because she didn't want to feel this tangle of emotions again. This tiny blossoming in her

heart that said she was going to be in so much trouble if she didn't shut it down quick.

"If that's what you want." His voice was rough.

He took her other hand then, ran his palms up her arms to her shoulders. Little sparks of sensation swirled in her belly, lighting her up like the fourth of July. He pulled her into his arms right there on the edge of the floor.

Evie braced her hands against his chest, pressed back when he tried to bring her closer. It was already overwhelming to be so close to him. To feel his heat and hardness next to her body.

To feel everything she'd once wanted so much...

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