

A photograph of a very muscular man with short dark hair, seen from the back and slightly to the side. He is shirtless, showing his well-defined back and shoulder muscles. He is wearing dark shorts. The background is a lush green forest with sunlight filtering through the trees.

Elizabeth
LENNOX

Zeke

A DELTA FORCE ROMANCE

USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR
ELIZABETH LENNOX

Zeke

Delta Forces Series

By Elizabeth Lennox

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Chapter 1

“Zeke! You’ve been shot in the back! You’re going to the emergency room!” Major Derick Jones snapped.

Lieutenant Colonel Zeke Jeffers glared at him. “I’m fine! It’s just a scratch! The bullet only grazed me.” In truth, his back hurt like a mother...bad! He felt wetness and knew that the wound was bleeding, but...he seriously didn’t want to go to the hospital.

Zeke could handle snakes and evil, merciless terrorists. He and his team routinely swam through shark and piranha infested waters when necessary. One time, he’d even walked through one of those bird eating spider webs. Those bird eating spiders were the stuff of nightmares. Those suckers could grow bigger than both of his hands put together – and he had huge hands. In that instance, he’d simply pulled out his pistol and shot the massive spider, then muttered expletives while he fought his way out of the disgusting spider web, all the while, threatening his team members with violent repercussions for their amusement at his expense.

But the truth was, Zeke would rather deal with a bird-eating spider any day than go to the emergency room. Too many needles!

Just considering the possibility made him shudder with horror! And that hurt his back, so he banished the thought of...those things...from his mind.

“You’re going,” Colonel Mike Cain told him, his hands fisted on his hips as he glared at Zeke. “PFC Jones!” Mike barked.

Immediately, a young and eager private first class sprinted over and stood at attention. The enlisted man saluted smartly and yelled, “Yes sir?”

“Take Lieutenant Colonel Jeffers to the emergency room. Make sure he goes inside and sees a doctor.” Mike’s lips curled slightly upwards as he continued. “I want you to make sure that he sees a doctor and, if Lieutenant Colonel Jeffers doesn’t follow the doctor’s orders, I want to know about it.”

The enlisted man gulped as he glanced at Zeke. Zeke was a big guy, well over six and a half feet tall. And he was massively built with muscles on top of muscles. Colonel Cain was also tall and muscular, as was Major Joe Hancock and Major Derick Matlock. But there was just something about Lieutenant Jeffers that...he scared the enlisted soldiers! He was mean and demanding, although he never asked anything of the enlisted men that he wasn’t willing to do himself.

Except go to the emergency room!

“I can manage myself!” Zeke snapped.

Mike wasn’t having it. “PFC, you have your orders,” he replied, not taking his eyes from Zeke’s. “Drive him to the emergency room and...” Mike paused slightly as he smirked. “Make sure he doesn’t get blood on my truck.”

“Yes sir!” the private first class responded with another smart salute.

“Payback,” Zeke muttered to Mike. Thankfully, Mike was able to keep a straight face until Zeke was in the passenger seat of the truck. But as soon as the two men had driven off, Mike turned to Joe and Derrick and burst out laughing!

“He’s going to faint,” Joe predicted, high-fiving his friends.

Mike chuckled. “He wouldn’t dare. Not around Jones.”

They pulled out their wallets, offering the normal amount. A ten dollar bill was retrieved from each person by Derick who pocketed the money until they heard from PFC Jones. The enlisted soldier would report on Zeke’s emergency room visit and that would determine the winner of this

particular bet. Unfortunately, that might not be for another few hours.

“So glad Zeke is providing the entertainment as well as beer for tonight,” Derick laughed.

Joe pounded the other man on the back, chuckling as they went to observe the training of the newest potential Delta Force team members.

Mike looked at the group of soldiers who were standing in small groups, shocked at what had just happened. “Okay, gentlemen, how about if we do it again! And this time, let’s not shoot the officers, shall we?”

Thirty recruits from all over the country, the best soldiers the Army had trained, didn’t protest even though they’d been through the complicated obstacle course three times already today, beginning at four o’clock this morning. Since it was now two o’clock in the afternoon, and they were starving, it was going to be a test of their endurance. They’d paused for breakfast and lunch, but this obstacle course was tougher than normal, built to challenge their capabilities, their strength, and their ability to think on their feet. One needed more than just brute strength to get through this course. One had to think, to maneuver, and work together to reach the end. What the recruits didn’t realize was that it wasn’t just a test to finish the course. It was a test to get through the course with every member of one’s team alive and unharmed.

Zeke walked into the emergency room and looked around, irritated that Mike had demanded that he come here. It was just a freaking scratch! He’d endured worse on missions in the past, so why was Mike being such an ass about this now?

“Sir!” a youngish looking nurse hurried forward.

Zeke stared at the woman’s horrified expression and sighed. “I’m fine,” he told her gruffly. “It’s not a big deal!”

The nurse eyed Zeke’s back. “Uh...right..,” she nodded. “Okay. Right. Tough guy. Why don’t you come this

way and we'll...well, I'll just..." she trailed off, laughing a touch uneasily. "I'll just clean you up. How's that sound?"

Zeke liked the sound of that. "I don't need a doctor," he told the nurse. The PFC who had driven him to the hospital followed and Zeke rounded on him. "STAY!" he ordered.

Startled, the private backed away, completely intimidated. But he stayed. The nurse chuckled, leading Zeke towards the exam rooms. "This won't take long," he decided.

The nurse's gaze flicked to Zeke's back, then she nodded. "Right. Just a few minutes." She led him to one of the ER beds and patted the end. "Why don't you sit right here, and I'll just...get a doctor to take a quick peek. Nothing to it."

Zeke eyed her warily, not sitting down. Instead, he started to cross his arms, but pain shot through his back and he dropped his arms to his sides with a sigh. For a brief moment, he felt a bit dizzy, but told himself that was caused by the creepiness of being in a hospital, which he'd always hated. Doctors, hospitals...everything about them gave him the willies. He hated needles most of all, but even the hospitals were bad. He avoided them like the plague!

At that moment, a woman with lots of beautiful, dark, curly hair piled haphazardly on her head came over to him, led by the nurse that had abandoned him moments ago. "Right here, Doctor Fisher," the nurse explained. "He says it's just a scratch."

The doctor glanced at the nurse, who had that look that silently said, "He's nuts!"

"Right." The doctor turned and looked at Zeke and... paused. She was gorgeous! Since she was wearing scrubs, Zeke had no idea what her military rank was, but he didn't care. Emerald eyes stared from a heart shaped face that looked like she should be on a runway. Except she was a tiny little thing. Being just over six feet, five inches tall, Zeke usually preferred tall women. Women that didn't force him to contort himself to kiss them.

“Doctor Fisher?” the nurse asked, gently nudging the doctor. The woman jerked slightly, looking around, then realized that she’d been staring and pulled herself together.

Pity. Zeke hadn’t minded staring back at her. He couldn’t remember ever seeing such a pretty face before. Oh, he’d seen beautiful women, but there was something about this one that...something about her called to him.

The nurse took the doctor’s elbow, leading her around the bed to Zeke’s back. For a moment, Zeke considered pulling her back around so that she was facing him, but then the reality of the situation came back to him. The sooner she looked at his back and, okay, maybe cleaned up whatever felt so sticky, then the sooner he could leave. And the sooner he could call her up and ask her out for dinner! Hell, if he’d known that a doctor this pretty was working on base, he would have gotten shot a long time ago!

Doctor Abigail Fisher eyed the man’s back, slightly impressed. She’d seen a lot in the years since gaining her medical degree, but this was a new one. The bullet had left a shallow gouge across the man’s back from armpit to armpit. The wound wasn’t that deep, but since he didn’t have an ounce of fat on his body, the blood vessels were very near the surface. In other words, he’d bled like a stuck pig!

“Hmmm...” she said, keeping her voice calm and relaxed. “Cathy, I think we’re going to need to clean the wound before I can see what needs to be done. Would you mind...?”

“I’m on it,” the nurse replied eagerly.

Abby frowned at the nurse’s back as she hurried away to get the cleaning supplies. Then again, she didn’t blame her. This guy was...hot! As a doctor, Abby could testify to the man’s amazing physical fitness. If all of her patients put this much energy into their fitness, she’d be out of business! As a woman...Abby gave herself a mental shake. She was here as a doctor. *Only* a doctor.

Cathy returned, loaded down with supplies. “Ready,” she said, slightly breathless.

Abby rolled her eyes, and collected his chart, sighing as she noticed Cathy hadn’t finished filling it out. For obvious reasons.

“I’m going to have to cut your shirt off,” Cathy announced, pulling scissors out of the box of supplies.

The man, an officer, she realized, according to his chart, didn’t seem to mind the cleaning.

“As long as that’s all it is, go ahead,” he said, his voice deep and gruff.

Abby looked at the man, then down at his chart. “It appears that you’re due for your tetanus shot. Do you want...?”

“No!”

Abby smiled professionally. “Right,” she replied, marking something off on his chart. “Don’t like needles, huh?”

He hissed when Cathy pulled his tee shirt away from the wound. “I’m not a fan, no.”

She grinned at that. “Right. So...” she didn’t mention that she suspected that the wound across his back was going to need stitches to in order to heal properly. Lots of stitches! “Okay, so, we’ll skip the tetanus shot for now. But can you tell me how this happened?”

The guy sighed, drawing her attention to his deliciously broad shoulders. All of the soldiers on base worked out several times a week. But Abby could testify that none were as...well developed as Lieutenant Colonel Zeke Jeffers.

He flinched slightly, trying to peer over his shoulder, which meant Abby needed to distract him. “So, you were in a training accident?”

“Not me,” the guy replied firmly. “Another guy. We’re training for the team to find new recruits. Some idiot

decided to aim around a tree with his M16 and...”

“Around?” she interrupted. “But...!”

The guy snorted. “Exactly. Around.” He shook his head in disgust and Abby watched as Cathy pulled back the bloody tee shirt. “He swore up and down that bullets could curve if they were shot correctly. He said some BS about how every object has its own gravitational pull and that a tree could pull a bullet into its gravitational orbit if he shot it close enough.”

Abby swallowed a chuckle. “I see,” she replied. “So...?”

Behind him, Cathy paused, fascinated with the story.

“So, he decided to prove his theory. And he shot his rifle towards the target, but going around the tree in front of him. Since I was over at the obstacle course, evaluating the potential recruits, I didn’t see the idiot fire. It wasn’t even supposed to be live fire today. We wouldn’t have been on the obstacle course if there had been. Too dangerous. But this guy...!” Zeke shook his head in obvious disgust. “He had some live rounds in his pocket and wanted to prove what a hot shot he was. Hence, my back.”

Abby laughed. She just couldn’t help herself. It was such a ridiculous story, the idea of a bullet going around a tree and curving because of the tree’s gravitational pull. “Okay, so...the guy...? Is he going to make the cut?”

The man snorted. “Oh, he’s going to get cut, all right. Right to a court martial!”

Abby fully agreed. “Glad to hear it. This is one for the books.” She sighed and clasped the chart to her chest. “I hate to tell you this, big guy, but you need stitches.” Abby moved behind the man now that Cathy had finished cleaning the wound. Abby checked the edges and realized that it wasn’t as ragged as she’d anticipated. “But I think I can do a pretty good job of...”

Zeke didn't want to hear it. Stitches meant needles. He didn't do needles. Period.

"No stitches. It's just a scratch!" he insisted. "I can barely feel it!" That was an absolute, bald-faced lie. It felt as if his back was on fire.

She placed a gloved hand on his shoulder. "Okay, I'm hearing you aren't a fan of needles," she said carefully. Zeke appreciated her not maligning his masculinity by asserting he was afraid. He was! But that didn't mean that he wanted that fact advertised.

"I'm going to use some Novocain spray on your back first. Then you won't feel what I'm doing. Will that work for you?"

He sighed, but even that slight movement hurt. "It's just a scratch. All I need is a band aid and..."

She touched his shoulder again, this time it was bare and he felt her touch echo through his body, centering in his groin. Yeah, other men might be able to control their libidos when in pain, but they hadn't been around this doctor before. She was just that gorgeous!

"I'm sorry, but this is going to require more than a band aid. And what's more, you've lost a lot of blood. I'm going to need..."

"I'm fine," Zeke interrupted. He saw the worry in her eyes and suspected he might be acting like an ass. Still, the thought of needles was just...no. He hated them. "How about if we make a deal?"

She frowned warily. "I'm not in the habit of making deals with my medical services, Colonel."

He grinned, thinking she was cute. Was he being patronizing? He didn't think so. He was just a man interested in a woman and Zeke wasn't the kind who waited for a perfect situation. "I'll let you do whatever you want to my back, *if* you'll agree to go out to dinner with me."

The woman froze. He could feel the seconds tick by and a soft lock of her hair slipped out of the loose knot,

dancing beside her cheek before she impatiently tucked it behind her ear.

He heard her sharp intake of breath and could tell that she was attracted to him. He could also see the pulse throbbing at the base of her neck, saw that pulse speed up after his question. Yeah, she felt it too.

“How about if I treat your back, and then we can discuss dinner?” she offered.

He didn't buy it. “Agree to dinner first, then fix my back.”

She laughed, but apparently, she was at the end of her negotiations. “No. Now shut up, Colonel and let me do my job.” She moved behind him and pulled on a fresh pair of gloves. Damn it, he wanted to feel her fingers against his skin. Not the damn gloves!

The doc gave several instructions to Nurse Cathy who hurried away. Zeke ignored the dizzy sensation and straightened up. There was a touch of fire along his back, then a cooling spray. A few moments later, the burning pain vanished and he breathed a bit easier.

“So, what's your name?” he asked, determined to get something out of this miserable situation.

“Doctor Fisher,” she replied. “Or you can call me Captain Fisher. That works too.” He could tell by her tone that she was concentrating hard, but since she was behind him, he couldn't see what she was doing.

Abby worked quickly, tightening up her stitches carefully while Cathy continued to sponge away the blood. As she closed the wound, the bleeding slowed. Since the wound was so long, he needed a lot of stitches. Not to mention, it was pleasant to work on a man with this many muscles. Every touch of her fingers against his skin was warm.

She gave Cathy more instructions and Cathy moved quickly. She was an excellent nurse and Abby enjoyed working with her. She was knowledgeable and efficient, and

also a genuinely nice person. She was married with four kids, and the stories Cathy told cracked everyone up. With four boys in the house, Cathy was always on her toes. So coming to work in the emergency room was an escape from the chaos of her home life.

Still, Cathy kept shooting Abby pointed looks, the traitor! Abby didn't attempt to interpret those glances. Instead, she concentrated on sealing up the wound with careful stitches, not wanting anything this long and horrific to mar the man's perfect body.

Thirty minutes later, Abby straightened and admired her handiwork. "Okay, that should do it," she announced. The man twisted slightly, then hissed as the pain in his back began to return. She removed her gloves, tossing them into the appropriate receptacle. "You're going to be a bit stiff and sore over the next few days as your body heals. But I was able to stop the bleeding." She looked at the rest of his back, stunned by the other wounds. None of them were as long, but there were several! This man had seen some action, she thought!

"We'll put some antibacterial ointment on the wound now, but you'll need to apply more twice a day, and change the bandage daily. Do you have someone who can help you?"

"How about dinner?" he asked.

Abby laughed, impressed with his tenacity. "You're going to be asleep in about a half hour. The blood you lost is going to take your body a while to regenerate. Your body is working overtime." She pulled her prescription pad out of her pocket and started writing. "I'm giving you a prescription for pain pills and antibiotic ointment. And absolutely no physical exercise for at least five days." She looked at him pointedly. "No exercise of any kind."

He laughed and her body perked up at the sound. Was it just her imagination, or was his laugh almost sensual?

Tearing the page off the pad, she handed it to him. "Cathy is going to put a bandage on your back."

“What about dinner?” he called out just before she stepped out of the curtained off area.

Abby snorted, but paused with one hand still gripping the curtain. For a moment, she looked a bit exasperated, but one look back at the man changed her mind. “I’ll tell you what, if you’re still awake tomorrow evening, I’ll have dinner with you.” She smiled, shaking her head. “Let your body heal, Colonel.” With that, she moved on to her next patient.

Zeke watched her leave, impressed and aroused. He was glad she hadn’t noticed because his body’s reaction to her challenge might have scared her away.

Then the bustling nurse returned, carrying a pair of scrubs and several bandages. “I brought these for you. Your tee-shirt was trashed and I’m guessing you don’t want to walk out of here in those pants.”

He blinked down at the cute nurse who was probably in her forties, but with a look in her eyes that warned him that she wasn’t going to take his crap. He almost laughed at her business-like tone, which didn’t match the teasing glint in her eyes.

“Why’s that?”

She snorted, laying the scrubs on the bed behind him. “You seriously have no idea how much blood you lost today, do you?”

Zeke shrugged, then hissed as a streak of pain shot through his back and shoulders. “I’m fine.”

The nurse rolled her eyes. “Right. Well, we’ve already heard about your heroics today. Apparently, you saved the lives of several soldiers when you tackled the guy using live rounds. So, we’re all impressed with you. But seriously, the ‘scratch’ on your back is a big one. Take it easy for a while, Colonel.” She moved behind him. “I’m going to bandage this up so your clothes don’t rub against it. You should keep a bandage on this for two more days. After that,

you should be healed enough to go without, but keep applying the ointment for the next ten days to prevent infection.”

By the time she finished with her instructions, she was also finished bandaging up his back. “You’re all set,” she announced. Then moved to stand in front of him, hands fisted on her hips. “Don’t give up on her,” the nurse murmured. “She’s been here for six months and hasn’t dated anyone!”

Then she was gone.

Zeke looked out at the bustling emergency room, absorbing that tidbit of information. No one in six months? That meant she hadn’t had sex in six months either. Damn, that must be hard! Zeke liked sex. A lot!

Carefully, he tugged the scrubs top over his head, trying not to pull on the stitches. It was difficult, but if he moved slowly, it wasn’t too bad. As soon as he got back to his apartment, he’d cut the damn shirt off and find a shirt that buttoned in front. Zeke didn’t like to admit it, but maybe the bullet had done more damage than just a scratch. Thankfully, it was over and he could leave the hospital.

But even as he went, he scanned the area, searching for and eventually finding the pretty Doctor Fisher. She must have felt his gaze because she was writing something on a chart, but stopped and looked up, right at him.

He nodded and she blinked. The connection made, Zeke walked out, ignoring the idiot PFC who hurried to his side. Yeah, he was going to have “words” with Mike for assigning some idiot PFC to watch over him. Like he needed a babysitter! Although, if Zeke were honest with himself, if Mike hadn’t ordered Jones to accompany Zeke to the hospital, he probably wouldn’t have gone. So...okay, good for Mike. If Zeke hadn’t gone to the hospital, he might not have met the lovely Doctor Fisher. And now that he had, Zeke had a mission.

Not to anyone would Zeke admit that he’d been a bit bored lately. Yeah, he’d gone on several missions to places that a normal person wouldn’t have survived the first five minutes. Just last week, he and his team had been waist deep

in a crocodile filled swamp. Thankfully, the crocs had stayed away long enough for his team to get through the muck, finish the mission, and get out again.

So the prospect of convincing the pretty doctor to have dinner with him seemed like an excellent way to keep busy.

Chapter 2

“You get shot at and then get a date out of it?” Mike demanded.

Zeke had just entered Mike’s office but stopped short at the abrupt question. Looking behind him, he spotted PFC Jones who had accompanied him to the emergency room. The guy had the audacity to grin.

“He’s going to be in hell this afternoon!” Zeke muttered, stepping deeper into the office and slamming the door behind him.

Mike threw back his head, laughing at his friend. Normally, Zeke didn’t mind being the butt of a joke. Members of the team took the teasing as just part of the job. But his back hurt like a mother...! And it itched. From experience, Zeke knew that he couldn’t do anything about the itching because it would pull at the stitches. So last night, he’d struggled to sleep, torn between bouts of intense itching and, when he finally fell asleep, intense lust as he dreamed about the pretty doctor with the long, dark curls and big, green eyes. He hadn’t gotten a good look at her figure because of the scrubs and doctor’s requisite lab coat, but knew that she wasn’t too thin. The good doctor had lots of enticing curves on her figure.

While Mike laughed, Derick and Joe meandered into the office, wanting to find out what had their boss so amused.

“What’s going on?” Derick asked, crossing his arms over his chest. Derick was shorter than Zeke, but not by much. He was six feet, three inches tall. Joe was about the same height as Mike at six, two, but both were just as buff as Zeke. All four were neck and neck in the muscle department, thinking that it was their duty to be stronger and more adept than the men they led. Which meant that their teams worked harder to be just as strong, which pushed the officers even harder.

Mike muffled his laughter long enough to explain. “Zeke...he gets shot by a gravity defying bullet then refuses to let the doctor work on his back until she agrees to go out to dinner with him.”

Joe chuckled, and Derick filled in the rest. “From what I hear, he was shot down by the fair doctor. No deal. No dinner with the gorgeous woman.”

Just to annoy Zeke, Joe spoke up with, “Maybe she’d like someone who isn’t built like the Hulk.” He grinned when Zeke glared. “Perhaps Joe and I should try our luck. If she’s as pretty as Jones says...”

Zeke moved in, cringing only slightly when his tensed-up muscles pulled at the stitches. “Stay away from her!” he warned with a low, threatening growl.

Joe and Derick’s mouths fell open, then they burst out laughing. Mike was the only one able to speak and said, “So, that’s the way it is? Another of the mighty has fallen?”

Zeke shrugged his shoulders slightly, trying to alleviate the tense muscles. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he grumbled and moved back to the opposite wall. “But the doc is *mine*.”

“Ah!” Mike replied, leaning back in his desk chair, hands laced over his flat stomach. “I completely understand.”

Zeke paced slightly, but there wasn’t much room in the small office, especially with four, huge men in it. “I have no idea what you mean by that, but...” he paused, shaking his head. “She interests me. That’s it.”

Joe chuckled. “It’s been a while since any woman has interested you. So who is she?”

Zeke stared at his friend. “What the hell does that mean?”

Derick explained. “You haven’t shown interest in a woman in far too long, Zeke. We were starting to worry about you.”

Zeke thought back to their nights out over the past few weeks. But not a single woman came to mind. He thought back longer. And then a few more months. He'd just been thinking that going six months without sex would be misery. But now that he thought about it, Zeke couldn't remember how long it had been since he'd last had sex!

"Well, hell!" he muttered, but for some reason, the idea that he'd just gone a long time without a woman made him feel better. It put his obsession with the pretty doctor into perspective. At least he wasn't losing his mind, he thought. So last night's interrupted sleep and his lustful thoughts, his almost immediate attraction to the lovely woman, was only because he hadn't had sex in way too long. That made much more sense!

"I think it's more than just his lack of recent interest," Mike muttered. "But we have more important issues to deal with." And with that, all four men leaned forward, ready to listen to the latest world issue that needed their intervention skills.

"So?" Cathy whispered when Abby stepped up to the nurses' area of the emergency room. "Did you see him last night?"

Abby felt her cheeks heat up, but she kept her head down, writing in her patient's chart. "See who?" she asked, even though she knew exactly who Cathy was referring to. Lieutenant Colonel Zeke Jeffers, hero at large and wannabe Hulk.

Cathy snorted. "Oh please! I was ducking out of the way from all those sparks flying between you two yesterday!"

Another doctor walked up to the counter. "What's going on?" he asked, handing Cathy the patient's chart.

"The patient in exam three needs to head down to X-ray," Abby explained, finishing her notes before handing the chart to Cathy as well. "I think his leg is broken."

Abby walked away, but not before giving her friend and co-worker a meaningful look to not gossip.

But as soon as Abby was out of earshot, the other doctor, Tommy Calips, leaned forward conspiratorially. “Did she go out to dinner with him?”

Cathy shrugged. “No idea,” she whispered back. Cathy thought it was cute that Abby thought she could keep her soon-to-be relationship with the handsome and oh-so-buff officer a secret here in the ER. This place was like a gossip petri dish! Everyone knew everyone’s business. Thankfully, no one was malicious about their whispering comments, but everyone knew each other’s business. And everyone had heard about Abby’s interest yesterday. Not just that, but everyone had also heard about the guy’s heroics as well. The officer had a bullet graze across his back and had still sprinted across the training fields to tackle the enlisted man before he shot another round. Which had probably accounted for the extraordinary amount of blood loss.

The doctor watched Abby step into the next patient’s curtained-off area, greeting the person with an encouraging smile. “She definitely needs someone,” he said, then sighed as he turned to greet his next patient, taking his cue from Abby and smiling in greeting.

Chapter 3

“What are you doing?!” she muttered to herself.

Standing in front of the apartment door, she lifted her hand to knock, then dropped her hand and scurried back toward her car.

She'd made it all the way to the stairs when she stopped and closed her eyes. “This is ridiculous!” she snapped.

Turning back towards the door, she froze. The man in question, Zeke Jeffers, was standing in his doorway, watching her curiously.

Was he laughing at her?

Damn it! She hated making a fool of herself. Abby looked down at the keys in her hands then, with a resigned sigh, walked back to stand in front of the enormous man. She still paused for a long moment, then looked up at him.

“I came by to help you with your stitches,” she announced with an almost belligerent tone.

His slow grin was devastatingly sexy. “I'd love the help. I haven't changed the bandage and it's driving me nuts!”

Abby looked at him with horror, struggling for words for a long moment. “But it's been three days!” she gasped, stepping forward and glaring up at the man. “I told you to change the bandage every day and to apply the ointment!”

He grinned down at her, completely unaffected by her dire tone. “Easier to do when I have help.” And with that, he stepped back to let her into his apartment.

Abby huffed, hiding behind irritation at his lack of concern. But it was all a façade. She really just...darn it, she'd wanted to see him again and prove to herself that he

wasn't as big or as handsome as she'd remembered! And that she wasn't as affected by the man's presence either!

Unfortunately, neither was the case. As soon as she stepped into his apartment, she knew that her visit was a mistake. Instantly, she felt overwhelmed by the man. He was just so big! And tall! And so...overwhelming! And clean! How could she smell the soap on him from this distance?

It was all just her imagination, she told herself.

Deciding that she was procrastinating, she nodded sharply, needing to get down to business. "Right. Well, why don't you pull your shirt down and I'll...check out your wound. I can apply the ointment that you should have been applying for the past several days, then I'll change the bandage."

Did the big brute just pull down the collar of his shirt as she'd expected? Nope! Not just a simple tug? Oh no! He had to take his shirt off entirely!

For a long moment, Abby stood there, stunned by the muscles rippling along his chest. His arms. Good grief, she hadn't known that biceps could get that large! She didn't think her hands could even circle those massive biceps!

"Doc?" he prompted. "As much as I love having you admire me, I'd love to have your hands on me too."

That brought Abby's eyes up to his with a sharply indrawn breath. Staring into his gorgeous blue eyes, she... stopped thinking. "I wasn't..." she stammered, shocked at how her fingers tingled at the thought of touching him! "I'm only here to check your back and..." she tried to remember the other part of her mission. Looking up into those enigmatic blue eyes, it took her several moments to remember the reason she was here. "And..." Another blink and she shook her head slightly. "And change your bandage," she finished, relieved that a few of her brain cells had kicked in and saved her.

Apparently, they hadn't kicked in fast enough if the heated look in his eyes was any indication. But the man

simply walked over to one of the big club chairs and sat down on the arm, presenting his back to her. “Check away, doc.”

Abby looked down at the bandage. There were only a few places where the blood had seeped out from the stitches, which was good. It meant that the majority of the stitches were holding and the big brute hadn't done any heavy lifting which would strain the skin around the wound.

Still, she hesitated to touch him, remembering her reaction at the hospital several days ago.

“You won't hurt me,” he told her, his voice deeper and huskier than it had been moments ago.

“I wasn't worried about hurting you,” she admitted honestly.

His response was to stand up and look at her. “What are you nervous about?”

Abby tilted her head back, staring up into his surprisingly blue eyes. “I'm not...” she couldn't finish the lie. He was just so big and so...male!

He cupped her jaw and she felt the warmth of his skin, the rough calluses. Everything about him was just so powerfully masculine, sparking her nerve endings and making her skin simmer with a heat she'd never experienced before.

“What are you doing?” she asked nervously, wishing that her voice was louder than a whisper. And that she had the strength to pull away. But good grief, she liked the way his hand felt on her skin! She liked how strong he felt when he stood so close. Abby had never been someone who liked to be protected, but she'd never be afraid of walking down a dark alley with someone like Zeke!

“I'm going to kiss you,” he announced.

The jolt sent her heart into panic mode. “You can't!” she told him, and yet, she didn't pull back. “I'm your doctor.”

Slowly, he shook his head, those blue eyes staring into hers, conveying a message that she both loved and...knew was

very wrong. “You’re a woman who came to my apartment, Abigail.”

“Abby,” she corrected. “No one calls me Abigail unless I’m in trouble.”

He smiled slightly, and bent lower, brushing his lips over hers tantalizingly. “Shut up, Abby.”

Abby almost laughed, but the way he kissed her felt... wonderful! Scary, but amazing.

Yeah, she was in big trouble!

“I really need to look at your back,” she murmured when he lifted his head slightly.

“In a minute,” he countered, lifting her chin with a fingertip and covered her lips with his, deepening the kiss.

Abby gasped when she felt his tongue against her lips, but she couldn’t have stopped herself from responding even if she’d wanted to. He was just that potent!

Moving closer, her hands slid slowly up his chest. That’s when she felt his arm wrap around her waist, pressing her against him and her mind blanked as instinct took over. She was mesmerized by his kiss, feeling her body tingling all over in anticipation of...!

The hissing pulled her out of the lust induced haze and Abby pulled back, blinking up at him with surprise. Then she realized what happened and gasped, stepping out of his arms. “I’m so sorry!” she whispered, her fingers moving to her lips that were still tingling.

He laughed softly and pulled her in again. “Not your fault, Abby,” he assured her. “It was my fault. I’m the one that tried to pick you up.”

She blinked, her hands resting on his shoulders as she tried to make sense of his words. “Why did you try to pick me up?”

His other hand moved to slide across her cheek again. “So that I could carry you into my bedroom and make love to you.”

He said it as if the idea were a foregone conclusion. “Into your bedroom? And...!” She pulled out of his arms, shaking her head. “Nope! No way! I told you five days with no physical activities. Nothing strenuous.”

He chuckled, following as she hurriedly retreated. “Okay, then you be on top.”

Abby blushed as that image popped into her mind. “Um...you’re...Colonel Jeffers, I just...!”

Her hand fluttered as she tried to tuck her hair back behind her ears.

“Let’s get something straight, Abby. There’s something going on between us. You came here tonight to find out what it was. And if you hadn’t come here, then I would have sought you out at the hospital over the next couple of days. But there’s no way that we can ignore this. It’s too strong. And if those dark circles under your eyes are any indication, you’re not sleeping any better than I am.”

She shook her head. “Colo...”

He growled warningly. “If you use my title one more time, we’re going to see how strong your stitches really are.”

Abby pressed her lips together for a long moment, giving him her best “doctor” glare. With a tone that didn’t allow any argument, she pointed to the club chair he’d perched on previously. “Sit down. I’m going to look at your back, apply the ointment that you should have been applying every day, and then I’m leaving.”

He looked at her intently for a long moment, then moved towards the chair. “Why not stick around and have some dinner?”

“Because I’m here...”

He stopped her with a shake of his head. “No, you’re not. You’re not just here as a doctor, Abby.” His hand slid up her back, proving his point when she shivered. “You’re here as a woman. A confident, powerful woman who needs to accept that you’re also a sexually vibrant woman who wants

me.” He leaned down a bit more as he said, “Don’t hide from it. Embrace it.”

And with that, he turned around and sat back down on the club chair, giving her his back again. “Why did you decide to become a doctor?” he asked, changing the topic.

It took Abby several moments to get herself under control. His question helped and she turned her attention to his back. Pulling on a pair of gloves, Abby carefully peeled the bandage away and peered at the raw, torn flesh on his back. “I don’t really know,” she admitted. “I just sort of fell into it.”

He glanced at her over his shoulder. “How does that work? I thought most doctors spent their lives knowing that they want to become a doctor.”

While Abby smiled as she touched his flesh with her gloved finger, and wishing that she could pull off the gloves and touch his skin, she considered her answer. “Actually, when I was little, I wanted to be a fashion designer. When I got to be a little older, I wanted to be a mystery writer. When I reached high school, I knew that I was going to be president of the United States.”

“Seriously?” he asked, surprised, but she heard the amusement in his voice even if she couldn’t see his face at this moment.

“Yep. I was head of the debate team and loved politics. I read every article I could find on the presidential election that year, and I loved reading books about the Constitution. So I probably would have headed into law school.”

“What changed your trajectory?”

“Well, my father was a Navy SEAL and, during my sophomore year of high school, he was killed on a mission.” She pulled out the container of antibacterial ointment she’d brought with her, squeezing some onto her finger, then carefully applying it to his wound as she spoke. “I was

devastated. It didn't help that I couldn't know where he'd died or how it had happened."

"That must have been rough," he agreed.

She paused for a moment as the memories swept over her. But she shook them off and concentrated on Zeke and his magnificent back. "It was. I was angry for a long time, and tried to find out as much about his passing as I could." She grimaced, then shrugged, although he couldn't see her since his back was to her. "When I read through some of the reports the Navy gave to my mother, I became fascinated by the medical terminology that someone had used to describe my father's wounds."

"They gave that to you?"

She smiled, but Zeke couldn't see her expression. "Sort of. My mother was in my dad's commanding officer's office. She was crying and he tried to comfort her. I saw a file with my dad's name on it and...I snuck a peek. When I realized what it was, and that the commanding officer was hugging my mother and couldn't see me, I took pictures with my cell phone."

He made some sort of grunting sound. "That's...not good security," he muttered. "Typical of the Navy."

Abby laughed, shaking her head. "Ah, the rivalry between the Army and the Navy is still strong, I see."

"Absolutely!" he agreed. "The SEALs are pansies."

Abby rolled her eyes. "Don't you guys occasionally train with the SEALs?"

His massive shoulder shrugged dismissively. "Yes. And as individuals, I can acknowledge that the guys are serious bad asses. But I'm Army. So therefore, publicly, I can't let my admiration be known." He shifted a shoulder slightly. "Go on. You were telling me how you decided that the Army was better than the Navy and joined the real military."

Abby laughed as she finished up with the ointment and picked up the gauze pads to re-cover the stitches. "You're

right, I was too angry with the Navy, but wanted to be a part of the military. I've kept in touch with my father's commanding officer over the years and he helped me get into an ROTC scholarship program that helped me pay for medical school." She taped the gauze to his back, nodding with approval at her handiwork. "I've never looked back. I love military life and I love what the Army does. I believe in its mission and it was the best choice I could have made."

"You're not worried about being sent overseas?"

She pulled off her gloves. "I did a tour in Iraq and another in Afghanistan. So no. I'd rather help out where I'm needed. But anywhere the Army sends me is fine with me."

"That's an unusual attitude."

She smiled and closed up her medical bag. "Well, I don't know if I'll stay in the Army forever. But for now, it suits me." She looked around, startled by the stark décor. It consisted of only a big, leather chair and...surprisingly, lots of books. "Where is your television?"

He grunted as he picked up his shirt again, sliding it over his arms. "I prefer to read."

"How do you watch football?"

He stood up and moved closer, looking down at her. "Are you, perhaps, stereotyping me?"

She laughed. "Absolutely! A big guy like you? I bet you played football, didn't you?"

He glared for perhaps a second longer, then acquiesced and nodded confirmation. "Yeah. I played at WestPoint."

Her eyes widened at his dismissive tone. Getting into WestPoint was...well, huge! "Impressive! How'd the team do during the all-important game each year?"

His grin widened. "We beat Navy three out of the four years I played."

Abby laughed, thinking he was even more attractive now that she knew he had brains inside that hard head of his.

“Well, I guess I’d better head out.”

He moved slightly closer, looming over her. “Why not stay and have some dinner with me?”

Abby glanced at the kitchen. It didn’t look as if he ever used it. “Thanks but...” she hesitated when he moved even closer. “I should...”

“You should stay and have dinner with me. I’ll order pizza.”

“Pizza isn’t very healthy.”

He laughed at her chagrined expression. “Live on the wild side, doc. I dare you.”

Abby laughed as well, but the idea of going back to her apartment and...doing nothing just wasn’t nearly as enticing as staying here and getting to know Zeke. “I’ll stay on one condition.”

“What’s that?” he asked, moving slightly closer.

“That you promise not to kiss me again,” she whispered.

He tilted his head, his blue-eyed gaze lingering on her lips. “I can agree to that. But you have to promise me something in return.”

She tried to hide her smile, but it was difficult. He was a bit too charming. “What’s that?”

“You have to promise to have dinner with me tomorrow night. I’ll cook and I promise it will be healthier than pizza. Deal?”

She looked up at him warily. “No kissing tonight?”

He shook his head. “None. I won’t even kiss you when I walk you to your car after dinner.”

She bit her lip, thinking that she should tell him no and just walk away. This man was dangerous. Enticingly dangerous but she’d lived such a normal, boring life for so long! She wanted the excitement of Zeke Jeffers! She wanted

just a night, maybe a few nights, of being close to a man that excited her unlike anyone she'd ever met before.

"Fine. Yes, pizza." She lifted her hand in the air, stopping his gesture of triumph. "But no kissing."

His lips curled up into a sexy smile. "Deal." And he picked up his phone to order.

An hour later, Abby was sitting on the sofa next to him, laughing so hard, she had to hold her stomach as he told her about some of the training exercises that had gone wrong over the past few years. "It's true!" he insisted when she shook her head, laughing so hard that her stomach hurt. "He covered himself with mud in order to hide himself."

"But...what happened to his weapon?"

Zeke shrugged dismissively. "He lost it in the mud."

"Oh no!" she gasped, and started laughing again. "What did you do when he found it?"

Zeke shrugged and took a long sip of his iced tea. "Well, he didn't find it for a few hours. He had to go back through the entire obstacle course and dig through every inch of the mud. And that was in the spring time," his grin widened, "so the rain had been pouring down over the course for a few weeks by then."

"Oh, the poor kid!"

"Right. Poor kid, my ass," he scoffed. "The idiot then had to spend hours cleaning his weapon."

"You let him shower first, right?" she asked, the doctor in her needing to know.

"Hell no!" he replied with heat. "And I made him clean his weapon outside."

She was bent over laughing at this point. "Why?"

"Because if he did it inside, then the mud would dry up. Then it would get all over my training rooms."

Abby couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed so hard. Zeke was such a surprise and she was...well,

confused and amazed.

Abby took a deep breath, trying to ease the muscles in her stomach that were aching from laughter. “I need to get home,” she told him, not bothering to look at the clock. Her departure had nothing to do with the time and everything to do with the sudden tension sparking between them. It had eased up while they’d eaten dinner, but now...she could feel his thoughts turning to something more...interesting.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay? Release me from the no-kissing policy?”

She bit her lip, trying to pretend as if she knew what she was doing. “Not tonight,” she told him. “Your back....”

He shook his head. “Forget my back. Stay,” he soothed, sliding his hand around the back of her neck.

“You promised no kissing,” she whispered, startled by how much she wanted to climb onto his lap.

“I’m not kissing you,” he replied, but his eyes moved to her lips, looking at them as if he were thinking about kissing her.

“You said something about walking me to my car?”

He didn’t remove his hand from her neck, but his fingers stopped sliding sensuously against her skin. “Fine, but you promised me dinner tomorrow night. And I promised that it would be healthier than pizza.”

Abby stood up, pushing her skirt down over her hips. She hadn’t realized how far up the material had shifted during their conversation. “Sorry about that.”

He chuckled softly, standing up as well. “I didn’t mind.”

She grabbed her purse and medical bag. “You didn’t say anything either,” she grumbled, slinging her purse over her shoulder.

“I’m not an idiot,” was his only response.

She laughed, appreciating his honesty even if it left her flustered. “I’m not used to dating men as honest as you.”

“You’re used to dating dishonest men?”

Another chuckle and she shook her head. “I’m leaving now. Thank you for a delightful evening.”

“You’ll change the bandage again tomorrow and put some of that ointment on my back tomorrow when I pick you up, right?” he asked, putting a hand to the small of her back as he led her out of his apartment. The stairs were wide, but not when one walked next to a man as big as Zeke. His shoulders needed extra space!

“You don’t have someone who can do that for you?”

“I could ask someone, but I’d rather have your hands on me. My co-workers aren’t as gentle as you are. And they might tear one of the stitches. I wouldn’t want to risk your hard work.”

She sighed. “Now you’re just playing to my medical instincts. That’s not fair.”

He grinned and moved closer. “I never promised to play fair, Abby. So, about tomorrow?”

“Fine! I’ll change the bandage and put more ointment on it. But only because I don’t think you’ll ask someone else to do it and it really needs to be done every day.”

“Good. I’ll pick you up tomorrow at six. Dress casually.”

He pulled her into his arms and, without kissing her, nuzzled the sensitive skin behind her ear, while his hands trailed over her body, sliding up and down her spine and lower...almost too low.

“I thought...?”

“I’m not kissing you,” he replied, burrowing his nose into the soft, sexy curls at the nape of her neck. “Wear your hair down tomorrow, okay?”

“Zeke,” she sighed, not sure what she wanted to say.

But before she could make a fool of herself, Zeke stepped back and opened her car door for her. “Until tomorrow,” he said with a gentlemanly bow.

Abby stared up at him for a long moment, debating with herself. But she knew the limits of her self-control, so instead of stepping closer, she stepped into the driver’s seat and pulled the door closed. Starting up the engine, she looked at him one more time, admired the play of muscles along his arms and shoulders and...all over. Then she carefully backed out of the parking space and drove home.

That night, after she’d washed her face, brushed her teeth, and changed into a soft, silky nightgown, she turned off the light and stared up at the ceiling, thinking about all she’d learned about Zeke tonight. She pulled her pillow against her chest and fell asleep with a smile on her lips.

Chapter 4

“What has you grinning like a Cheshire cat?” Cathy asked as soon as Abby stepped into the women’s locker room the following morning.

Abby shrugged, then pulled on a clean pair of scrubs. “I had a date last night. And I had a great time.”

“With that hottie from the other day? The big one with the yummy muscles?” Cathy probed hopefully.

Abby laughed, and nodded. “Yes. We had pizza last night and we’re having dinner again tonight.”

“Oooh! Sounds nice! Where is he taking you tonight?” They walked out of the locker room into the brighter lights of the main hospital hallway.

The whoosh of the doors to the emergency room sounded and they looked to see who was coming through. Since it wasn’t an emergency, they turned back to sorting through the supplies. “I don’t know, but apparently, he’s some sort of trainer. He told me so many hilarious stories about training new recruits last night that my stomach still hurts from laughing!”

Cathy looked at her curiously. “He’s a trainer?”

“Yeah. I don’t know which teams he trains, but I suspect he’s pretty tough on the soldiers.”

“Hmmm...I thought...” Cathy started, but trailed off.

Abby looked at her friend, her eyes worried. “What? What did you think?” Cathy had been stationed on the base for several years now and knew nearly everything that went on around here. Abby had only been here for a couple of months, so she wasn’t “read in” on a lot of the training that happened in the outer areas of the base.

Cathy waved a hand, shaking her head. “Oh, nothing. I just...”

Before she could finish, the doors opened again but this time, it was a team of paramedics that had an older officer on the gurney with breathing trouble. “Time to work,” Abby sighed, quickly moving towards the gurney and giving instructions to the paramedics before taking over.

Zeke whistled as he stepped out of his truck, scanning the area for...whatever. He was itching for a really hard work out, but knew that he had to wait until the stitches came out. Otherwise, he knew that Abby would put him on bed rest. Not that he'd follow her orders, but he didn't want to push her too far. He could wait another few days to work out, but only a few more days. The stitches itched worse than ever and he really needed something to distract himself. He'd gone through worse, he reminded himself.

Besides, he would be seeing Abby tonight, and that made the world a pretty good place, right at the moment.

“Stop it.”

Zeke turned to Derick who was checking off inventory on a clipboard.

“Stop what?” Zeke asked, shoving his hands into his pockets.

Derick looked back down at the clipboard. “Stop being so...*happy*.” The man's disgusted tone was obvious. And amusing!

Zeke threw back his head, laughing at his friend. “Right. I'll get right on that.” Then he walked away.

Joe was over in the corner with some of the other guys, lifting weights, but at Zeke's approach, he sat up and glared at him. “I'm with Derick,” Joe announced, shaking his head. “If you're going to spread that annoying happy crap, then stay away.”

Chuckles echoed throughout the group, but none dared to openly agree with Joe.

“What has you in such a foul mood?” Zeke asked, leaning against one of the weight machines. He was back in uniform today, his back healed enough for him to pull shirts over his head without tugging at the stitches. But he didn’t dare start in on the weight lifting again, even though his muscles and his mind craved the exertion.

Joe stood up and grabbed a towel, wiping his face. “It isn’t that I’m in a foul mood. It’s that you are acting just like Mike.”

Zeke glanced over at their friend and leader, who was in the conference room. The door was open at the moment so they could all see Mike as he pointed out something to General Kelly. Then Zeke glanced over at Lexie, Mike’s new wife, who was smiling as she worked on her computer, her fingers flying over the keyboard. The woman was one of the most efficient assistants their team had ever had. Add in the fact that she worked her butt off, both during the day to help out the team, as well as at night, when Mike stopped bothering her, to write romance novels.

Zeke would never admit it to anyone, but he’d read her books and...hell, they were pretty damn good!

“What’s wrong with acting like Mike? He’s a good guy.”

Joe glared at him for a long moment, then just rolled his eyes and turned away.

Zeke laughed, and strolled into his office, sifting through the tasks that required his attention. As he sat down and got to work, he smiled unconsciously as he considered options for dinner tonight. He’d struggled to sleep last night, so he’d woken up and started cooking, getting things ready for tonight. But what should he make for dessert?

Chapter 5

Abby paced across her small apartment, skimming her hands down over the jeans she'd pulled on after she'd finished her shift. Was her sweater set okay? Was the red too...sexual? Maybe she should change into a different color. She had several sweater sets because they were easy to coordinate with her skirts and slacks. Maybe blue? Yes, she should change into the blue sweater set.

But before she reached her bedroom, the doorbell rang and she froze. "Zeke," she whispered. He'd promised not to kiss her last night, but that promise didn't carry over to tonight.

Okay, maybe she should hold off on the kissing until his back was healed a bit more. She glanced over at the supplies she'd grabbed from the hospital earlier today. The gauze and ointment rested on her coffee table, seeming innocuous and simple. But the reality of those materials meant that she'd get to touch Zeke's back once again. And that...that was a problem.

The doorbell rang again and she sighed, accepting that she didn't have time to figure everything out. Better just to confront the issue head on.

"Hello..." She trailed off as she took in the man himself. He wore a pair of jeans that hugged his hard thighs and trim hips, but the tee shirt. Goodness, the tee shirt was... oh my! His muscles were on full display, the sleeves tight around his bulging biceps and...oh my!

"If you keep staring at me like that, I'm going to do something against my doctor's orders," he murmured, his eyes glowing with heat.

Her eyes snapped higher, taking in his handsome features and those blue eyes that...sighing, Abby stepped back, allowing him to come into her apartment.

“Let’s change your bandage.”

He stepped into her apartment and everything suddenly felt much...smaller. Tighter! It was all because Zeke’s shoulders were so wide and so amazingly...delicious!

Darn it, she was a doctor! She saw men’s bodies all the time. It was just bones and muscles, tendons and...!

Nope. There was no way Abby could compare Zeke to the other men that came through the emergency room. He was...better. Bigger, better, sexier, taller, more delicious, and just...!

“You’re doing it again,” he said, his voice low and grumbly. Zeke moved closer, resting his hands on her hips as he gently pulled her closer. “And guess what?”

“What?” she whispered, holding her breath as she waited...waited...for him to kiss her.

“I don’t have to stop myself from doing this,” he said. Then his lips covered hers. Slowly, gently, he teased and coaxed her into responding. Abby didn’t need much encouragement. At the first touch of his lips against hers, Abby released the breath she’d been holding and leaned in, her hands tentatively sliding up his chest as she tilted her head back to return his kiss with interest. That was all the encouragement he needed and the kiss went from soft and coaxing to full out seduction. She felt one of his hands cup the back of her head, holding her in place so that his lips and tongue could ravish her own. It was glorious!

And over too soon.

“If we keep this up,” he growled, “we’ll never have dinner.”

Abby almost asked if they *really* needed dinner, but stopped herself. “Right.” Stepping back, she looked around, trying to remember what they were doing. Why were they in her apartment instead of heading out?

The gauze on the coffee table caught her attention and she grabbed it with both hands. “Um...if you’ll...” she stared

at his tee shirt... “take off your shirt, I can...” she waved the gauze in the air.

“With pleasure,” he said teasingly, then pulled the navy tee shirt up and over his head.

Abby gasped when his chest and all of those rippling muscles were revealed. Would she ever get used to him like this? Probably not!

“Feel free to touch,” he stepped closer.

Abby closed her eyes, shaking her head with exasperation and...lust. Seriously, she needed to regain control of this situation. “Turn around, Zeke. Let me get this over with.”

“Take your time. I like having you touch me.”

He turned and sat down on the edge of her sofa, otherwise, she wouldn't be able to reach him. For a long moment, she simply stared at him, admiring his wealth of muscles.

Finally, she carefully peeled away the bandage and was surprised to see how much the man had healed in just the past twenty-four hours. “It looks much better,” she announced. “You must be healthier than the average person. You're healing better than normal.”

“I hope so. I'm ready to get these things out. They're itching like crazy!”

She smiled. “I'm sure that you have the self-discipline to not scratch.”

“Most of the time. But it would help if you gave me something else to think about,” he said, glancing over his shoulder at her.

There was no way she could misinterpret his glance and she smiled. “Give yourself a couple more days, he-man. Then you can resume your normal activities.”

“Two more days, Abby. And then we're working on an activity that is near and dear to my heart.”

Abby knew she should tell him that he shouldn't make assumptions. But in truth, she was looking forward to that moment as much as he was. She was thoroughly sick of denying herself the pleasure of Zeke and these little teasing touches on his back made it difficult to sleep.

"No comment?" he asked, looking up at her.

She suppressed a shiver, and shook her head. "None."

He stood up and had her in his arms before she knew what had happened. "Damn, Abby!" he groaned, his hands sliding up her back again. They crept around to the front, but he stopped himself before his hands could become too intimate.

Leaning his forehead against hers, he looked into her eyes. "You can't say things like that. Not yet. Wait until you'll let me follow through."

"Okay," she replied, breathless and more turned on than she'd thought possible. He pulled her hips against his, grinding his teeth as he fought for control. She even felt his fingers tightening around her waist and inched closer.

"Abby!" he groaned again. "You're killing me!"

She laughed, feeling powerful. Little Abby Fisher could actually make a man as big and powerful as Zeke Jeffers shiver with desire! What a power trip!

"Oh, you think this is funny?" he asked, shifting so that she was pressed firmly against him.

"Um...maybe I should finish your back first, so we can get out of here. This is getting...dangerous."

He sighed, kissed her forehead, and nodded. "I agree. But no more of those soft, sexy touches, Abby. I can't handle it. Just...smear the goop on me and then slap another bandage over the stitches. Then we'll get out of here."

Order given, he turned around and sat back down on the arm of her sofa.

With brisk efficiency, Abby smoothed the antibacterial ointment over his wound, and carefully bandaged everything

back up. “There. All done.”

Zeke grabbed his shirt and pulled it back over his head, tugging it back into place as he stood up and faced her. “Okay, we need to get out of here.” And with that, he took her hand in his and drew her to the front door. He barely gave her time to grab her purse and keys.

“What’s the rush?” she asked, a bit breathlessly as she followed him down the stairs to his truck.

“I can’t be this close to you and a bed at the same time, Abby,” he explained as they approached his truck. He leaned in close, pressing her back against the cab. “I know that you need more time, time to get used to what’s happening between us. So instead of tempting fate, and my self-discipline, we need to get away from temptation. Because you...” he glanced down at her sweater set and Abby suddenly realized that his hands were underneath the sweater, stroking her bare skin. “Honey, you’re temptation personified!”

He gave her a quick, hard kiss and pulled her into his arms just long enough to open the door to his truck. Abby eyed the tall truck hesitatingly. His truck was just like him - big! Instead of making an undignified entrance into the cab of the truck, Zeke took matters into his own hands and simply lifted her up, placing her gently into the passenger seat.

With a wink, he slammed the door closed, then walked around to the driver’s side. When he pulled himself into the seat, he looked at her with an expression that dared her to be angry with his efficiency.

“Just drive,” she ordered, laughing.

Twenty minutes later, Abby was completely lost. She had no idea where he was taking her. For all she knew of this area, he could be taking her to a swamp to bury her alive.

She didn’t think that was the case at all. In fact, she felt safer with Zeke than she did in her own home behind a locked door. Looking at him, she suspected that Zeke could take on Superman and come out the winner!

“Where are we?” she asked when he pulled into a small area that wasn’t really a parking lot. It was more just a small space between the trees and shrubs.

“It’s a spot I found about a year ago when I was jogging.”

She looked around, the road was probably four miles behind them. “You were jogging this far out?”

“Yeah. It’s only about ten miles to this point. But it’s worth it. Trust me.” He came to a stop and turned off the engine. With that, he reached behind his seat and grabbed two bags.

“That’s a pretty long run,” she commented, squinting into the distance. “How long does it take you to get this far?”

He walked around to her side of the truck and opened the door. “Want me to carry you?”

“No way! I’m not pulling those stitches,” she replied, but he lifted her out of the truck, setting her feet on the ground with just one arm.

She laughed and pulled back as soon as she had her balance. “Okay, lead the way.”

He looked down at her. “How often do you let a man take you out into the woods to a place you don’t recognize?”

Abby looked up at him, all amusement gone. “Never, Zeke. In fact, in the past, I wouldn’t even allow a man to drive me to a date. I generally met my dates at the restaurant or coffee shop until I felt more comfortable with him.”

He stared at her for a long moment before he said, “So, what makes me different?”

She frowned thoughtfully, not exactly sure how to answer his question. “I can’t explain it. You’re just... different,” she admitted with a slight shrug.

There was a silence as they absorbed her words and the meaning behind them. Then Zeke lowered his head, brushing his lips over hers tenderly. Zeke took her hand and led her deeper into the woods.

After several minutes of walking, Abby heard the rushing water. “What is this place?” she asked.

“Wait for it,” he said, a teasing note to his voice. “It’s just around this bend in the path.”

They turned on a barely used path and...! “Oh Zeke!” she whispered. Right in front of her was a small waterfall that flowed over large stones, surrounded by weeping willows that draped softly over the banks, the long tendrils of the weeping willow branches dipping gracefully into the water. Because the days were longer, the sun still dappled through the leaves, but it wasn’t hot. Although it wasn’t too cool either. The temperature was perfect for a spring picnic.

“This is amazing!” she whispered, leaning her shoulder against his side, unconsciously needing to touch him, to feel the strength of him against her side.

“I’m glad that you like it,” he replied. He pulled a blanket out of one of the bags and spread it out over the grass. “Have a seat.” He pulled out two glasses and a bottle of wine, several types of cheese, a loaf of crusty bread, grapes, and a tin of cookies. Homemade cookies!

“This looks wonderful,” she told him, taking each of the containers and peering into them as soon as he handed it to her.

“Good. I hope you’re hungry.”

For the next two hours, they sat on the blanket sampling different cheeses and bread along with grapes, talking about their lives and preferences, laughing at teenage foibles and college aspirations. When she’d had enough, he finally handed her the container of cookies. “I don’t know what kind you like, so take your pick.”

Abby removed the lid and discovered several different types of homemade cookies. “Who made these?” she asked, debating over what looked like a caramel cookie versus a peanut butter cookie.

“I did.”

She'd just picked up a peanut butter cookie when he said that. Unfortunately, she couldn't read his expression, and he popped a cookie into his mouth, so she couldn't determine if he was serious.

"No, really," she urged, nibbling on the cookie, then pausing as she let the creamy taste wash over her. "Oh, this is delicious!"

"Cinnamon," he explained.

"What do you mean?"

He shrugged. "I add cinnamon to the cookie dough before I bake them. Makes all the difference."

Her eyes widened, but she wasn't sure if she should believe him, or if Zeke was pulling her leg. "Um..."

"It's true," he assured her. "I also put brandy extract into my chocolate chip cookies. Makes them much better."

She swallowed, and looked at him again. "You're serious. You baked these cookies?"

"Sure. Why don't you believe me?"

"Because you're a guy! And a hulk-guy! I just can't picture you baking."

He shrugged. "I'm an excellent baker. Especially bread. I love experimenting with bread. It's pretty complicated, and yet, there are generally only a few ingredients. But if just one thing goes wrong, or the ingredients aren't incorporated at the right time, in the right order, the bread is a failure." He popped another cookie in his mouth, and leaned back on his elbows. "I make my own pizza crust too. I can make it and freeze it, then just pull it out in the morning to defrost in time for a pizza dinner. My crust is much better than anything you'll find at a takeout place. And bread? Seriously, there's nothing better than fresh baked bread on a Saturday morning. Sometimes, I'll make the bread on Friday night and leave it to rise overnight. Then all I need to do is put it in the oven the following morning and wait for it to bake."

She twisted around, listening to him but still struggling to believe he baked. “Right,” she laughed, assuming he was teasing her.

Zeke chuckled as he watched Abby take another cookie out of the container. He suspected that she didn’t believe him, but that was okay. He knew exactly how to convince her. As soon as she got over this need to hold off on a more physical relationship, he would implement that plan. Until then, he was truly enjoying talking with her, spending time with her. She had a great smile and was a great listener.

“Did medical school teach you to be a good listener?”

She was startled by the question. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” he said, reaching out to tug her closer, “that you’re so easy to talk to. You really seem to care what another person is saying. Did they teach you how to listen while in med school or is that something you grew up with?”

She laughed, shaking her head. “I learned it from my father.”

“He was good at telling stories?”

Abby rolled her eyes and, for some reason, his gut tightened in anticipation of whatever she was about to say. “I guess you could say that. My father was a Navy SEAL and couldn’t talk about what he was doing when he disappeared. From a very young age, I learned to listen to what he wasn’t telling me. I’d watch his facial expressions. I seemed to know when he was lying to me. And as I grew older, I learned to distinguish when he was lying because he couldn’t tell me something, and when he was lying so that he could tease me.”

“You didn’t get along with your parents?” Zeke didn’t mention that he wasn’t allowed to tell her a lot of what he did either. When he left on a mission, there was absolute secrecy to protect her as well as the team. If anyone even suspected that she might know where he and his teams had gone, she would be in danger.

He made the decision right then that he wouldn't lie to her. He might not be able to tell her the whole truth, but Zeke didn't want her to have any reason to distrust him.

“Oh no! I got along with them fine. Better than fine!” She grinned. “I wasn't one of those moody, rebellious teenagers. I got good grades, took advanced classes, and gave them plenty of bragging rights.”

“And probably dated plenty of boys too.”

She snorted. “Did I mention that my father was a Navy SEAL? Everyone in my class knew that and every one of the boys was terrified of what my father might do to them if they even glanced in my direction. So no. I didn't date much in high school. Only a few of the boys were brave enough to approach me and, of those, none of them were brave enough to make a move on me. My curfew was nine o'clock on the weekdays and eleven o'clock on weekends. That meant that I was usually home by ten forty-five on any date I went on because the boys were terrified of what my father would do if I came home late.”

Zeke laughed. “Yeah, I can imagine being a bit particular about the boys my daughter dates.”

She tilted her head. “What about the girls your son dates?”

“Nah! My son will be able to take...” he stopped, realizing exactly where he was going. “Okay, let me rephrase that,” he replied with a chuckle.

Abby looked at him with a “Gotcha!” smile. “Please do.”

He grinned and reached out to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear. “My daughter will know how to protect herself. And I will caution my son about the wiles of women.” He leaned over and kissed her gently. “Better?”

Abby laughed, then looked startled when he shifted so that he was looming over her. “Wait a minute! How did we get into this position?”

He nuzzled her neck. “Obviously, your father didn’t teach *you* how to avoid precarious situations with wily men.”

She laughed, but his hand slipped under her sweater and her breath caught in her throat, shocked at the sensation of his touch and the desire that burned through her.

“What are you doing?”

He smiled, his hand sliding over her stomach. “I’m touching you.”

“But...we should wait.” Her tongue darted out, wetting her lips. “Your back. It isn’t healed.”

His mouth nibbled along her neck. “We’re not going to make love today, Abby. We’re going to take things very slowly.” He nuzzled a spot under her ear while he continued to stroke her waist. “You might trust me with your safety, but you still don’t trust me with your body, do you?”

She thought about that for a long moment, knowing that his comment wasn’t exactly right. When the realization came to her, she held her breath. She trusted him with her body, yes. Completely. But she didn’t trust him with her heart. That was the real risk she took right at this particular moment. And it scared her more than she’d thought possible.

“Zeke, we should...”

“Shhh,” he whispered. “Just tell me when to stop. We’re only going to make out tonight. Just like in high school.”

Was that more dangerous? She didn’t know and she didn’t have a chance to figure that out. Because he was kissing her again. His lips were surprisingly gentle. Brushing his lips against hers, he nibbled and teased until she uttered a protest and lifted her head, capturing his mouth with hers.

That’s when things became dangerous! Abby moaned as he took control of the kiss, his lips moving sensuously over hers, urging her to open her mouth. When she did, his tongue took over the teasing while his hands continued to slide along her skin. With every new inch of skin he touched, her body

trembled and she felt as if she wanted to wrap herself around him!

Every muscle in Zeke's body was tense with the effort to keep himself under control. They were out in the open and, it wasn't probable, but it was possible someone could come upon them here by the creek. So as much as he wanted to make love to Abby right here, right now, Zeke held back, controlling his touches and refusing to let himself pull her sweater off so that he could feast his eyes on her breasts. He wanted to taste her nipples and...he shook his head and pulled back, his erection throbbing at the idea of tasting her everywhere!

"We should stop," he groaned, but he didn't move. His hips were between her legs, their jeans the only thing stopping him from pressing into her body and finding the nirvana he knew he would find there.

Abby arched. "You started it!" she hissed.

He laughed, shaking his head in a pointless effort to disperse some of the lust clouding his mind. "Yeah. I know and it was a mistake." He pushed away, sitting up but his jeans were pretty uncomfortable with the painful erection pressing against the zipper. "Damn, Abby! You get me hotter than a teenager!" he groaned with a chuckle.

Abby sat up as well and he could see that she was shaking. "I'm..." he started to reach for her, but she pushed away, laughing. "Don't you dare touch me again, Zeke Jeffers!" And she stood up, putting several feet of distance between them. Shoving her hair out of her eyes, she looked around. "No touching until..." she sighed, bowing her head. "No touching until your back is healed. Two more days, Zeke. Two more days and then, if you are still interested, then I'll..." she jumped back as he lunged at her.

"My back is fine," he vowed, reaching for her.

But Abby jumped out of reach again. "You can't even see your back, Zeke. And it's healing beautifully, but it's not

ready for the strain of what's on your mind. My stitches are good, but not good enough for what will happen when we finally..."

"Get naked," he finished for her and stepped closer, not letting her jump away from him again. "That's what we're going to do, Abby," he growled with barely restrained frustration. "We're going to get naked so fast that it will make your head spin."

She stared up at him, not sure what to say after that. "Right. But um..."

"You'll enjoy it," he told her, reading her mind. "I promise that you will be screaming my name until you're hoarse."

Abby laughed, not believing him. "Um...Zeke, I'm not really the screaming sort of woman."

His fingers dug into her waist just a little. "Just you wait, Abby." He looked into her eyes. "Screaming! You'll be begging and it will be amazing! Freaking amazing!"

He could see in her eyes that she didn't believe him, but that was okay. He had two more days to wait, and then he'd prove it to her. And afterward, when she was in his arms, breathless and limp, he'd repeat her words right back at her.

In the meantime... "It's still early," he commented. "Why don't we pack this up and see if there's a movie we want to watch?"

She looked up at him, surprised by his question. "A movie?"

He started to pack the rest of the food away. "Do you not like movies?"

She chuckled and bent to help him. "I love movies. I just..."

He realized where she was going with that statement and laughed. "Abby, I like you. I enjoy spending time with you."

Abby paused, looking over her shoulder at him. Confused. “It’s not just sex?” she challenged, tilting her head quizzically.

Zeke snorted at that question. “Hell yes! It’s sex. But,” he paused, looking at her as if he didn’t really understand it either. “But there is more to it than *just* sex. So much more.”

She blinked up at him and Zeke wanted to shout or laugh or...hell, maybe howl. “I just scared the hell out of you, didn’t I?”

Abby nodded slowly, chewing her lower lip.

He kissed her again, but this time it was a gentle, sweet kiss. “Don’t be scared, Abby. We’ll take it slow. I promise not to scare you away.”

She laughed and he pulled her into his arms. In his mind, she fit against him perfectly. She wasn’t too short because when he held her like this, they just...fit. Abby felt...right.

“We’ll figure this out.”

She laughed and he felt her soft lips against his neck. Damn, he liked that! He liked her touching him, liked holding her even if they couldn’t do anything more than this. He wished she would stop worrying about his back. But then again, he respected her far superior medical knowledge so he didn’t try to downplay her concerns. She was right, he couldn’t see his back and he really had no idea what was going on. He was simply going on past experience with how his body healed.

Then he remembered that this might be more than just giving his back time to heal. Abby might need a bit more time to come to terms with what was happening between them. And damn it, he was going to give that time to her! It might kill him, but he was going to do it.

Chapter 6

Abby smiled as she walked into the hospital three days later. Zeke was...amazing! She'd never met a man that was as sweet and wonderful as Zeke. With all of his big, delicious muscles, Abby was discovering that he really was a big pussy cat. He loved to bake and, every time he picked her up, he'd hand her something that he'd baked the night before or, in the case of the bread he'd brought her last night, that he'd just taken out of the oven before coming to pick her up.

That loaf of bread hadn't been spared and she ran a hand down over her stomach. The bread last night had been... oh my! He'd added turmeric to the dough. So, it was a yellow loaf of warm, crusty bread that smelled divine! She'd smothered it in butter, closing her eyes as she savored the flavor of the bread. When she'd opened her eyes, there had been an odd expression on his handsome features. But he'd said nothing. Instead, he'd taken her hand and led her out of her apartment, not even giving her time to put the bread away.

So far, he'd taken her to the firing range where she'd completely lost the competition that she'd secretly had going with him. She was an Army Captain, so she'd gone through all of the normal basic training that every soldier had to go through. But she'd prided herself on her sharpshooting skills. Unfortunately, her skills had deteriorated with lack of use over the years. Whereas Zeke could really shoot! He was amazing! When their target papers were taken down, there had been one large hole in his paper. One hole! At first, she'd looked at the paper and wondered where all of his bullets had gone, assuming that he'd missed. But no! Zeke hadn't missed. The guy had zeroed in on the same place and hit the same mark with every shot. Meanwhile, her bullets had been in a good grouping, but they were fanned out across the target.

Another night, they'd gone for a long walk down by the river and he'd bought her dinner with ice cream afterwards. It had been a sweet, romantic night and she'd sighed with happiness when he'd walked her to her door. But then he'd kissed her and all of that sweetness had been obliterated by sensuality and desire. Abby hadn't been smiling when she'd stepped into her apartment that night. In fact, she'd been frustrated, her body tingling with awareness and anticipation.

So, tonight was the night. She'd changed his bandage on his back every night and the wound had healed beautifully. In fact, she'd even considered taking the stitches out last night. His back had healed amazingly fast. But she wasn't surprised. The man ate healthy foods, knew how to relax through baking, and exercised like a demon. He was in top physical shape. Bodies healed well when they were healthy to begin with.

"You're doing it again."

Abby blinked, looking up to find Cathy smirking at her from the other side of the nurse's station.

"Doing what?"

The lively nurse leaned forward, glanced to the right and left, then whispered, "You're thinking about him!"

Abby laughed, but felt her cheeks heat up. "Is it that obvious?"

Cathy shrugged. "Only because I know you. To someone else, you probably just look like you're losing your mind." She shrugged. "Only crazy people go around smiling like that all the time." She shook her head. "And the sighs! Good grief, woman! Stop sighing!"

Abby laughed as she walked away, heading off to examine the next patient.

Several minutes later, Abby smiled, finished writing her notes in the patient's chart, and moved on to her next patient of the morning. But the whole day, she thought about Zeke and what would happen tonight. Several times, she

shivered in anticipation and had to laugh at her silliness. Sex was fine. It was good and fine and...just fine. She loved snuggling afterwards, but would it be different with Zeke?

A little after three o'clock that afternoon, just after she'd changed scrubs because a patient had thrown up all over her, she trudged grimly through the emergency room when she received a text message. Thinking it was related to one of her patients, she hurriedly checked the message.

"Have to postpone tonight. Will get back in touch as soon as I can. Z."

That's it. Nothing else? Where was he going? Why did he have to cancel? Was it some sort of family emergency? That must be it, she decided as she slid her phone back into her pocket. Grabbing the chart for a new patient, she read through the information, but a part of her mind wondered about Zeke's message. It had been cryptic, but that was Zeke. He wasn't a flowery message kind of guy.

Still, the message seemed...strange. What did it mean? Was he okay?

With a sigh, she knew that she'd just have to wait until she could call him after work. So she sighed and focused on her patients.

Chapter 7

Three days! She hadn't heard from Zeke in three days! What in the world was going on? He hadn't responded to her texts. He hadn't answered her phone calls. Was this thing between them over before it had really begun?

The thought was so depressing that she pretended she hadn't thought it. Fighting back the tears, she focused on the stitches she was sewing on a man who had cut himself in a bar fight. With a glass bottle, no less, so the edges were ragged and...and what kind of an idiot gets into a bar fight at ten o'clock in the morning?! Fighting back her anxious frustration, because she knew it was for Zeke, not her patient, she finished off the stitches. "Okay, you're all set," she announced.

"Thanks, Doc," the guy said, starting to slide off of the gurney.

"Hold up," she cautioned, writing out a prescription. And that action almost sent her to tears. Because the whole situation seemed like a repeat of what she'd done with Zeke just over a week ago. Taking a deep breath, she finished the prescription and handed it over. "Here. You're going to need to apply this ointment to the wound twice a day and..." she paused, blinking back the tears, "...and change the bandage daily."

"Uh...thanks." The man took the prescription, looking at her warily. "You okay?"

Abby nodded. "I'm fine. Thank you."

At that moment, two military police officers stepped into the exam area. "Are you finished with him, Doctor Fisher?" one of them asked.

Abby nodded at the MPs, knowing that they were there to take the guy into custody. A soldier wasn't allowed to get into a bar fight. Not even at ten o'clock in the morning. It

simply wasn't allowed. Oh, bar fights happened all the time. But if the military police got involved, then the soldier faced serious consequences.

Taking a deep breath, she scribbled on his chart, then slid it over to the nurse who would file it.

The rest of the afternoon was just as tedious and all she wanted to do was to head home and soak in a hot bubble bath so that she could wallow with a big glass of wine. She wanted to put her headphones on and listen to music while she sipped the wine and thought about nothing at all.

Adding insult to her predicament, it was Friday night and, because she'd been hoping to go out and do something with Zeke tonight, or even better, stay in with Zeke tonight, she hadn't made plans with her friends. So she had nothing on the agenda for her night, or even her weekend.

How depressing. She felt like a grouchy bear as she unlocked her car door. Driving home, she considered stopping by the grocery store for some ice cream. But the thought of dealing with the crowds was just too much. She didn't seem to have the energy for that tonight.

So instead, she drove back to her apartment and lugged her bag up the stairs. She'd just locked the door, not intending to head out again, when a knock sounded on the door. A hard, demanding knock!

Who in the world?!

Opening the door, she was ready to lambast the person on the other side for being so rude about the knock when she gasped! It was Zeke! He was standing in her doorway and... nope! Not in her doorway! Nope, he was walking into her apartment. He was pushing her back against the wall and... kissing her!

The melting was almost instantaneous! Zeke's hard body, his persuasive lips, and...all of him. She even liked the way he smelled and Abby hadn't ever thought that a man smelled good or bad! But goodness, Zeke smelled delicious! All male and powerful and manly!

His hands! Good grief, his hands were everywhere! Under her skirt and...wait, why were his hands under her skirt! Abby tried to concentrate, pulling her mouth away from his, but he simply moved his mouth to her neck, which felt amazingly good! Yes! When he kissed her there, just like that, she wanted to melt into his arms.

Still, something was bothering her. She couldn't quite put her finger on what it was, but Abby knew that it was important.

“Zeke!” she gasped. “Wait! I can't...!”

He pulled away, bracing his hands on the wall behind her head so he wasn't touching her any longer. Suddenly, she felt...cold. Abandoned!

Staring up into his eyes, she tried to catch her breath but...he looked so delicious! His tee shirt was untucked from his jeans and...had she done that?

“Do you need more time?” he asked, his voice rough with desire. “I can do that. Just say the word. It might kill me, but I will wait until you're ready, Abby.”

Was she ready? Yes! Good grief, she was so ready! More ready than she'd ever thought possible! No man had ever had her this ready! She felt as if one more touch from him might just cause her to combust.

Pushing her hand through her hair, she realized that he was watching her, his eyes glittering with need. Did he really want her to touch him that much?

More heat sizzled through her with that realization. But she paused, trying to remember...what? What did she need to remember?

“Abby,” Zeke murmured, disrupting her thoughts. “Talk to me. Tell me yes or no. Slow down or keep going. You're in charge here. Tell me what you want.”

She laughed, still trying to sort through her muddled thoughts. “Zeke, you're...intense.”

“I want you. You needed a few days. Now we have...”

“Wait. That’s it!” She gasped, stepping back a little and glaring up at him. “Where have you been? You just disappeared! I thought you weren’t interested in me anymore.”

His eyes showed his surprise, but that was the invitation he needed. Like a panther, he moved closer, drawing her forward with his hands around her hips. “I’m so interested, I might just break the zipper on my jeans, honey,” he told her, pressing her hand there to show her exactly what he meant. Sure enough, his erection was pressing against her stomach and she grinned with the surge of power she felt.

“I can’t tell you where I went, Abby,” he said. “I won’t ever be able to warn you when I have to go somewhere.”

She was startled, and something struck her, an old memory that she couldn’t quite put her finger on.

“But trust me, I won’t ever just walk away from you. If something goes south with our relationship, then I’ll tell you so, in person. I’m not the kind of man who will break up with you in a text message.” He moved closer, lowering his head and doing that nuzzling thing along the base of her neck. “But there’s no way that this is over, honey. Not when I want you this badly.”

She shivered under his hands. He moved closer, his hips pressing against hers, his lips teasing her neck. She gasped when he cupped her breasts. When his thumbs moved over her already taut and aching nipples, she was lost in her desire.

So instead of pushing him away, she came closer, pressing herself against him, feeling his erection throb against her stomach and...he brushed his thumbs against her nipples again and she gasped. “Zeke!” she whispered against his neck. Then her fingers moved to the hem of his tee shirt, pulling and tugging. She was so impatient, she wanted to rip his shirt off!

“Get it off!” she snapped, pulling fruitlessly at his shirt.

He pulled away for a moment, then he was back, his tee shirt gone. She slid her hands up his chest, reveling in the feeling of his muscles under her hands, her fingertips tracing and teasing, exploring every inch of him.

She was ravenous now! Never in her life had she been this adamant about needing sex but with Zeke, she was all in! Her fingers moved lower, tracing the ridges of his abs before sliding underneath the waistband of his jeans. Her fingers fumbled with the snap, but he hissed and pulled her hands away.

“Bed. Now!” he ordered, then scooped her up into his arms, carrying her from the wall to the only bedroom in the apartment. With a kick of his boot, the door slammed shut behind him.

Unceremoniously, he dumped her onto the bed, and proceeded to strip her clothes off. “I’ll be more careful next time, Abby. But right now, I need you naked!”

Seconds later, he got his wish. He barely paused before he lowered his head, taking one of her nipples into his mouth. Abby screamed, writhing under his not-so-tender onslaught. But she needed more! Her fingers moved back to his jeans but again, he stopped her by simply standing up and stripping off his clothes.

“Now, we’re going to do this right!”

“Your stitches!” she gasped.

He shook his head. “I had Mike take them out. My back is fine, Abby.” Then he leered at her. “Forget about my back and concentrate on me.”

With one hand, he took her ankle and spread her legs wide, his eyes moving from her breasts to that secret place. She wanted to hide from him but Zeke wasn’t having it. His hands moving along her legs, first the outside, then the inside, his fingers teasing and touching everywhere. Nothing was off

limits and he spread her wide, his mouth hovering teasingly over her core before he covered her with his hot mouth.

She screamed, arching against him, her fingers diving into his hair to hold him there as she wiggled, trying to get his mouth to...! “Yes! Just like that! Do it again!”

He did. Over and over again until she was almost out of her mind with the desperate need for a release. But he didn't give it to her. When she felt his finger slide into her heat, she screamed again. “Stop teasing me!” she yelled at him, her fingers releasing his hair in order to twist the sheets, not wanting to hurt him even in the throes of the most overwhelming passion she'd ever experienced.

“Yes!” she whispered, or shouted, Abby wasn't sure. All she knew was that satisfaction was just a little closer.

“Not just yet,” he teased before he wrapped his mouth around that sensitive nub and sucked. Abby was trembling with need now, not sure how to get him to give her what she needed. She stilled, her body right on the edge. But a split second before she might have tumbled over, he pulled away.

“I hate you!” she screamed, opening her eyes to find him rolling a condom down over his erection and she licked her lips. Zeke looked at her with triumph in his eyes which caused her fingers to curl over his shoulders when he lowered himself back down between her legs. “Hold onto me, honey,” he coaxed.

Abby's fingers tightened on his shoulders as he pressed his impressive length into her. “Yes!” she sighed, arching and wrapping her legs around his waist while he pressed deeper and deeper into her tight, wet sheath.

When he was fully embedded in her heat, he paused, looking down at her. “You okay?”

“Yes! Damn it, you're driving me crazy!” And she pressed against him, shifting her body against his in a desperate bid to find that release that her body craved so desperately.

Abby arched her hips, not sure what to do to ease this crazy need for release because she'd never felt like this before. Sex had always been fine but not world-rocking. It had never been insane, desperate, or...just needed!

When he started moving inside of her, she shuddered, lifting her hips to match his thrusts. Over and over again, he pressed into her, bringing her closer and closer! It felt... amazing!

When that beautiful release finally came, she screamed as the waves of pleasure poured over her in a seemingly endless tidal wave.

For a moment, she felt him stiffen and knew that he was finding his own release, but Abby could only hold on, her fingers curling into his shoulders as another orgasm hit her.

Afterwards, Zeke collapsed on top of her, his body a wonderful weight that Abby savored, unconcerned with her ability to breathe. Feeling him like this was more important than oxygen, she thought as her eyes closed.

A long time later, he rolled off of her and pulled her close. "I'm smothering you," he muttered, and yawned as he buried his nose in her hair.

"You're fine," she whispered, her voice hoarse.

Abby felt him grin into her hair and wanted to laugh. Or cry. Maybe both. That had been the wildest and most beautiful moment she'd ever experienced. "Please don't say anything to ruin this moment," she whispered, turning to snuggle into the warmth of his body.

"Would I do that?" he asked, wrapping his arms around her to pull her even closer.

"You're male. Yes, you'd do that."

He laughed, kissing the top of her head. "Yeah, I probably would. So I guess I'll just shut up."

Abby smiled and closed her eyes, enjoying the perfection of this moment with him. It might not last. She

might never have this again. But for this moment, it was perfect.

Chapter 8

“Please, you *have* to share,” Cathy teased, coming up beside Abby. “What’s your secret?”

“My secret?” Abby asked, feeling like humming. Maybe singing.

Cathy leaned against the counter, eyeing Abby pointedly. “There was a bout of food poisoning in one of the mess halls today. We had seventeen soldiers come in throwing up all over the place. Two heart attacks, one broken leg, and a car accident involving four different patients.” She paused after listing the crises they’d seen today. “How are you glowing?”

Abby laughed. It had been two weeks since Zeke had come back from wherever he’d gone. Two weeks of blissful, amazing sex. Two weeks during which time the sex had only gotten better! As she and Zeke learned more about each other’s bodies, they found how to pleasure each other better. It was mind-blowing how he could make her climax so many times in a night. Sometimes, it was only once and they would fall asleep, both of them tired from a hard day. And other times, she’d climax over and over again until it was almost painful. And yet, Zeke knew when to relent and let her body come down from that incredible high. After those times, he’d stroke her softly, holding her in the aftermath of their lovemaking until she fell asleep against his strong shoulder.

“You’re thinking about him, aren’t you?”

Abby laughed and nodded her head. “Yeah. I’m thinking about Zeke. He’s pretty wonderful.”

“That good in bed, huh?”

Abby didn’t answer that, believing that their sex life was personal. Instead, she whispered, “Remember those cookies in the break room the other day?”

Cathy's eyes widened. "No!" she grumbled, shifting on her feet. "NO way! A man that gorgeous is not allowed to bake as well!"

Abby laughed, nodding her head. "He loves to bake. The other morning, he made cinnamon rolls that...they were amazing! Just...amazing! Right out of the oven, freshly baked with tons of icing on top!"

Cathy sighed. "No wonder you're eating salads all the time!" she replied with a smile. Then her smile disappeared. "Just tell me he's horrible in bed. The guy has to have some flaws. So it's sex, right? He's inept?"

Abby laughed, but didn't answer. "I have a patient," she said, leaving Cathy hanging.

"You'd think he could at least be inept on those missions," Cathy grumbled as she followed behind Abby, although Cathy went to a different exam room. "But I hear he's a dynamo there too."

Abby paused and glanced thoughtfully over her shoulder at her friend. Missions? What missions?

But Cathy was heading for another patient that needed her assistance. And Abby needed to tend to her own. Gazing down at the chart, she wondered what sorts of missions Cathy meant. Zeke was a trainer. She'd even seen him training one day when she'd been brought there for a medical emergency. He'd been pushing the soldiers through some drills, doing something with an obstacle course that he'd probably run through a thousand times.

But that had been on one of the other fields and she hadn't had a chance to really talk to him about it. Which was an absolute lie, she thought as she smiled at her next patient. She'd had plenty of chances to talk to Zeke about his work. They talked a lot at night. He cooked her dinner and she sat on a stool watching him as they discussed...whatever. They were both opinionated people and she loved that he was so well informed.

So, what was the niggling doubt that kept coming up in the back of her mind? There were certain topics that she knew she didn't want to bring up. And that mission he'd gone on two weeks ago, the secrecy of it and something he'd said had tripped up a memory in her mind. What had he said?

Unfortunately, a multi car accident was reported and the entire emergency room staff jumped into preparation mode. For the next several hours, Abby didn't have time to think about anything other than stitching up wounds and setting broken bones. A few accident victims arrived in the emergency room and both were in pretty bad shape but, thankfully, they would fully recover. By the time her shift ended in late afternoon, the crisis had died down.

"What a day!" Abby sighed as she and Cathy walked into the staff locker room to change clothes.

"Yeah. It was rough. Did you see that broken leg that Doctor Carter had to set?" She shuddered. Even medical staff could be shocked and grossed out at times.

"Ugh!" Abby laughed, leaning her head back against her locker. "I'm glad he landed that patient instead of me."

Cathy nodded, then sighed as she pushed herself to her feet. "I don't think I have the energy to change clothes."

Abby opened her eyes and looked at her friend. "You have blood on the side of your..."

"Darn it!" Cathy snapped, then tugged the scrubs off and tossed them into the bin for sanitizing. They changed into their street clothes and headed out to their cars. "Are you seeing him again tonight?"

Abby smiled, her exhaustion lifting as she thought about Zeke. "Yeah. Probably."

Cathy grinned. "I'm glad for you, Abby. You deserve a good guy like him. And you're probably the best person to handle his quirky job requirements."

Abby had just pulled her keys out of her purse when she registered Cathy's words. "Quirky? He's just..."

Cathy chuckled, shaking her head. “Abby, he’s not a trainer.” She shrugged, “Colonel Jeffers might train the teams, but he’s one of those bad ass dudes that flies out to resolve dangerous situations around the world.”

Abby frowned, her eyes narrowing. “But...he’s always here.”

“No, he’s not. Remember a few weeks ago? He left abruptly and you thought he’d dumped you.”

She remembered, her heart twisting at those painful memories. “But...he’s...he’s just a regular guy,” she protested, her voice barely above a whisper now as the truth started to seep into her mind. “He’s not...”

Cathy saw the pain in Abby’s eyes and moved closer, laying a comforting hand on Abby’s shoulder. “We can never know for sure, Abby, but Zeke is probably part of the Delta Force team. They are super secretive, and they’re the Army’s version of the SEALs. That’s why I thought that you and Zeke were a good couple. Because your father was a Navy SEAL. I just thought...?”

Abby shook her head, not sure how to handle this news. Zeke was Special Forces? Although, now she thought about it, it made sense. Some of what Zeke had said over the past few weeks, the way he trained so hard, his discipline, and...well, lots of little things. Was he Special Forces? Was he one of the guys that dove into hot spots? Her father used to joke with his fellow SEALs about how he would dive out of a plane and parachute into jungles or buildings or even onto a ship. Did Zeke do that too? Was he one of those men who put their lives in horrific danger?

“I...” Abby tried, but the words wouldn’t come to her. She couldn’t seem to think anything other than to question Zeke’s job.

“Talk to him, Abby. Talk to Zeke. I could be wrong.”

Abby nodded, not really listening. She got into her car and...sat for a long moment. She couldn’t drive. Not yet anyway. She was too distracted and, after today’s crises, Abby

didn't want to put other drivers in danger simply because she was too distracted to pay attention. So instead, she pulled her cell phone out and texted Zeke, asking if he was coming over. It was a stupid question since he came over to her house practically every night.

Come to think of it, there had been a couple nights when he hadn't come over but had told her he'd see her by morning. Had he left the country or done something dangerous during those hours when he was gone?

Abby rubbed her forehead, trying to think.

When she got Zeke's response, which was a firm, "Yes!" she smiled, but...then she sighed. "Just talk to him," she said aloud. Starting her car, she forced herself to focus on driving home.

Zeke stared at the message, feeling his gut clench with worry. Something was wrong. Was Abby hurt? Was she in danger? He stepped out of the shower and quickly pulled on a pair of jeans and a red tee shirt. He'd planned on making stir fry for dinner tonight, but hadn't gone to the grocery store yet to get the ingredients. He preferred going shopping with Abby anyway, because it helped him get to know her better. He loved discovering the little things about her, such as that she liked red bell peppers but not green ones, even though they were the same thing. She liked raw carrots, but hated cooked carrots.

He loved cooking for her. He loved baking for her too. She was so appreciative of even the small things and he...hell, he loved her. He loved the way she rubbed his shoulders at night when he was sore from a workout. He loved the way she closed her eyes when she took her first bite of warm bread, savoring the flavors. He loved the way she snuck one of his cookies while she blended her spinach and avocado smoothies in the morning, then pretended that she wasn't chewing when he walked in and caught her.

He loved the way she worried about her patients, even after they'd gone to one of the specialists within the hospital.

She was an emergency room doctor, so she only saw her patients for a short period of time, but Abby still considered them “her” patients. Whenever he spotted her nibbling the side of her mouth, he knew she was thinking about a patient.

So, as he pulled into a parking space in front of her apartment, he looked up into her windows, wondering what was going on. It had only been one text message, but Zeke had felt a vibration in the world and knew she was upset about something.

Sure enough, as soon as he stepped into her apartment, she turned to face him, the muscles in her face drawn and her eyes alert.

“What’s wrong, honey?” he asked, moving closer to her, intending to take her into his arms.

“Stop!” she whispered when he was less than a foot away from her.

Zeke stopped, looking directly into her eyes. “What is it?”

“Are you a member of a Delta Force Team?” she blurted out. He watched as she held her breath, waiting for his answer.

Normally, he didn’t confirm nor deny his position. The teams worked best in secret. They were better able to move around and get things done if no one knew of their existence. But the policy was that significant others were privy to a team member’s job.

“Yes, I am,” he confirmed, then waited, wondering what she would do or say.

For a long moment, she didn’t say anything. But he saw the tears well up in her eyes. “Honey, it’s not a big deal,” he assured her, reaching for her.

She stepped back and he let his hands drop to his sides. “It is,” she whispered. “It’s a huge deal.”

He wasn’t sure, but he thought he heard a grating in her voice now. “Tell me what bothers you about my job.”

She huffed a bit, running a shaking hand through her hair. “What bothers me? *Seriously?* You’re one of those crazy people who literally run into danger and...do stuff!”

“Yeah. That’s sort of the whole point of the Army, isn’t it?” he teased.

“No!” she snapped, then closed her eyes and shook her head slightly. “Okay, yes. But...” She stumbled for a moment, then opened her eyes. “My father was a Navy SEAL, Zeke.”

“Yeah. I know that. So you understand...”

She sliced her hand through the air, cutting him off. “I understand that you put yourself in grave danger whenever you go out into the world.”

“Yes. But we’re well trained, honey. We don’t go in blind either. There’s a lot of technology that helps us stay safe.”

She started pacing. “That’s probably true, Zeke. But here’s the problem.” She gripped the back of her big club chair, her knuckles turning white. “I’m in love with you,” she whispered, closing her eyes and her body seemed to bow with the release of her admission. “I’m so madly in love with you and...and now I find out...” she stopped, the tears escaping from her closed eyes.

Zeke didn’t hesitate this time. He stepped forward and pulled her into his arms. “It’s okay, honey. I’m in love with you too.” He rubbed his hand up and down her back, feeling her arms move around his waist. “Marry me, Abby,” he urged when she pressed her whole body against him. “I know that we’ve been together for only a few weeks, but I know that you’re the woman I’ve been waiting for. You’re the one. And I’m the one for you too. I know it. I can feel it when you give yourself to me.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “You’re the one for me.” But she pulled back, slipping out of his arms and Zeke knew a moment of panic. “I love you so damn much but...I can’t marry you!”

“You love me,” he repeated with vehemence.

“Yes. I do. And I don’t think I’ll ever not love you, Zeke.” She wiped at her cheeks with the back of her hand. “I love you so much, but my father...” she hiccupped as the memories came flooding back. “He was so big and strong and brave and he never hesitated to dive head first into dangerous situations.” She sobbed, curling her arms around her stomach as she sat down on the sofa. “He was my hero, Zeke. He was so wonderful. But he would disappear.” She looked up at him. “He’d just disappear and we wouldn’t know where he was or what he was doing. We’d never know when his team would be coming back, or even *if* they would come back.”

He bent down, looking into her eyes. “I’ll always come back to you, Abby.”

She smiled weakly through her tears, reaching out to cup his cheek. “You can’t promise me that, Zeke.”

He knew that was true, but he didn’t like that reality. “Abby, we’re good together. We love each other!”

“I do!” she gasped, nodding her head. The tears were coming so fast and furiously, they dripped onto her knees. “I love you so much!”

“Then don’t do this!”

“I have to! I can’t...be with you. When my father died, it nearly killed my mother. And I was devastated. I can’t go through that kind of pain again.”

Zeke stared at her, shaking his head as he stood up. “We’re not over. This isn’t over between us,” he told her, pointing his finger at the carpet between them. “I’m not giving up on you, Abby. But I’m going now. I’m going to give you a bit of space.” He stepped closer and she shrank back. Zeke ignored her body language and went with his gut now. “We’re not over!” and he kissed her. It was a hard, brief kiss, but he pulled back and walked out.

Chapter 9

Abby had no idea how she made it through the week. By Friday evening, she could barely drag herself into her apartment and close the door. But that was as far as she made it. Instead of sitting on the sofa, she slid down against the closed door of her apartment and...sobbed. She'd cried so much over the past few days that the skin around her eyes was raw. Cathy had asked about her red eyes that first day, but Abby had shaken her head and walked away. She knew that the other doctors and nurses were asking about her, but none of them were brave enough to ask her directly. Abby suspected that their deference was due to Cathy's intervention and she was grateful, but Abby couldn't form the words to thank her friend.

And at the moment, she didn't have the strength to get herself up off of the floor.

She wanted Zeke! She wanted to feel his arms around her. She'd eaten all of the cookies and bread that were left over from his treats and now she was out of baked goods. The baked goods that he'd made specifically for her. Or that he'd made for himself, to relax after a stressful day – but she knew that he baked things that he suspected she would enjoy.

The man was...amazing! But he would die. It was inevitable! He literally dove into danger and the man might not acknowledge the reality, but he was only human. Yeah, he might be stronger and faster and smarter than the bad guys, but a bullet was faster still.

A knock on her door startled her and she jumped up. When she peered through the peek hole, Abby couldn't stop a yelp of surprise. Pulling the door open, she stood there, staring at her mother.

"Oh, honey!" her mother said, stepping forward and wrapping her soft, comforting arms around Abby.

“Mom!” Abby sobbed, resting her head on her mother’s strong shoulder.

They stood like that for several minutes while Abby just cried her heart out.

“Come on, sweetie. Let’s go sit down and you can tell me what’s going on.”

Abby sniffed and grabbed another tissue. “Why are you here?”

Joanne smiled. “I received a call from a Lieutenant Colonel Zeke Jeffers. He said that you needed me and I booked the flight as soon as we hung up.”

Zeke’s kindness only made her cry harder. “Oh Mom!” she sobbed, deflating as she sobbed out her pain and heartache. Joanne made soothing sounds, and then she pulled her daughter back into her arms, soothing Abby in the ways that mothers have always done.

When the current round of sobbing ended, Joanne looked at her daughter. “You’re not eating, are you?”

“I eat,” Abby sniffed.

“Not enough. I’m making you dinner. Then you’re going to tell me what’s wrong and explain to me why a stranger called to tell me my daughter is in pain. After that, we’ll figure this mess out.”

Abby sniffed but obediently followed her mother into the kitchen, sitting down in one of the chairs while her mother put the fabric grocery bags on the counter and started pulling out ingredients.

“Macaroni and cheese?” Abby asked, the first hopeful thought she’d had in days.

“Of course,” Joanne laughed, looking over her shoulder at her daughter. “Is there any other comfort food for times like this?”

Abby laughed, and buried her face in her hands. A moment later, she stood up and came over to hug her mother. “I’m so glad to see you!” she whispered.

Joanne's arms tightened around Abby's waist and she smiled. "You're going to be okay, sweetie."

Abby pulled away and forced her lips to smile, but she didn't believe her mother. "How can I help with dinner?"

Joanne pointed to the bag. "You can open that bottle of wine and pour us each a glass. Then you can sit on that stool and tell me what's going on." She started grating cheese, but paused to look directly into Abby's eyes. "And you're going to explain to me why you didn't call and tell me that something was wrong, young lady!"

Abby laughed as she got down two wine glasses. "I didn't want to bother you."

Her mother snorted. "Abby, when you're upset about something, you call me! Understand?"

Abby smiled for the first time since she'd broken up with Zeke. "Understood."

Her mother humphed a bit, then turned back to working. "Okay, so start talking. What's going on?"

Abby poured the wine, then sat down on the stool with a heavy sigh. "I've been seeing a guy, Mom. He's wonderful. He's big, strong, and patient and," she grinned as she looked at her mother stirring the flour and butter in the pot, "he bakes! He loves to bake things. When he's stressed about something, he'll pull out flour and sugar or whatever and bake cookies or bread or anything that comes to mind. Plus he cooks me dinner whenever he comes over. He loves to cook. He's just amazing!"

Joanne laughed, nodding. "Okay, he's handsome, he's strong, he's patient, and he's well trained. So, what's the problem?"

Abby's smile disappeared and she took a long sip of her wine. Setting it carefully back on the counter, she said, "He's a member of the Army's Delta Force team, Mom. He's Special Forces." She sniffed. "He's just like Dad. He goes into danger zones and...he's..."

Her mother paused and looked at Abby. “I still don’t see the problem, sweetie.”

Abby shrugged. “Dad died.”

“Yes,” she agreed, stirring in the milk now. “We’re all going to die at some point.”

“Mom, Dad died in some foreign country and we still don’t know where or how or even why.”

She nodded again. “Yes, that’s true. But Abby,” she added in a handful of grated cheese, “he died doing something he believed in. He died doing something heroic, something that made this world a better place.”

Abby thought about that and nodded slowly. “Okay, fine. He died doing something he believed in. But he left you and me behind.”

Joanne nodded and sighed heavily. “Yeah. That was awful. I was devastated when I got the news.”

“Mom,” Abby groaned, “you’ve never gotten over him.”

Joanne laughed. “I’ve moved on with my life.”

Abby stared at her mother for a long moment, shaking her head slightly. “But you’ve never remarried.”

Her mother shrugged. “That’s true. But not because I haven’t tried. I just...I loved your Dad, Abby. I loved him so much and no other man has made me feel what I had with him.” She shrugged and peered into the pot, as if evaluating the cheese mixture. “Why settle for second best?”

Abby thought about how Zeke made her feel. Every time she saw him, her heart thudded with excitement. Every time he touched her, even non-sexually, she felt something stir inside of her. “That’s how Zeke makes me feel,” she whispered.

Joanne turned to look at Abby. “So, what’s the problem?”

“I don’t want to be hurt again,” Abby admitted.

Joanne snorted. “Oh, sweetie! You’re *going* to be hurt again! That’s just life. Pain in life is inevitable.” She stirred in more cheese. “It’s how we live our lives during the fun times that counts. If we go through life trying to avoid pain, well, then we’ll miss out on a whole lot of wonderful, beautiful moments as well.” She looked at her daughter’s stunned expression. “You love him, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Abby admitted.

“But you’re afraid?”

Abby nodded. “I don’t want him to die, Mom.”

Joanne turned off the heat under the pot. “Abby,” she said, covering her daughter’s hands with her own, “he is going to die eventually. He might die next week or he might die when he’s eighty-five. He could die in a car accident or some bastard in a foreign country might shoot him. But yes, he’s going to die.” She squeezed Abby’s hands. “The question you need to ask yourself is what you might be missing out on before that happens.”

Joanne walked back to the stove and poured the pasta into the boiling water. She didn’t say anything else, just continued stirring and adding various ingredients into the cheese sauce while Abby contemplated her mother’s words.

She was right, Abby thought. She was so right! What in the world was she doing? Why was she here when Zeke was vital, wonderful, and still alive?! Why was she wasting time alone when she could be with Zeke?!

“I have to go, Mom!” Abby said, jumping off of the stool and rushing over to hug her mother one more time. “I’m sorry, but I need to fix something!”

She grabbed her purse and her keys, running out the door. Her tires squealed as she pulled out of her parking space and Abby forced herself to slow down. It wouldn’t do anyone any good if she got into an accident on the way to Zeke’s apartment.

Ten minutes later, she stared at the empty parking space where his truck was usually parked. He wasn’t here?

Abby looked around, trying to figure out what to do. She needed to see him, but where was he?

She texted him, then waited a few minutes, willing him to respond. But there was just silence.

What to do, what to do?!

Then she thought of something. Could he have gone...?

Pulling out of the parking lot, she made her way out of town. Zeke's truck was bigger and had better clearance, but her small sedan was determined and she drove it carefully down the dirt road and over the ruts and holes.

There! She saw the flash of blue! It was Zeke's truck! It was by that spot near the creek!

She barely took the time to turn off her car before she threw open the door and looked around. "Zeke?" she called out.

A moment later, Zeke strode through the trees, his eyes alert. "Abby? What's going on? What's wrong?" he demanded, tugging her into his arms protectively as he scanned the area.

Abby laughed, wrapping her arms around his neck. "I was wrong!" she whispered, holding him close. "I was so wrong!"

Zeke froze, barely registering what she said. Especially since her soft curves were pressed against his body and...damn it, she felt good!

"How were you wrong, love?" he asked, not really caring. She was in his arms and that was all that mattered.

"I was wrong to push you away. I love you!" she told him, pulling back so that she could look into his eyes. "I love you so much that it scares me. And that's why I pushed you away."

He understood what she'd been going through. "You're afraid that I'll die and you won't know where or why. Like what happened to your father."

"Yes. But it's more than that, Zeke." She moved closer, placing her hands on his chest. "You scare me because I love you so much. So if anything were to happen to you, I don't know if I'd survive."

He sighed and pulled her in close. "I'll give it all up. I'll resign from the Army."

She laughed and hugged him tighter. "No, you won't!" she countered. "My mom arrived and..." she stopped, looking up at him. "Wait a minute. She said that you called her?" She looked at him. "You called my mom?"

"Yes," he admitted. "I saw you one day and you looked awful. I knew that you wouldn't talk to me, so I looked up your mom and told her that you needed help. That you were upset." He kissed her. "I sent her a plane ticket because I knew that you needed someone."

"Zeke," she sighed, her heart swelling with the love she felt for this man until she thought her ribs might actually crack. "I love you!" she whispered. "I love you so much and I promise I'll never push you away. But you can't resign." She looked at him. "You love what you do. My mom reminded me of that about my dad earlier tonight. My dad loved what he did. He believed in his work and he was good at it." She moved closer. "She also said that she'd never been happier than when she was with him. And no man had ever measured up to him. So she said that she was glad that she had all those years with my dad." She lifted up onto her toes and kissed Zeke. "I want to be with you. I want those years, however many there are. I want to know everything there is to know about you, Zeke. And if something happens to you, I'll know that we had those years."

"Abby!" he groaned and lifted her into his arms, kissing her and running his hands over her body. "I love you so much!" he told her.

Abby laughed. "Will you marry me?"

He chuckled in response. “Isn’t that my line?”

She shrugged. “Hey, get with the times, big guy.”

He kissed her again. “Yes!”

Epilogue

Abby beamed when she saw the cars pull down the long driveway. She'd been waiting by the window for the past fifteen minutes, so it wasn't a surprise.

What was a surprise were the doors that flung open and four spirited young children that burst from the vehicle.

Angela, Abby and Zeke's oldest daughter, yelled out the window. "Slow down! You're going to hurt Gramma!"

Abby laughed, shaking her head as she pulled open the front door. "Don't you dare!" she called to her grandchildren, all of whom threw themselves into her arms, heads and body parts knocking in an effort to be the first to hug her.

"Oh, it's so good to see all of you!" she said, closing her eyes as she savored this moment.

"What's all this noise?!" a booming voice called out from inside the house. "I don't believe I authorized any noise today!"

Abby laughed as all four grandkids pulled away, yelling and screaming with excitement as they performed the same ritual for Zeke as he knelt down to their level. Abby smiled at the craziness, thinking about how much she still loved him. Zeke was still just as tall and handsome as ever. The years had slowed both of them down, but Zeke still worked out and he still took her breath away.

"How you doing, Mom?" Angela asked, laughing as she walked up the stairs to the beach house behind her kids.

"I'm doing pretty well, dear. How are you?"

Angela turned and they watched as her husband, Dwayne, greeted Ben, Angela's brother who had pulled up behind Angela in the driveway.

“How did Ben convince you to drive all four kids in your car?”

Angela groaned. “I lost a bet,” she admitted. Ben and his wife, Jane, stepped out of their car, shaking Dwayne’s hand and laughing about something.

“What was the bet?”

“Oh, I challenged him to a game of darts. Ben won by one point.”

Abby shook her head. “Don’t let your father hear that you lost at darts,” she warned, linking her arm through Angela’s as they watched the men start unloading the luggage. “He’ll have you practicing all week.”

Angela smiled, agreeing. “How are you and Dad?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Great,” Abby replied with a smile. “Really great.”

Angela laughed. “Is he still annoying you all the time?”

Abby grinned. “Of course. But you know how much I love it.”

Her daughter sighed and looked towards her husband. “Yeah. I’m really hoping that my marriage is as fun as yours.”

Abby hoped for that as well, but before she could reply, Angela gasped so loudly that Ben even paused, turning to look.

“Cookies!” Angela moaned. “How many did Dad make?” she demanded.

Before Abby could answer, Angela and Ben both sprinted into the house, needing to stop their four children from getting too hyped up on sugar. Because as sure as the sky was blue and the sun would rise in the east, they knew that Zeke had made dozens of cookies to spoil his grandchildren.

Author's Note: I truly hope that you enjoyed Zeke's story. If you wouldn't mind, would you take just a few moments to leave a review? They are extremely important – not just for the success of the book, but they also give me feedback so that I can write better stories. Click [HERE](#) to leave a review. Or your reviews tell me that I'm doing it just right! ☐ Either way- I read every single review and sincerely appreciate all of them.

If there are comments that you'd rather not share publicly, please feel free to e-mail me at elizabeth@elizabethlennox.com. And thank you!

Keep flipping for a sneak preview of “Derick”! (There are four books in this series! Mike, Zeke, Derick and Joe! All four of these were previously released to my subscribers for free. I try to release at least one free novella to my subscribers every year – and subscribers always get news of sales, free book introductions and other fun events! If you'd like to subscribe, [Click HERE](#))

Excerpt from “Derick”

Release Date: October 30, 2020

Click [HERE](#) to get Derick’s Story!

Carrie watched the other house as she sipped her coffee the following morning. Then she choked when her neighbor stepped out of the house in just a pair of jeans. No shoes. No shirt.

Carrie didn’t really care about the no shoes thing. But her devil-neighbor without a shirt? Dear heaven!

The cup of coffee almost slipped from her numb fingers as she watched him move about in his garden. Her eyes were burning as she stared and Carrie had to remind herself to blink. She was completely unaware of her mouth hanging open as her gaze took in the muscles packed onto his shoulders and back. The guy was...holy cow! He was buff!

“Ouch!” she hissed, looking down at her lap to find that she’d spilled coffee all over her lap. “Darn it!”

Standing up, she grabbed a dishtowel and wiped down her legs. She wasn’t wearing her normal baggy jeans because she was inside so the hot coffee stung her bare skin.

“Pull yourself together, Carrie!” she hissed, then purposely turned her back to the window and headed into her living room. She’d finished sanding down everything in this room as well as the family room and they both looked great!

She moved up the stairs, thinking to start on the staircase next. But as she pulled on her jeans and tee-shirt, ready to start the next project, she changed her mind. The front porch really needed those boards replaced. And it would make sense to replace the boards and sand everything down

out there this morning, before the day got too hot. Yep, that was her new plan. Once it got too hot, she'd move inside to work on the stairs.

Twenty minutes later, she hauled the new boards she'd purchased the previous week out of the garage, setting up the tables so she could cut the new boards after she'd pulled up the old, worn out ones. She set up the handsaw and her goggles, pulled her hat down low over her hair, grabbed the crow bar and got to work. If she glanced over at her neighbor's yard occasionally, well, that was just curiosity. Nothing else.

Using the crow bar, she pulled up one board after another, setting each of them beside the new boards. She'd just started on a particularly stubborn board when she felt a presence. Looking up, she found her neighbor, a tee shirt covering those amazing muscles now, coming towards her.

"Need some help?" he asked.

Carrie started to shake her head, wanting to tell him that she could handle it. But he walked over to the board and, with what looked like a flip of his thumb, had the stubborn board pulled up. With one gloved hand, he tossed the board onto the pile.

"Derick Matlock," he said, pulling off his work glove and extending his hand to her.

"Jolene Smith," she replied, telling him the name on the driver's license she kept in her wallet. "I don't..."

He didn't even look at her as he pried up another board and tossed it onto the stack. "I know. You don't need my help," he interrupted, then went back to the porch and pried up the next rotted board. "I'll just get these up for you. I'm bored and need the work out."

Carrie watched as he used the crow bar with almost no effort, impressed by his strength. She really should tell him that she didn't want his help but...she did. Which was stupid! Carrie knew that working by herself was safer.

But instead of telling him to leave her alone, she walked over to the saw and, picking up one of the boards, measured and cut it on the line she'd made. When that was done, she did the next and the next.

Derick...she really liked that name. It suited him. Once all of the old boards were pulled up, and done in a fraction of the time it would have taken her, he laid the newly cut boards in place. Grabbing her nail gun, he popped each of the boards into place.

The whole time, she watched the man, sneaking peeks at his flexing muscles and rugged, handsome features, amazed and more than slightly mesmerized by the rippling muscles on his back and arms. But whenever he looked over at her, she was quick to look down again, turning her attention to measuring and cutting the boards.

It took less than two hours to get the porch finished. She'd planned on it taking all day, with only a few hours of working inside while she worked on the stairs. So it was a shock to find it all finished so quickly.

"Thank you," she told him, glancing up into his dark eyes before quickly looking away. "It's much easier with two people working."

"What color are you going to paint the house?" he asked.

Carrie looked up at the building and shrugged. "I haven't thought about the exterior yet. That comes a bit later in the process for me."

"Where did you live before here?"

Carrie looked away. That was a question she wasn't going to answer. No way! "Um...well, thank you for your help, Derick. I really appreciate it."

With that, she picked up the saw and...and it was taken out of her hands. "Where do you want this?" he asked.

It was really heavy, but she didn't want his help. She could handle this work on her own. "I can put it away."

He lifted it out of reach when she tried to take it from him. “I know that you can handle it. But it’s heavy and you’re tired. So, why don’t you just tell me where I should put it,” he paused, those firm lips quirking upwards slightly as if he were trying not to smile, “and don’t suggest up my ass. I doubt it would fit.”

Despite herself, she laughed outright. Especially since those words had been on the tip of her tongue. “Fine. In the garage please. That way I can lock my tools up at night.”

He walked over to the garage, placing it in the open space where she’d had it earlier. “How many houses have you flipped?”

Her heart thudded at that question. She glanced at him, startled that he was so perceptive. “Why do you think I flip houses?”

“Because you know enough about fixing up a house to save the exterior painting for last,” he replied. “Not many people do that. They want the curb appeal to happen fast and don’t like coming home to an ugly house.” He moved closer. “You’re skittish too. Which means you’re hiding from something.”

Carrie almost ran at his words. But she instead, she pulled herself up straighter, determined to face the truth. She was so sick of running. “I’m fine.” A lift of her chin reinforced her assertion.

“I can see that you’re *very* fine, Jolene. But I can help.”

Carrie crossed her arms over her chest. “I’m fine,” she told him again.

He sighed, looked over at her porch. “Right. You’re fine. So,” he paused, rubbing the back of his neck, “When you decide that you’re tired of being fine, let me know. I’m good at resolving problems.”

And with that, he walked back to his house.

Carrie watched him walk away, half of her admiring his tall, strong body. The other half craving the safety he offered.

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Story!