

**Sneak Peek: Close Quarters (from SEALs of Summer Boxed Set)**  
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**Chapter One**

Stretching his aching neck, Special Warfare Operator Leland Gates blew out a tired breath and flexed his fingers off the steering wheel of the rental SUV he had picked up in Austin. His gaze drifted along the bluebonnets blanketing both sides of the two-lane road. God, how he'd missed those. Another twenty minutes and he would arrive at his family's quiet little cabin tucked away in the Hill Country. His throbbing knee screamed for a good stretch and a long walk.

Running his hand along the twinging muscles on his left side, he winced. Right in front of his eyes, the long stretch of Texas highway morphed into the tight confines of a shipping vessel as the slight pulse of pain brought back memories he would rather forget. As an elite SEAL team operator, he was used to danger and risk. Most missions went according to plan, but there were always the ones that were complete Charlie-Foxtrots. The recent rescue of an American crew aboard a hijacked shipping vessel off the coast of Africa had been one of those.

Shaking his head to clear the distant sounds of muted gunfire and snapping ricochets, he concentrated on the highway. When the turnoff to the private road came into view, he eased off the gas and hit his blinker. He made the unmarked left and drove a few dozen yards to the locked gate. After punching in the code and watching the gate slide sideways, he rolled across the cattle guard and onto the property. A short time later, the small cabin appeared at the end of the single lane caliche path.

Always alert, Leland noticed the faint glow of light behind the wooden blinds and curtains. He lifted his foot from the gas and let the SUV crawl forward as his finely honed gaze swept the area. There was no vehicle that he could see. Was it a hitchhiker or possibly an illegal immigrant? It wouldn't have been the first time some poor soul had taken refuge at the cabin.

Not taking any chances, he reached for the weapon stowed safely away in the lock box tucked inside his small suitcase. Armed and ready, he parked his SUV at an angle that gave him some coverage and with enough space to maneuver if he needed to retreat hastily. Before he barged into the cabin, Leland decided to make sure his little sister hadn't given her key to someone.

"Leelee!" Peyton answered with her usual bright cheeriness.

His lips twitched at that awful nickname she had given him. He had hated it from the first time she had used it, but he hadn't had the heart to tell her no. At six years old, Peyton had been the scrawniest little thing, all big eyes and wobbling lips and terrified of

everyone but him when his parents had brought her into their home as a foster child. He had been adopted by Jan and Dave Gates a few years earlier so he had understood Peyton's fear and had been willing to go along with that girlish nickname if it made her smile.

Trying not to be distracted by memories, he asked, "Peyton, did you give your cabin key to a friend?"

"Okay, look," she said quickly and in a tone that made his chest tighten. "Please don't flip out on me. She needed to get out of town for a couple of days, and I didn't know you were going to take leave and try to disappear out there."

He had a bad feeling about the identity of *she*. "Did you give the key to Jamie?"

Peyton hesitated. "Yes."

He pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled roughly. It had to be *her*. It had to be the one woman in the whole wide world who got under his skin. It had to be the girl who made him want to break all his rules.

A sensation that felt suspiciously like anxiety gripped his gut. He had escaped out here to relax, not to be strung as tight as a tripwire. "I'll head into town and see if I can get a room at one of the bed and breakfasts or that ratty little motel on the outskirts."

"No! Leland, please don't." She only used his full name when it was serious. His internal alarm clanged. "She's in trouble."

"She's always in trouble. Hell, Jamie *is* trouble."

"Stop." Irritation edged into his sister's voice. "You're always so mean to her. What did she ever do to you?"

"Do you really want to start that list, Peyton? How about two years ago when she got you two locked up in a Mexican jail during Spring Break? How about the time she convinced you to sneak off to that concert in New Orleans? Do I need to remind you about the bikers who tried to turn you two into their old ladies at that rest stop on the Texas-Louisiana border?"

"To be fair, I don't think they actually wanted us as their old ladies. I think they wanted to make us their sweet butts."

"Peyton!"

"Like you've never done anything wild and the slightest bit stupid? Because if I start running down that list, we'll be on the phone all night."

"This isn't about me."

"Isn't it?" She waited for him to answer. When he didn't, she spoke again, her tone rough and irritated. "You know what? Go ahead. Tuck tail and run off to that motel."

"Watch it, Peyton." Now he was the one with a hardened edge to his voice. "I'm too old to be playing dare games with you."

Her end of the line remained silent for tense seconds. "Please stay, Leelee. I'm worried about her. This...this is different."

Though he didn't understand the unbreakable bond between those two young women, he knew he would never forgive himself if Jamie got hurt. Peyton would carry that guilt forever. Hating himself for caving so easily, he rubbed his forehead and growled. "Fine. I'll stay, but I swear on everything holy, if this is another one of her schemes—"

"It's not."

He narrowed his eyes. "What aren't you telling me, Peyton?"

"That's Jamie's story to tell." A muffled rustling sound scratched at his ear. "I have to go. My study group is here. I'll touch base in the morning."

"All right."

"Leelee?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you okay?"

She always asked him the same question, and he always answered it the same way. "I'm fine, little bit."

"I missed you. I'm really glad you're home."

*For a few days*, he thought. "I should have come to see you first."

"I understand that you need to get away sometimes."

"I'll try to see you before I head back to Virginia."

"No worries if you can't. I'll be here whenever you have time."

When Peyton said that, she meant it. Between them, there had always been honesty and frankness. Their experiences as neglected and abandoned children had allowed them to bond quickly and deeply despite their obvious differences. Where he was tall with blond hair and blue eyes, Peyton was short with dark hair, warm brown skin and coffee black eyes. They might not have been siblings by blood, but they were siblings in the ways that mattered most. He would do anything for her, and she would do the same for him.

"I've got to run, Leelee. I'll talk to you later. Love you."

"Love you, sis."

After the phone call ended, he tapped his phone on the steering wheel. James "Jamie" Pearson's mischievous smile flashed before him. Heat rolled through his lower belly at the mere thought of her lush mouth and tawny eyes. The wealthy heiress to the Lush & Luxe makeup empire had skin a shade darker than Peyton's, rich and silky and ever so tempting. He swallowed hard at the memory of running his hands along her arms and sliding them under her shirt to swipe the soft skin of her stomach and breasts.

Even now, five years later, his face burned with shame as he remembered how close he had come to crossing *that* line. At twenty-two, he had been a battle-hardened and weary man already. He had come home that Christmas for a reprieve from the hell of back-to-back tours and losing his closet friend in the unit. He had hoped that being surrounded by family and friends would soothe the raw wound in his chest, but he had only felt more disconnected and alone.

He had disappeared from the Christmas Eve revelry to seek refuge in his bedroom with a bottle of his father's favorite brandy. Jamie had sought him out and spoken so tenderly to him about losing her father in that climbing accident. She had understood what it was like to look into the eyes of a dying man and to carry the guilt of surviving.

Drunk and hurting, he had allowed Jamie to get too close. He had let her inside that wall he had erected after becoming a SEAL, the one that kept him from caring too much and the one that kept him safe from distraction. The explosive, passionate kiss they had shared in his childhood bedroom had obliterated that wall. The memory of it still made his heart race.

There had been so many kisses before Jamie and too many after her, but not a single one of them compared to that one. He told himself it was the heightened excitement of finally tasting the forbidden, but deep down inside, he knew better. He

knew that there was something about Jamie, something special, that no other woman on the face of the earth could ever hope to possess.

But it had been wrong to kiss her.

The five year age difference between them wasn't a big deal now but back then? It had been hugely improper. Thankfully, he had come to his senses before things had grown too heated between them. He could still see the embarrassed and angry look on her beautiful face when he had shoved her into the hallway and locked the door. It had been a cold and callous thing to do, but he hadn't trusted himself to do right by her otherwise.

Before passing out drunk, he had silently vowed to find her the next day and explain why he had sent her away. She deserved to be treated properly, to have everything done by the book. Swearing to wait for her to finish high school and start college before he made his move, he had fallen asleep with the strongest sense of hope coursing through him.

But all that hope had been blown to shit early the next morning when he'd caught Jamie sneaking out of the guest room where his cousin Tanner had been sleeping. Her hair had been a wild mess, and she had run a quick hand over her rumpled dress while hopping into her heels. It hadn't taken a genius to put together the pieces and solve that equation.

Even now, all these years later, his stomach clenched painfully. He massaged the center of his chest. The bitter burn of betrayal still raged hot inside him. He had trusted Jamie. He had flirted with danger for her—and she had run straight from his bedroom and right into the brawny arms of his high school football star cousin.

Most galling of all had been the way Jamie had tried to flirt with and tease him that afternoon when she had stopped by with presents for the family. He had rebuffed her advances and kept his answers clipped and to the point. For the rest of his short visit, Jamie had stayed away from the house.

Since then, he had seen her only a handful of times. Between his career in the SEALs and her jet-setting lifestyle, they weren't often in the same place at the same time. He liked it that way. It was easier to believe that she wasn't the only woman who haunted his dreams. It was easier to forget how his traitorous body responded any time she was close.

He tried to pretend he didn't remember the exact date of the last time he had seen her, but he remembered, right down to the hour. Eight months, 4 days and—he glanced at his battered watch—nine hours. He had been heading out the door of his family home to catch a flight, and she had been barreling inside to share some juicy bit of gossip with Peyton. They had collided hard enough to send her flying right back out the door. He'd caught her hand in time to steady her, but she had shaken off his fingers as if his very touch disgusted her.

His jaw clenched. Would the next few days in the close quarters of the cabin be so torturous? Tired and aching, he wanted to shower, eat and slide into bed. Except the mere thought of getting some much needed sleep reminded him that the cabin had only one bed. Someone would have to bunk on the couch, and he had a sneaking suspicion Miss Lush & Luxe was going to expect him to be gallant and take the lumpy old thing.

Wiping a hand down his face, he snarled a few choice cuss words and killed the engine. He stuffed his weapon back in its carrying case and zipped up his luggage. Grasping the handle, he dragged it across the seat and out the door with him. He loudly

slammed the door of the rental SUV and stuffed his phone into the back pocket of his jeans.

Steeled for the worst, he strode toward the small cabin and up the stairs to the porch that ran the along the front. He fished his keys from his pocket but a feeling made him try the handle, just to see if it was locked. When the knob turned easily and the deadbolt didn't engage, he growled with frustration. Didn't Jamie realize how reckless this was? She was a woman alone in the middle of nowhere. Someone dangerous could have pushed that door open and sauntered inside.

Someone dangerous did.

Shaking his head and ready to read her the Riot Act, he entered the cabin and dropped his suitcase on the couch. The one room cabin had an open floor plan. Only the bathroom at the rear of the house had a door, and it was closed. He heard the faint whir of running water and deduced she was taking a shower.

Never one to go into battle without a little recon, he took advantage of the chance to gather intel. The opened suitcase on the bed caught his eye. He stepped closer and poked through the contents. His fingers brushed something lacy, and he swallowed hard. He pushed aside the dress in the way and found the sheer boyshorts he had touched.

Though he had gotten his hands on plenty of panties in his twenty-seven years, he hadn't ever felt any as delicate as these. They were expensive and elegant. *Just like her.* He tried not to imagine the pale sea blue lace cupping her bottom or her dark brown skin peeking through the lacy bits, but he failed miserably. Heat shot through him, and he hurriedly shoved aside her undies before his thoughts turned too dirty.

A quiver of guilt pierced his chest as he rifled through her bag. He wasn't sure what he was looking for really. As far as he knew, Jamie had never been into anything dangerous like drugs, but if the Facebook posts she had been sharing with Peyton were any indication, she had been spending a lot of time traveling south of the border and sailing around the Gulf and the Caribbean.

There were only a handful of reasons for a girl like Jamie to be down there so much, and he didn't like any of them. He didn't want to think she was holed up here in the cabin because she was running from trouble of that variety, but his years in spec-ops had taught him never to assume anything. One photo, in particular, flashed in his mind. He had been taken aback by the smiling faces of Jamie and Hector Salas, a known enforcer for one of the Mexican cartels, kicked back on a beach and enjoying a beer. The thought of her dating a man like that soured his gut something awful.

Not finding any clues that might help him understand why a young woman with all the money in the world would choose this sparse, out of the way cabin to hide, Leland moved into the kitchen area to check out the food situation. He opened the refrigerator and frowned. Two bottles of wine, a half dozen eggs, and a small wedge of buttery yellow cheese from Jolene's specialty market and cafe in town were the only things inside. He glanced at the counter and spotted four big, flaky croissants from the bakery and two small bananas. From the small amount of shopping Jamie had done, it was obvious she didn't plan to stay long or eat much.

As he checked the pantry situation, he heard the shower shut off. He shoved aside the sealed jar of peanut butter and the boxes of unopened crackers to find three cans of soup. He crouched down to check the bottom shelf where his dad usually kept a case of beer but found it empty. Annoyed, he closed the door and considered driving back into

town for a six pack. He had a feeling that he was going to need a cold one to get through the night.

A door squeaked, and the floorboards creaked under the weight of Jamie's feet. Using the stealth that had gotten him out of more tricky situations than he cared to count, he quietly crossed the kitchen area. His breath caught in his throat at the sight of Jamie in nothing but a towel, shiny beads of water still glistening on her skin. The damp white cotton clung to her supple body, hinting at the womanly curves hidden beneath it.

With her back turned to him, he allowed himself the chance to get a good, long look at the woman who had tormented his dreams. She was close enough now that he could smell the cherry and almond hints of the lotion and soap she preferred. He would never admit it to anyone, ever, but he had tracked down the brand in a high-end shop while looking for a gift for his mother.

One sniff, and he had been transported back to that Christmas Eve night and that kiss. He'd put the bottle back on the shelf—and then promptly snatched it back. Sometimes, in moments of sheer weakness, he opened the bottle of lotion and breathed in the comforting scent. He let himself think of how things might have been, if she hadn't crushed his heart beneath the heel of her designer pumps.

Before he could let her know that he was in the cabin, Jamie untucked the end of her towel and let it fall. He wasn't about to pass up the chance to ogle her impossibly perfect backside, but he didn't want to be a total lecher about it. Certain he was about to feel her wrath, he loudly cleared his throat.

Startled, Jamie screamed and spun around, all in the same moment. Throwing her arms out as she whirled, she clipped the lamp on the bedside table and sent it crashing to the floor. The ceramic shattered and sent shards flying everywhere. When her panicked gaze locked onto his face, Jamie's expression turned to one of sheer fury. She pointed a beautifully manicured finger at him. "You!"

He realized she was going to take a step toward him but couldn't act fast enough. "No! Jamie, the lamp!"

But it was too late. Her small foot crashed down on a shard, and she yelped. Without a moment's hesitation, he crossed the space between them in quick, easy strides and swept her up into his arms. It wasn't until he gazed down at Jamie's bewitching face that he realized he had just made the biggest mistake of his life. He was holding the woman of his dreams—and she was stark naked in his arms.

## Chapter Two

The very last thing Jamie Pearson had expected to find out here in this remote cabin was Leland freaking Gates. The sandy haired warrior was supposed to be halfway around the world doing insanely heroic things, not bursting through the front door of his family's cabin to scare her half to death. She was going to thump Peyton so hard the next time she saw her. Everything about this disastrous run-in with her teenaged crush had the mark of a setup by her best friend.

Of course, her irritation with Peyton faded some when she felt those steely arms of Leland's cradling her body. He held her close to his chest, the heat of him seeping into her and warming her naked skin. The masculine scent of him, the cedar and sandalwood notes that drove her crazy, intoxicated her. The jolt of adrenaline she had experienced from discovering someone else in the cabin left her a bit shaky, but her heart was racing for a totally different reason now.

Her reaction to the dangerously handsome SEAL frustrated her. Teenaged crushes weren't supposed to last this long, but her feelings for Leland had never faded. She had tried to forget him and replace him, but she had failed miserably. That kiss—that perfect, passionate kiss—had rocked her world.

But he had shattered her self-confidence when he had thrown her out of his room. If she hadn't gotten sidetracked with Tanny's drama, she might have been brave enough to climb up the tree outside Leland's bedroom to crawl in through his window and force him to speak to her. Instead she had been forced to sneak home before her mother realized she had been out all night.

By the time she had managed to get away from the depressing spectacle of her mother boozing it up over a badly scorched Christmas ham to bring over presents for Peyton's family, she had earned only scowls and growls from Leland. It hadn't taken her long to figure out that he was mad at her for taking advantage of his drunken state. He was all about honor and integrity and the most stand-up guy she had ever known. Kissing her wasn't illegal or anything, but it skirted close to a few questionable lines, especially since she was his kid sister's best friend.

So she had spent the rest of that winter holiday break humiliated and feeling lower than dirt. The worst part was that she hadn't been able to get over her crush as easily as he had discarded her. Jamie wasn't used to being denied what she wanted, and all she had ever wanted was Leland Gates.

And now here he was, cradling her in his strong arms and carrying her toward the bed. He placed her down carefully and pulled a pillow over to cradle her throbbing foot. After thrusting the towel at her, he pointed a stern finger in her direction. "Don't move."

She had never been the type of woman who took orders, but her entire body thrummed with an illicit thrill when Leland gave one. She could only nod and wrap the towel around her naked body. Her face flamed at the idea of him seeing her without a stitch of clothing.

Leaning back on her palms, she ignored the pulsing ache in her foot and watched him make quick work of cleaning up the ruined lamp with a dust pan and broom he had fetched from the space between the refrigerator and wall. When he was finished, he dumped the ceramic pieces in the trash and ducked into the bathroom. He returned with a damp washcloth, a towel, a pair of tweezers and a first aid kit.

Leland started to crouch down but winced. He stiffly but quickly rose to his full height. His voice was hard as he gestured to the headboard. "Move up there."

She scooted to the spot he had indicated. "Are you hurt?"

His jaw twitched. "It's nothing."

"You're lying."

He didn't meet her gaze as he clasped her ankle and slipped the pillow underneath it. Silently, he placed the towel on the bed and put the first aid kit and tweezers on top of it. Finally, he admitted, "I was thrown down two flights of stairs and twisted my knee. It's a bit finicky still."

Finicky? Only Leland would describe something so terrible so breezily. "Two flights of stairs?" She couldn't believe he was still walking. "Shouldn't you be resting?"

"Why do you think I'm here?" He shot her an irritated look, his baby blue eyes glinting with frustration. "I flew out here to get some peace and quiet."

Feeling guilty for running his plans, she bit her lower lip. She hated to be such a disappointment to him. She'd gotten used to being her mother's disappointment but from Leland, the only person in the world she had ever wanted to impress? It was almost too much.

Quietly, she said, "If you'll let me stay the night, I'll clear out in the morning once my car is out of the shop."

"You're not leaving." Leland grabbed the tweezers and cupped her heel against his palm.

"But—"

"You're staying here."

She didn't want to argue with him. Staying close to Leland was the safest option for her right now. Her stomach knotted painfully as she considered telling him the reason she had run out here to lay low, but she could just imagine the blowup that would occur. Not wanting him to be mad at her just yet, she kept her trap shut.

"This is going to hurt." His grip tightened on her heel. "Just hold still and let me do what needs to be done. It's quicker that way."

She swallowed nervously and nodded. "All right."

The tip of the tweezers prodded a sensitive spot on her sole, and she cringed. As if he wanted to keep her mind off the pain, Leland made small talk. "Why is your car in the shop?"

"I hit a pallet on the way into town. Thankfully I had cell service out there. I managed to find the number for the only auto shop for fifty miles."

"Did George come out to get you with his tow truck?"

"Yes. He was kind enough to bring me out here too."

"He's a nice guy." The tweezers grabbed the shard embedded in her foot. "Hang on, sugar."

Leland's warning didn't register, but the tender name he had used sure did. She barely felt the sliver of ceramic sliding out of her foot. Sugar? He had never called her anything so sweet, not in all the years she'd known him.

"There." He held up the piece for her inspection. "I'll get this clean and bandaged, and we're all done."

"Thank you."

"It was my fault you hurt yourself." He dabbed at her foot with an antiseptic wipe. "I should have knocked on the bathroom door to let you know I was here." Placing the



wipe on the towel, he kept his gaze fixed on her foot. "I shouldn't have let you drop that towel, and I definitely shouldn't have stared. It wasn't right."

There weren't many men who would apologize for something like that. The fact that Leland did only proved how truly one-of-a-kind he was. Tummy trembling, she found the courage to be brazen. "Did you like what you saw?"

His head snapped up at that. Never one to lie, he answered in a voice that was suspiciously deeper. Lust sparked in his eyes. "Yes."

Her belly wobbled at his confirmation. He was close to her now, closer than he had been in months. Her skin prickled with excitement. Afraid she might not have the chance to touch him again, she found the courage to reach out and stroke his cheek. The short, wiry hair covering his skin prickled her fingers. "You grew a beard again."

"It's nothing like the one I had a few years back." It might have been her imagination, but she could have sworn he leaned into her touch. His hand moved toward her, but he hesitated. His fingers flexed twice before he wound some of her springy curls around them. "You cut your hair."

"A few weeks ago," she said.

"I know."

She cocked her head to the side. "How?"

He let his hand drop and resumed doctoring her foot. "You tagged Peyton in that Facebook photo of the two of you having dinner and dancing."

Smiling, she lightly smacked his muscular forearm. "Stalker!"

He snorted. "If I wanted to stalk you, I wouldn't use Facebook, and you'd never know I was keeping tabs on you."

"Are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Keeping tabs on me?" She held her breath as she waited for the answer.

Instead of answering her question, he pressed a bandage to the bottom of her foot and placed a strip of athletic tape over it to keep it in place. "Keep this dry until tomorrow. We'll put some more antibiotic ointment on it in the morning."

He gathered up the mess on the bed and stood. When he disappeared into the bathroom, she carefully slid off the bed and tested a little weight on her foot. It hurt a bit, but it was nothing she couldn't handle. She plucked undies, yoga pants and a slim-fitting tee from her luggage but noticed one of her dresses had been moved. Glancing back at the bathroom door, she found Leland watching her. The predatory look in his eyes made her shiver. "Did you go through my bag?"

"Yes."

"Because?"

"I never walk into a battle unprepared."

His words struck her painfully. To think of spending the night in the same cabin as her as something as awful as a battle hurt badly. Was she really that terrible?

Clutching her clothing to her chest, she strode toward the bathroom and slipped by him. She gave him a nudge with her shoulder in a silent bid to move, but he didn't budge even an inch. In a flash of speed that startled her, Leland whirled toward her and pinned her against the door. He leaned down, invading her personal space and making her intensely aware of his body heat. "What are you doing?"

"What are *you* doing, Jamie? Huh?" His nose nearly touched hers. "What are you running from, girl?"

The concern in his voice surprised her. She swallowed anxiously. Could she tell him? God, the idea that he would be angry with her or yell at her was too much to even imagine. She lowered her gaze and hugged her clothes even tighter to her chest. She hated to have put him in this position. It had been done unknowingly, but he would feel the heat regardless. "Leland, you don't need to get involved in my mess. I've got it under control."

"You've got it under control?" he parroted sarcastically. "You're hiding out in the middle of nowhere, Jamie. That's not under control. That's panicking." His hand slid from the door to her face, and he trailed his fingertips down her cheek. "Let me help you."

A wave of annoyance engulfed her. This morning, she would have done anything to feel his callused fingers sliding over her skin. Now she didn't want his touch. She grasped his hand and dragged it away from her face. He seemed surprised by her reaction and jerked his hand down to his side. "I didn't realize my offer of help was so offensive to you."

"Offensive? That's not—*Leland!*" She said his name with such anger. "Are you kidding me? For years, you've treated me like dirt. Now you're calling me *sugar* and offering to help me?"

"I treated you like dirt?" he laughed harshly, the sound so grating her shoulders lifted toward her ears. Holding up his hands, he backed away from her. "You know what? I've changed my mind. In the morning, I'll drive you into town. You can hide out in one of the bed and breakfasts there. This arrangement isn't going to work." He backed away from her and pivoted on his heel. "Maybe you can call Tanner for help," he muttered as he stalked away from her.

She trailed after him in an aggravated huff. His remark confused the hell out of her. Tanny was halfway across the country gearing up for Pro Day in preparation for the upcoming football draft. "Why in the world would I go to Tanny at a time like this?"

"Oh," he said, spinning to face her. "It's Tanny now, huh?"

"It's always been Tanny. We've been close friends since junior high."

"I've had a lot of friends since junior high. We were never that close."

She frowned. "What does that mean?"

"Don't." His jaw visibly clenched. There was a warning edge to his voice, almost as if he expected her to tell a bald-faced lie. "I know what I saw that morning."

Completely bewildered, she scrunched up her face. "What the hell are you talking about, Leland? What morning?"

"Christmas Day. Five years ago." He spoke each word so roughly. "Or are you going to tell me you don't remember that kiss we shared the night before?"

Her mouth went dry. "Of course I remember that kiss." *I'll never forget it because it was the kiss.*

"The next morning, I watched you slink out of the guest room Tanner was staying in and do the walk of shame right out of Mom and Dad's house."

She pieced together what he was saying. Her heartbeat sprinted. Unable to keep her voice even, she practically screeched at him. "You think I had sex with Tanny? In your parents' freaking house? Across the hall from my best friend? Is that really what you think of me?"

"I saw you," he insisted stubbornly. "Your dress was all messed up and you were hopping into your shoes."

"Oh. My. God." Dropping her clothes, she planted both hands against his chest and shoved hard. "You are such a jerk!"

He snatched her wrists, not tight enough to hurt her but to keep her from trying to shove him again. His strong grip didn't surprise her. Those skilled hands of his were deadly. "Why did you spend the night with him?"

"That's none of your business."

"Like hell it isn't!"

Refusing to ever break Tanner's confidence, she turned the question around on him. "Why do you even care? You're the one who tossed me out into the hall like I was nothing."

"You're not nothing. Not to me," he retorted forcefully. "Never to me."

"But you—"

"I was a jackass," he insisted, cutting her off mid-sentence. He let go of her wrists and wiped his face between his hands. With an exaggerated exhale, he said, "I saw something and didn't even stop to think about all the angles. I jumped to the worst possible conclusion and punished you for it for too damned long."

"Why would you jump to that conclusion, Leland? Why didn't you come after me and ask me then? Hell—why didn't you ask Tanny?"

"I don't know." He shook his head. "No. I *do* know. I was afraid."

She blinked. "You? Afraid? Leland, you're a SEAL. You jump out of airplanes in pitch black night, land in the middle of the ocean and swim onto shore. You fight terrorists. You rescue folks from the very worst people in the world, but you were afraid to talk to me?"

"Crazy, ain't it?" His low Texas drawl made her belly quiver. "But there it is. You scared me then and you scare me now."

"But—why?"

He swallowed hard enough for her to see his Adam's apple bob. A strange thought struck her. Was Leland nervous? "You know why."

She didn't. She really didn't. Unless...

No. That couldn't possibly be what he meant.

"I'm sorry, Jamie. For all of it," he added, his shoulders sagging and his face betraying his guilt.

He looked utterly exhausted, and her heart ached for him. What had this man been through in the last few weeks? What other nightmare scenarios had he survived during the years he had dedicated to serving his country? Yes, he had screwed up big time with his assumption about what had happened that night five years ago, but she decided to let him have a pass this one time. If anyone had earned a second chance, it was Leland.

She placed her hand against his cheek and ran her thumb along the very edge of his mouth. "Let's start over, Leland. Right here, right now, okay?"

He seemed surprised by her offer. "I'd like that."

"Good."

Leland crouched down, carefully favoring his knee, and gathered up her dropped clothing. He pressed it into her hands. She thanked him with a nod and turned toward the bathroom. His voice stopped her before she made it to the doorway.

"Jamie?"

She pivoted to face him. "Yeah?"

"I don't know why you're holed up in this cabin, but as long as I'm here, I'll keep you safe."

His promise washed over her in a wave of soothing warmth. She had never meant to entangle Leland in the web of craziness she had spun for herself. At some point, she would have to come clean with him about what she had been up to for the last two years and the reckless thing she had done last week. Dane would catch up to her eventually, and if Hector wasn't there to intercept him...well...she hoped he would take one look at Leland, tuck tail and run in the other direction.

"Thank you." It wasn't nearly enough, but it was all she could think of in the moment. She slipped into the bathroom and shut the door. Leaning back against it, she closed her eyes and wondered if her heart rate was ever going to return to normal. Half an hour in Leland's commanding presence, and she could hardly breathe. How in the world was she going to survive the next few days alone with him?