

IT WAS NEARLY dark when Wyatt caught sight of Tal heading away from

the chow hall. She was probably going to the women's area of the B-huts. These were barracks huts made from plywood, with a small room for each of the four officers living in them. Each room contained a cot, a dresser, a window, and an air conditioner. The walls were paper-thin, and any *thunk-thunk* on the plywood floor would wake up anyone else in the hut.

Wyatt had visited the barber after seeing Tal at breakfast and gotten cleaned up. He'd trimmed his beard, had his shaggy hair shaped a little, and then taken a long, hot shower. That was what he looked forward to the most—a hot shower to loosen the kinks out of his sore, stiff muscles. Now, wearing a clean day uniform that consisted of a long-sleeved shirt and cammies, he felt human again. He walked silently, like all SEALs, sure that the good Marine captain couldn't hear him approach her from behind. Wyatt didn't want to scare the hell out of her, but everyone in their business was hypervigilant.

"Hey," he called softly, wanting to catch her attention but not have her reach for that pistol on her thigh. "How are you feeling now, Captain?"

Tal jerked to a halt and spun around, her hand automatically going for the damned pistol. Even in the dusk, Wyatt could see the fear and shock in her narrowing eyes, her palm automatically coming to rest on the butt of her safed .45. He smiled and held up his hands, leaving a good six feet between them.

"Hey, I'm unarmed, darlin'," he teased in his drawl. He saw her eyes move to his two drop holsters with SIGs in them.

"You're *never* unarmed, Chief," Tal muttered, pulling her hand away from the butt of her .45 pistol and slowly straightening to her full six feet.

He lowered his hands, allowing them to rest easily on his hips as he studied her in the dusk. The entrance to the B-hut was a good hundred feet away.

She couldn't just turn, slip into it, and slam the door in his face. *Not this time.*

He noticed that her voice was sharp with adrenaline, and he felt guilty for alarming her. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare the bejesus out of you." He hitched a thumb toward the chow hall in the distance. "I spotted you coming from chow and thought I'd intercept you, see how you're feelin' after your coughing and choking episode."

Well, that was half true. It was a good reason to get her to drop that icy shield she kept around her. The fear dissolved in her eyes, replaced by a spark of anger. Why?

"I'm fine," she muttered, the tension bleeding out of her. "Now leave me alone, please."

He adopted his old cowboy slouch and said, "Hey, I'd like to take you out for pizza and beer some night. If you're like me, you could use some downtime after those last ops we were on . . ."

"Are you crazy? I'm not going anywhere with you, Lockwood." She couldn't believe his gall. Hadn't he gotten the point yet? *She wasn't interested!* Well, that wasn't quite true. Her body sure as hell was interested in the lanky, casual SEAL, but her heart? That was wholly another matter. Tal wasn't a love-'em-and-leave-'em type; she was never interested in one-night stands. What interested her was a long-term, serious relationship. And she knew Wyatt Lockwood wasn't interested in that sort of ongoing affair.

He looked down at himself and then up at her. "Crazy? Not since the last time I checked. Why not go out with me?"

Okay, so sweet-talking wasn't going to work. Wyatt knew they had simmering chemistry between them. It had always been there. He wasn't a SEAL for nothing. They went after what they wanted. He straightened and walked right up to her, took her gently by the arm, and led her over to the side of the materials and supply building, placing her back against it. This way, she had no place to go, since he was standing a foot away from her, looking into her shocked eyes.

Taking her completely by surprise, he said, “I really like you, Captain, but you won’t even let me get my foot in the door. It’s been three years now, so you can’t say I’m not patient. So satisfy my curiosity, okay? What’s going on here?”

Unsettled by his bluntness, she took a minute to get her thoughts together and came up with the most important reason first. “It’s obvious,

even if it’s escaped your notice. I’m an officer and you’re enlisted, and never the twain shall meet. You know those are the rules, even if you are a stubborn damn SEAL and think you can break rules whenever it suits you.”

She reminded him of a cornered female bobcat, all hisses, spits, and growls. “That’s never stopped me before, and it shouldn’t stop you, either.” He looked around the base, watching the night throw its shadowy cape across the busy desert Army base. Returning his gaze to her, he said, “I know a number of safe places here on base where a man and woman who want total privacy can get it.”

“I’ll just bet you do,” Tal retorted, her fists clenched at her sides. “Listen carefully, Lockwood. I want nothing to do with you. Period. Does that compute?”

He took off his baseball cap and scratched his combed hair. “Well, no, not exactly, darlin’.”

Her fine nostrils flared and her voice quivered. “Don’t you dare call me that word. Save that for all the other women you routinely chase around here.”

His brows rose. “Ahhh, my legendary reputation has preceded me. Well, I’d like to share my philosophy with you—”

“Don’t bother! Matt told me all about your ‘living for today’ attitude.”

“It’s a good philosophy, don’t you think?” He allowed a hint of a smile to leak from his mouth, wanting to kiss the hell out of those petulant, full lips of hers. Had anyone ever told this woman how sexy, how earthy and

sensual she was beneath that godawful uniform she wore? Just because she was a Marine didn't mean she wasn't sexual.

“No! I don't do sex for sex's sake, so get me off your radar, Chief Lockwood.”

“Now,” he crooned in his best drawl, “the woman I want to take to bed and make love to is my whole world. She's the only thing on my radar, darlin'. I want to hear her talk, listen to the tenor of her voice, feel how soft her skin is, how responsive she is when I start to please her. My woman is all I live for in that moment. Nothing else exists for me except her heart, her soul, and what I can do to please her.”

“Ugh,” Tal muttered, wishing she could gut-punch him so he'd move and leave her alone.

Wyatt thought he saw arousal in her eyes when he dropped to that low, soft drawl, kind of like a croon, and he knew the effect it had on women. He wondered if she was damp between her thighs yet. How he'd like to run his hand between her legs and find out. “I don't see anything wrong with wanting to please my women, do you?” he said, and remained where he was. Wyatt knew if he reached out to touch her right now, she'd probably deck him.

He'd wanted to test Tal to see just how deep her supposed revulsion toward him really was. There was a slim possibility that she really didn't want him, but he thought the chances were between low and none. “You know,” he continued, “there's more than just sex between a man and a woman. There's the sharing of genuine feelings. And the best part is when they like each other as well as have a great time in bed together.”

He saw her drag in a ragged breath. His hands itched to follow the curve of those breasts, to feel their heat and touch her nipples, which by his calculations were already hard right now.

“Step back,” she ordered, her eyes narrowing. Tal couldn't go there. She just couldn't, even though her damned body was being a traitor, falling for Lockwood's seduction. The man clearly knew how to get a woman's full

and undivided attention. And worse, she liked that he was fully, intensely focused on no one but her. Absorbing him, that glint in his eyes, his shadowy features, wildly aware of the male heat rolling off him, she wanted to try to disregard her fearful heart. It had been shattered with the death of Brian, and it had nearly broken her as a result. She never wanted to endure that kind of pain again.