

PUSH THE BUTTON

by Tara Ann Bradley

CHAPTER ONE

Just One Freaking Day

Comfortable lounging cloths. Check.
Scandal queued up on Netflix. Check.
Harold's Fried Chicken. Check.
A full day of relaxing. Heaven.
Or, at least, my version of Heaven.

With being overseas, friends dying, stake outs, shoot outs, kidnappings, being a good friend to my new friends and getting the community center in order, finding any and everything to keep my mind from wondering, I haven't had an official day off in like...forever.

I needed this.

I needed lying around on my borrowed, ugly plaid sofa in nothing but my cotton, black panties and a black Hanes Her Way tank. Gorging on greasy fast food chicken and fries drenched in mild sauce. Lost in a world of political corruption with the fabulous Keri Washington.

Like I said...Heaven.

I tilted my head back and dropped a fat fry, dripping with sauce, into my mouth, letting out a little hum of ecstasy at the back of my throat. Kicking my feet up on the crappy, slightly shaky coffee table, I grabbed my iPhone and turned it on Airplane mode, ensuring that no calls would be interrupting my regularly scheduled program.

This was not my first attempt to have a day like this. But, just like clockwork, each and every time I'd tried, someone called and ruined it. I loved my girls...I loved them like sisters, but they can go suck it today.

Today, I was taking a break from wedding planning, hormonal pregnant women, lawyers with bad tempers and nosy wannabe reporters. Even my sweet, precious Joie wasn't breaking through today.

Real life could catch up with me tomorrow. Today was for me and me only.

The old sofa creaked and moaned as I settled back into it and pressed the play button on the remote, firing up the first episode of *Scandal*. I'd just sat the Styrofoam

container in my lap when I heard it—the one thing that threatened to throw a monkey wrench in my plans.

A knock on the goddamn door.

I scrunched up my face and scoffed, glaring at the door as if the intruder on the other side could actually see my displeasure. If only they could, then they would take the fucking hint and go away.

Another knock came, this one more persistent than the last. *They can knock until their knuckles bled. No way am I answering that door.*

I turned my attention back to the television and tried to get back into the show, but I was irritated now. That peaceful, content feeling I had going on just a moment before was out the window.

I tossed my plate of nearly untouched food onto the table and clenched my jaw, balling up my fists, and then releasing them again.

Just one day.

That's all I asked for. Just one freaking day. I told those bitches no phone calls, no texts, no showing up at my place. To just leave me the hell alone for twenty-four hours and I'd be all theirs again. But did anyone care about what I wanted?

Fuck no.

Or else they wouldn't be knocking on my door.

The knock came back, this time not letting up at all. In fact, she was bawking on my door as if she were trying to tear it down with her bare knuckles.

It had to be Mercy...or Grace. None of the other girls were bold enough to blatantly piss me off like that.

If she thought that was going to get me to the door, she was highly mistaken.

Like I always said, tune something out and it didn't exist. Pretend there was no one at my door, and then there would be no one at my freaking door.

Then, hopefully, I could get back to my nice, quiet alone time before my delicious, golden fried chicken got cold.

But, the knock wouldn't go away, and I sucked at pretending.

I flopped back on the sofa and covered my face with a pillow and screamed, chanting "go away, go away" in my head. Maybe if I said it enough, and really meant it, then they would just go away.

The knocking got even louder, and I pressed the pillow further into my face. I'd almost passed out from the lack of oxygen when I heard something that sounded like... *I know like hell that heifer is not kicking my door.* The shoddy thing was made of paper-thin plywood and was barely holding up as is.

That does it.

Whoever was at the door needed to brace for a fight because that's exactly what she was going to get. Too bad my gun was locked up in the other room or this intrusion would get really violent, really fast.

Taking a few seconds to draw in air into my burning lungs, I threw the pillow down and sprung up from the sofa. I stomped to the door, my feet slapping against the splintered wooden floor.

Flipping the deadlock with a little extra sass, I threw the door open with so much force that I almost dislocated my shoulder...and then jumped back from the foot that was already geared up to land yet another devastating kick to my poor crappy door.

“WHAT THE HELL IS YOUR PROBLEM?” I yelled, looking up from the large, black boot-covered foot that almost took my shin off to the deep blue eyes of...Mack?

Mack worked as head of security for my best friend’s fiancé. He was overbearing, infuriating, and unbelievably gorgeous. Incidentally, he absolutely hated me.

Every time I saw him, he glared at me as if he wanted to knock my head off. Every chance he got, he made sure to tell me how displeased he was by everything I did.

He was the last person I expected to show up at my place, ever.

He lowered his foot to the stained, puke-green carpet in the dingy hall and jerked his head back as if he hadn’t expected me to open the door—which was weird considering he’d done everything possible to ensure that I did just that.

Those deep, denim blue eyes, crinkled at the sides with the beginning signs of laugh lines, snapped down to my tank, moving over my midsection like a thorough caress, and on down to my black, bikini-cut underwear. My skin flushed under the heat of his eyes as he continued his visual caress down to my long, bare legs and feet, then back up again—spending more time than was comfortable on my nipples poking against the thin fabric—to glare at my face.

While he did this, I took the time to take him in, too. I never had any interest to date outside of my race, but I had to admit that this white boy was F-ahh-ine with a capital F. And, I don’t mean in a Brad Pitt or Channing Tatum kind a way. Nope, Mackenzie Fischer had a type of hotness that was completely unique to him.

I really couldn’t explain it. It wasn’t just his squinty, downturned eyes that held a promise you would die to cash in on. Nor, that full, pink bottom lip that dared you to run your tongue along it. Nor, that Chris Hemsworth via Thor-esque facial hair that hugged that ruggedly beautiful mouth perfectly. Nor, that shiny, dark, shoulder-length hair that invited you to run your fingers through it. Nor, that bronzed, olive skin that just begged to be licked.

Nor was it the still way he held his body as if trying to tame a wildness that his eyes only hinted at.

It was, indeed, a combination of all those things that, put perfectly together in 6-foot-5-inch hard, muscular frame, produced a hotness that defined logic.

The man was absolutely lethal, and I wasn’t just talking about the effortlessly way I saw him take down two large men in a blink of an eye. No, Mack was dangerous in a way that threatened to destroy everything that I was trying to hold on to, mainly my sanity.

And, now he was staring at me as if he wanted to devour me and pick my remains out of his teeth with my bones.

I cleared my throat, and when that did nothing to dislodge the globe-sized ball blocking my airways, I cleared it again. “What are you doing here?”

His eyes roamed down my body again, and while the first time there was an appreciative glint in his eyes, this time there was not. I could be mistaken, but I would say that he looked pissed off.

When he finished his quiet perusal, his hard eyes came back to mine. “You always answer the door in your fucking underwear?”

Yep, definitely pissed off.

“Yeah, Slick” I said, and I didn’t think it was possible but his eyes got even harder. “Especially when annoying men don’t take the hint when I didn’t answer the first twenty

times they knocked.”

A door creaked open further down the hall. Mack turned his corded neck and his squinty glare in its direction, and whatever he saw didn't ease the anger in his eyes one bit. In fact, it amplified it. He turned back to me, his gorgeous eyes a shade darker than before, and took a threatening step towards me.

“Get back inside,” he demanded, and I didn't appreciate the authoritative way he thought he could order me around.

So, of course, I did the exact opposite.

I put my hand on my waist, shifted all of my weight on my right leg and stuck out my hip. My voice full of attitude when I asked, “Are you leaving now?”

“No.”

I tilted my head and gave him a sugary sweet smile. “Then, no.”

His eyes went to my mouth, a confused frown on his face as if he couldn't understand what I was saying.

Heavy footsteps drew his attention back to the hallway. It was probably my neighbor, Jack, leaving for his second-shift job. Since he needed to pass my doorway to get to the stairway, he was about to get a full view of me in limited clothing, which Mack didn't seem to like...at all.

He turned back to me, and there was a slight growl in his gravelly voice when he demanded, “Get your ass out of the doorway in your goddamn underwear. Now.”

I scoffed and opened my mouth to say something, but he took another step forward. This one much more threatening than the last. Now, I'm not the type of chick that backed down from anything, but there was something about the way he moved, very virile and cat-like, that would warn anyone with common sense to step the fuck back.

So, I stepped the fuck back.

What? I'm hardheaded not stupid.

For every step back, Mack took a commanding step forward. I caught sight of the tip of Jack's steel-toed boot just as Mack cleared the doorway. I tried to look around his massive body to greet my friendly neighbor, mostly to fuck with Mack, but he slammed the door close before I had a chance.

I crossed my arms underneath my breast, pushing them up, and glared up at him. I hated that he was so tall. I was 5'8" barefooted, and outside of that one time I sneaked into the Bulls training camp, it was rare that I had to crane my neck to look up at a guy, but this guy was so freakishly tall that he towered above me, and that irritated the hell out of me.

“Why are you here?”

His eyes had zeroed in on my chest when I crossed my arms, sending an involuntary shiver throughout my body, but they snapped back up to my face as soon as I started talking. I fought the urge to shrink back from the undeniable heat flaring up in his eyes. It terrified the shit out of me, in an irrational type of scary anticipation—the kind that pulled at me with the same ferocity as it pushed me away.

He's not for you, I warned myself, trying hard to hold on to my snit—which was hard when every cell in my body wanted to succumb to an entirely different emotion.

“Happye told me you were taking the day off,” he said, not releasing me from his glare for one second, not even to let me take in the big gulp of air that my lungs begged for. “I came to help you move.”

My neck stiffened.

“I’m sorry Happye wasted your time,” I said, my tone sharper than I intended it to be. I cleared my throat and pulled myself up to my full height. “I’m not moving.”

His eyes flared with irritability, as if it was me annoying him and not the other way around.

“Say what now?” he asked with a bit of a warning tone, almost as a dare for me to repeat myself. Annoyance forgotten, I almost called his bluff, just to see what he would do, to feel that delicious, wild energy surrounding him consume me. Call me a masochist, but the danger that lingered around under his skin turned me on even more.

I wanted to ride that forbidden ride just once, to feel him bucking beneath me and see how far he could throw me.

Not for you.

I dropped my arms and took in a loud, annoyed breath. *Oh, well.*

Since his eyes still wouldn’t release me, I forced my eyes from him, turned on my heels and headed back to my God-awful sofa. I plopped down on the unstable piece of tacky furniture and pulled one of the mismatched, rust-colored throw pillows into my lap, suddenly feeling very self-conscious about my semi state of undress.

I picked up my remote, anything to take my mind off the tingling between my legs, but before I could press the play button, he was there, his large callous hand engulfing mine, and then the remote was gone.

“Hey,” I protested, kicking myself for not noticing when he’d moved. I was too caught up in my body’s intense reaction to him that I let my guard down.

Big mistake, soldier, I heard Eddie’s teasing voice in my head.

I’m not a soldier anymore, I reminded him. *And you’re dead. So get out of my head.*

I swallowed down the lump in my throat and blocked out my friend’s laughter ringing in my ears. I missed that laughter so much that I conjured it up several times a day just so I would never forget what it sounded like.

Mack sat down next to me, so close that his thigh pressed against mine. Even though he was wearing jeans, I could still feel the heat of him against my naked skin, overheating my senses and driving out the coldness that attacked my bones whenever I thought of Eddie.

I wanted to slide over to the far corner of the sofa, to press into the arm and put much needed space between me and his heat. But, that would make me seem weak, and the last thing I wanted him to know was how he affected me.

So, I fisted the edge of the pillow in my lap; the material so fragile, pieces of fabric frayed in my tightly balled up hands.

“Why are you so against moving?”

I closed my eyes and counted to ten, a trick I’d seen Happye do one too many times. And, like with her, it did nothing to calm my ragged nerves.

“I asked you a question, Faith.”

My eyes snapped open, my hands tightening.

Why can’t he just go away?

He bent forwards, his elbows rested on his thick thighs. His body faced forwards, but his head turned towards me. Those incredible blue eyes focused on me as if he could see right down to my soul—which terrified and excited me at the same time. I feared what he would see if he could see that deep, yet a part of me desired for him to try.

Other than Eddie, no other man had ever tried.

Instead of answering his question, I asked one of my own. “And, where would I be moving to?”

“I don’t know, maybe to that three million dollar condo you own. Anywhere but this dump.”

The tingling turned cold, and my stomach muscles quivered. I turned my flinty eyes to the television, glaring at Olivia Pope frozen on my wide, flat screen.

All I wanted was one goddamn day.

“I’m not moving,” I said through gritted teeth.

The topic wasn’t up for discussion; I was sick of people pestering me about it.

Fucking Happye. I was going to kill her.

I felt the vein pulsating at my temple. The more I thought about it the more my temper flared.

Why couldn’t everyone just let me be?

“Faith,” he said, his voice now low and...somewhat soft. No matter how much that voice warmed my belly, I wasn’t hearing it.

“Don’t want to hear it, Mack. I hear it enough from the Misfits.”

The Misfits was the name Happye coined our little group shortly after we met each other, and now all of us used it occasionally. With the amount of trouble we’d gotten ourselves into recently, the name caught on.

“They love you, Faith. They’re just looking out for you.”

I jumped up from the sofa and padded to the bedroom. Snatching up a pair of discarded sweatpants from the bed, I quickly threw them on.

“I get that,” I said, stepping back into the room. I knew very well how worried my friends were that I lived in this neighborhood, in this building where crack was sold by the boatload on the top two floors. Just hearing the constant traffic at night bought back all the memories I thought I’d escaped when I went to the Army. “But, they have to respect that this is my decision.”

He rose slowly, very methodically, like he was in control of every muscle, every blood vessel, every cell in his body.

“They do respect it,” he informed me, taking long, careful steps towards me. He stopped just inches from me, so close that the toes of his boots touched my bare, China Glaze’s Concrete Catwalk-painted toes. His eyes darkened to the color of stormy waters. “I just don’t.”

My head flinched back at his brutal honesty. For a long second, I stared at him in shocked hurt, but I quickly schooled my expression. I had to admit that his words hurt. I knew I wasn’t his favorite person, not since my impulsiveness got Happye shot, but I thought more than anything else I had, at least, earned his respect.

I locked down the hurt and folded my arms across my chest. “Well, it’s a good thing I don’t give a rat’s ass about what you think.”

The corner of his mouth lifted in a sly smirk, and he bent over at the waist so that he was in my face. “Oh, you care. Probably a little too much.”

My body flushed with unquenchable heat, and because I tend to react before thinking, I kicked out, aiming for his family jewels. I was fast, quicker than most, yet not fast enough. He threw out his right arm and blocked the kick before I had a chance to make contact. His left hand snaked out and gripped my upper arm. With a flick of the

wrist, he spun me on my heels. I lost my balance and fell back into him. With a speed that made my quick combat moves look like they were executed by a turtle, his arm locked around my chest, pinning my back against his hard chest.

My heartbeat pounded in my ears, and warmth flooded my body. Everywhere his body touched mine tingled, while the parts that weren't being touched craved contact.

"We're not getting violent are we, Kitty Cat?" he asked with his face so close to my ear that his warm breath tickled the hair at my temples.

Wetness pooled in my cotton panties, and I fought against rubbing my thighs together to get relief from intense aching.

I was right. He was deliciously dangerous, and I'd never been more turned on in my life.

"Don't misunderstand me," he continued, his voice low and gravelly. I shut my parted lips and tried to breathe in through my nose—which was difficult considering I was practically hyperventilating. "I didn't say I don't respect you. I just don't respect your decision to keep putting your safety in jeopardy by staying here."

"I can't stay in Eddie's apartment," I finally breathed out in a low whisper.

"Fine," he agreed, and I started to breathe a little easier. My slight reprieve didn't last long when he continued, "You can stay with me."

"What?" I struggled against his hold on me, but the more I struggled, the more his arms tightened. "Are you out of your mind?"

"I don't give a shit if you go to my place or to the home your friend left you, you're not staying here another night."

"You can't be serious." My head jerked to the side, and I looked at him over my shoulder. He tilted his head down, his dark blue eyes on me, showing me just how serious he was.

"Mack_ "

"My place is nice but it's not nearly as sweet as the condo Eddie left for you."

My breath caught. "I can't_ "

"Just tell me one thing," he said, talking over me. "If your friend was here, knowing how you grew up, what would he say about you being so stubborn that you'd voluntarily live like this? With what's going on upstairs happening all around you again?"

I clamped my mouth shut, closing myself off from the guilt trying to sneak in.

It didn't surprise me that he knew about my background, or that he knew about the shady dealings of my neighbors. Like me, Mack did his homework and, unlike me, he never walked into a situation blindly.

"It's not about being stubborn," I whispered. "I don't want his stuff. Not like that."

He gave me a squeeze before his arms loosened considerably. Though I was practically free, I didn't step out of his arms. "I didn't know Eddie Mason. From what I do know, he seemed like an alright guy, and he cared a lot for you. I do know that both of you have been taking care of each other all your lives. Now, it was fucked up what happened to him but he was smart enough to have a will in place when it did. I checked; he made that will three weeks before he died, a day after he sent that email to the team doctors. You know what that tells me?" With my throat clogged, I blinked against the sting behind my eyes and shook my head. "That tells me that although he had just walked into some major shit, so majorly fucked up that he feared for his own life, the first thing on his mind was how he was going to keep taking care of you in the event he

wasn't around to do it anymore. You gonna throw that back in his face?"

When the first tear fell, I did nothing to stop it. Instead I went limp in his arms, letting him hug me close, and I cried.

CHAPTER TWO

I Let Him

Twenty minutes I stood looking at the plain white door, preparing myself to walk into Eddie's apartment again. The last time I was here I almost broke down seeing the signs of the struggle that resulted in his murder. I hadn't been back since...didn't want to come back, not with his bloody handprint still marring the wall.

The entire time I stood there, Mack hovered silently behind me, showing an amazing amount of patience that I didn't know he was capable of. And, when I finally gathered up the nerve to put the key in the lock, I felt his large hand give my shoulder a squeeze of support.

After it was all said and done, I had nothing to be worried about.

I gasped when I walked in and saw that not only had the mess been cleaned up and the handprint covered with pea green paint, but all of his furniture had been replaced. His leather sectional, his broken glass tables, even his bed switched with all new things. The only thing that remained was a picture of the two of us, taken the day we graduated boot camp, on the mantle and his kickass 90" Sharp television.

It was my second pass around the room when I noticed the piece of paper taped to the front of the TV.

I stepped out from under Mack's hand and strolled over to retrieve the note.

We knew that you probably didn't want to deal with it, so we put Eddie's things in storage until you're ready for them.

Love,

The Misfits

I stared down at the tiny piece of ivory paper in my hand, the neat loopy script blending together as wetness pooled in the rims of my eyes. It had only been Eddie and me for so long. Now I had all these new friends that I was still getting used to. Most of the times they were a huge pain in the butt, but then they did something, something so perfect, that I couldn't imagine my life without them.

I ducked my head and wiped the corner of my eyes with the too-long sleeve of my shirt. What the hell was wrong with me? That was twice today I'd been moved to tears. Twice that Mack had witnessed me at a weak moment.

This wasn't like me.

I wasn't like Happye or Joie—I wasn't a crier. I learned early in life that tears equaled weakness, and that the weak got run over...or beat. That hard lesson came courtesy of my father's fists, just before he abandoned my mom and me with nothing but the drug

addiction he introduced her to years before.

I folded the note and stuck it in my back pocket, doing another quick swipe of my cheeks before turning to face Mack. He stood by the door, still holding on to my television as if it weighed no more than a loaf of bread, watching me in a way that was a little uncomfortable.

I cleared my throat and focused on the wall next to his head. "You can put that in the bedroom," I told him.

"You okay?"

My eyes went to him and then darted away again. Blanking my face, I nodded. "I'm fine. Why would you think that I wasn't?" I asked, copying Mercy's ice cold voice.

He sat the television down on the wood and glass console table behind the beige leather sofa, rounded the furniture and stepped too close into my personal space. Again.

He pointed a long, olive finger at my chest. "Because if you twist that necklace around your neck any tighter you're going to asphyxiate."

My eyes widened. I looked down at my hand, noticing the silver heart pendant clenched between my thumb and forefinger. The thin, silver chain, was twisted up at my throat.

I unraveled the necklace and dropped my hand. Scoffing, I gave him a lip curl that made all other lip curls cower in shame. "You can leave now."

Sighing, he dropped his head, looking up at me through thick eyelashes. "Don't do that, Faith," he said, his tone soft yet firm.

"Don't do what?"

"Don't put on your usual mask of indifference whenever you start to feel something. You don't have to pretend, not with me."

"I pretend with everybody," I blurted out. "What makes you special?"

Long seconds passed by before I realized what I had admitted...to him, of all people.

I stared at him with wide, mortified eyes. Heat flushed my face. I never felt so open, so exposed before in my life. And, the fact that it was him, made it that much worse.

I bit my lip, balled up my fists at my sides, and said, as harshly as I could, "Just go."

I held my breath when he turned suddenly and made long, swift strides towards the open door. I swallowed down the thickness in my throat, trying to convince myself I was glad he was leaving.

That was what I wanted, right?

I just didn't think it would be that easy. He never did what I told him to do before. He never backed down without a fight. Other than Mercy, he was the only one who could go toe to toe with me. I didn't realize how much I liked those fights until he turned his back on me and walked towards the door.

Folding my arms and lifting my chin, I'd almost convinced myself that the tightness in my chest was not because he was leaving. I lowered my head and closed my eyes, squeezing the lids tight, not wanting to watch as another person walked out on me.

The door slammed, and I finally felt safe enough to face the room again.

I opened my eyes...and he was still there. All the air left my body. I took a tiny step back. My hand went to the silver heart lying against my chest; the heart in my chest skipped a beat.

Mack stood with his back to the closed door, his denim eyes narrowed on my face.

He didn't leave me.

I blocked out that thought—and the tiny spark of happiness that it inspired—and tried to even out my breathing.

“Now?” he asked.

I blinked, tilting my head in confusion. “What?”

He took a swift, long step towards me. “Now, that we are in here, and the rest of the world is out there, can you be real with me?”

The myriad of emotions that raced through me made me dizzy; happiness that he stayed (although I would never admit that to anyone, not even myself), apprehension that I wanted him to stay, mortification that he'd seen through my bluster and anger that he had the nerve to call me out on it.

I swallowed down all those other emotions and decided to go with the anger. Anger was safer. “Don't pretend like you know me.”

He took three long, hostile steps towards me (I counted them) and stopped so close that our bodies were practically touching. My breaths quickened, my chest brushing against him with each hard intake of air.

I fought against the undeniable urge to take a step back. His closeness unnerved me, but not as much as his alert eyes—seeing me, seeing through me. I disliked that he knew me, or at least thought that he did.

No one knew me, not really. Even my friends only got to see one side. The side that I wanted them to see. The only side that I showed the world.

But, Mack...Mack was looking at me as if he'd interloped on my private thoughts and was starting to figure out the parts that I usually hid from the world.

“I know you,” he said. His gravelly voice dropped to a low whisper, intimate in a way that I felt it on my skin. “I know it. You know it. That's why you're so fucking uncomfortable right now that you're practically crawling out of your skin.”

I had no defense to that. No quick retort popped into my head.

Although I hadn't given him permission or made it easy for him in any way, shape or form, he'd figured me out. I knew it the moment I went M.I.A. for a week and he'd tracked me down mere hours after Happye sent out the S.O.S.

And, he was right.

I was uncomfortable around him, but not for the reason he thought. Not really. Him knowing me worried me, but I was uncomfortable because somewhere deep inside, I was happy that he thought I was interesting enough to figure out. That thought thrilled me more than I wanted it to.

I also didn't like what his nearness did to my body. Well...I liked it, in a very carnal type of way. My body loved it. I just didn't like that I liked it; that he could affect me in such a overpowering way with just a look or a drop in his voice.

Hence, my extreme discomfort.

I wasn't that girl. I didn't go all ga-ga over a pretty face and muscular body. I'd enjoyed myself with my fair share of men over the years, but it had always been on my terms and it had always been only sex. No kissing. No cuddling. Just raw fucking. And, even that was so long ago that I was damn near a virgin again.

If I'd only wanted to jump his bones, like the others, than it wouldn't have been a problem.

While I was highly attracted to Mack physically, I had a desire to connect with him on

a different level. I liked him. All of him. And, that scared the shit out of me.

But, of course, I didn't tell him any of that. I did what I was used to doing, which was throwing up my shields and giving plenty of attitude.

With arms crossed, sneer in place, I huffed, "Don't flatter yourself."

His narrowed eyes hardened, but his long finger was gentle when he placed it at the corner of my mouth and literally wiped my sneer away. The gesture touched something in me, something left untouched for so long that I didn't know how to take it.

I locked that warm feeling down and buried it down deep.

His eyes roamed my face, but they weren't searching. He had the look of a man who already knew all the answers. "I see you."

Oh, God.

Everything about that sounded nice to me. The words. The meaning behind them. The low, soft way in which he said them. All of it speared me.

I have to get out of here.

"Whatever," I said, but it came out like a tortured whisper. I turned my back on him and practically ran to the hallway that led to the bedroom. "See yourself out."

I made it only a few steps into the hall before a hand gripped my arm and spun me around. My other arm was caught into a similar vice grip, and I was slammed into the wall, my back hitting it with a thud. My eyes widened as I stared up at Mack's angry face.

"Is this what the fuck you need?" he asked. "Do I have to get rough with you to get an honest reaction out of you?"

YES, I screamed in my head.

I didn't know what came over me—either it was the wild, dangerous look in his eyes or the heat of his hard body pressing mine against the wall. All I knew was that something flared up in me, the intense attraction I'd been suppressing for months rose to the surface, and I wanted him. Badly.

I wasn't a kisser. Kisses were too intimate to be shared with a random one night stand. But, that didn't stop me from attacking his mouth.

He stilled in surprise when I wrenched my arms from his grip so violently that I could feel my skin tear underneath his fingernails. One of my hands went to the back of his head, balling up a fistful of his long, dark, silky hair. My other hand went to the back of his corded neck, the wads of my fingertips pressing in as I pulled his mouth down to mine.

At first, he didn't respond when I pressed my mouth hard against his. But, when I sucked his bottom lip into my mouth and bit down hard on it, his hands gripped my waist, digging into my skin, and he pulled me closer.

The kiss was hungry and desperate at the same time, a fight for dominance as he asked me to surrender and I demanded the same from him. Neither of us was willing to heel, so the fight continued. Hands gripped, tongues swirled, breaths mingled as we both lost the fight on our control.

All too soon, Mack snatched his mouth away. "Fuck."

"That was my first kiss," I whispered, my lips still throbbing. I didn't know why but it seemed important for me to share that with him.

His eyes darkened, and his hands at my waist jerked. "Then, baby, you're a goddamn natural because that was fuckin' perfect."

For a suspended moment in time, we stared at each other, our chests rapidly rising and falling as we struggled for air. His hot eyes were the color of a midnight sky, his desire shining through the cloudiness. So much raw emotion I nearly whimpered, the weight of it too much for me to bear.

Just when I thought I could withstand it no longer, his fingers squeezed my waist and he twisted me around, his weight at my back pushing my front into the beige wall. I gasped with excitement when his hands locked around my wrists and yanked my arms over my head, holding them together and pinning them there with just one of his large hands.

His other hand went to the fastening on my jeans. I tilted my butt up and pressed it against him, pushing off the wall, to give him better access. With one flick of the wrist, he had my jeans unbuttoned, and he yanked open the flap, ripping the zipper off the track.

My breath hitched. Excitement filtered through me. An aching so strong—stronger than I'd ever known—throbbed between my legs. Heat flushed my body. Anticipation had me panting like a bitch in heat.

I wanted this.

I needed this.

I needed it so much, the wanting was almost painful.

"Mack," I breathed out, pleading with him for some relief.

He pushed my jeans down over one hip and then the other, my panties going along with them. I wiggled my hips, helping him along, but then groaned in frustration when he stopped them just below my hipbone.

Still holding my hands prisoner above my head with one strong hand, he pushed his other into my pants, honing in on my spot instantly. I cried out and pressed my hips against the wall, grinding up and down, so fucking ready for release, I was out of my mind with lust.

Without warning, his large hand palmed my pussy and he pushed two thick fingers inside of me. He pumped them in me, hard and fast.

No build up.

No sweet words.

No tenderness.

Just what I needed.

"Fuck," I called out and threw my head back to his shoulder. I tried to open my legs wider but the damn jeans were still around my thighs, restricting me.

"Take them off," I ordered, my rough, deep voice sounding foreign to my ears. I'd never been this turned on before.

He didn't stop what he was doing—didn't even slow down—as he continued to fuck me into delirium with his fingers. His thumb pressed in on my clit and then swirled, and I jolted.

"Mack, take them off."

This time it came out as a plea. I loved what he was doing with his fingers, but I craved him. All of him. I was out of my mind with wanting him.

I don't know what he heard in my voice, but his thumb stilled, taking away the delicious circles I was starting to get addicted to. His fingers drove in deep and planted, almost lifted me off the floor with just the pure power of his two fingers inside of me.

Then, he was out of me.

My body shuddered with protest.

His other hand released my wrists, and my hands dropped like lead to my sides. I had no time to dwell on the stiffness in my shoulders before I was spun around and pushed back against the wall.

Through the haze clouding my vision, I saw him lower to his knees, his hands tugging my jeans and underwear down with him. I was standing so close to the edge that every move he made, every touch of his skin against mine, the whispers of his knuckles grazing the back of my thighs, sent electric shocks through my body, tiny orgasms that pulled me closer and closer.

I didn't know how much more of this I could take.

Just like the man, everything he did to me was just too much.

I pressed my back flushed against the wall, loving how the coolness of it felt against my feverish skin. I tilted my head down, catching his midnight eyes as he worked off each shoe and released me from my jeans.

God, he is so beautiful.

After he made sure I was naked from the waist down, he lingered there, gazing up at me, his warm breath caressing my thighs. My chest heaved as I stared back at him, captivated by the wild, hungry look in his eyes and by what that look promised.

His eyes left my face and slowly moved down my body. His gaze felt like a stroke, thoroughly touching each and every part of me before lingering on the spot between my legs.

Something in the air changed. Time stilled. And the fire that had been crackling around us just moments before slowed down to a sweet simmer.

There was something inherently sexy about him staring at my sex like that, with his eyes darkening in a very primal way. It turned me on to no end, almost as much as his hands on me, and I squirmed against the wall.

He looked back up at me, and something in his eyes had also changed. The hunger was still present, but it was rimmed with a softness that I wasn't comfortable with. Passion I could take; tenderness was something else entirely.

I needed to get this thing back on track.

Reaching down with one hand, I gripped a hard handful of his luscious, long, dark hair and smashed his face into my pussy, opening my legs slightly to give him better access to my sweet spot.

I didn't want to slow down. I didn't want stilled time or soft-rimmed eyes. I wanted the heat we had before. I wouldn't accept anything less.

When he growled against my skin and his fingers bit roughly into my hips, I smiled victoriously.

His tongue went right to work. One long swipe along the folds and then he pushed between them, wrapping his tongue around my excited clit and sucking it hard.

My legs quivered. My hand tightened around his hair. A shock shot through my body, from head to toe and then back up again.

I rolled my hips, tilting my pelvis forward, and I pressed further into his face.

His hands slid from my hips to grip the front of my thighs, his thumbs putting pressure on the insides, trying to pry my legs further apart.

I was all too happy to comply with his silent, yet forceful, demand.

Widening my legs further, I threw my right one over his left shoulder.

Mack groaned again and gripped my ass as his tongue dove deeper.

My clit pulsed as he circled the little, hardened nub over and over again, faster and faster until the excitement was too much for me to handle.

I released his hair, the tingling in my fingers making it hard for me to hold on any longer. Instead, I placed the numb digits against the cool wall, panting as he worked me over with his tongue.

Exquisite wasn't a word I used often, but that's exactly what this felt like. Exquisite. Harrowing. Excruciating.

I'd never felt anything like it.

My body tightened, begging for release, but I held on, tormenting myself because I knew that once I did let go it was going to be explosive. And, I wanted to save that explosion for when he was in me. Don't ask me why, but, in that moment, it was important to me to wait for him. Even if he didn't ask, I knew that he wanted that too.

"Mack," I called out breathlessly.

I don't know if he heard the strain in my voice, or if he'd reached his own edge, but he circled my clit one last time and sucked my folds into his mouth before letting go and springing up to his feet. One second one of my legs was thrown over his shoulder, the next second both were wrapped around his waist, and his big, hard body pressed me into the wall. His weight held me there as his hands went to work unbuttoning his pants.

Fuck yeah.

He pulled a condom from his wallet, opened it with his teeth and went to work putting it on.

I was so primed that the first sight of the thick, rounded head of his cock caused a full body shiver, the kind that was violent and noticeable.

Therefore, Mack noticed it.

His wide mouth tilted up in a shit-eating grin, pride interlaced with the heat in his eyes.

I didn't give a shit. He could be proud, cocky even, if it meant that I got what I wanted. And, what I wanted was him, all of him, inside of the currently most desperate part of me. I was practically panting for it.

Luckily for me, Mack didn't make me wait for it.

Without preamble—no sweet words, no soft caresses, no slow entry—Mack thrust his hips one good time and plunged into me. Somehow he'd known that was what I wanted...what I needed...what I craved.

I wasn't disillusioned, and I was glad that he wasn't either. This wasn't lovemaking, nor was it sex. This was fucking, pure and simple.

And, it was fucking magnificent.

I dropped my head to his shoulder and closed my eyes, reveling in the feel of him in me. It was a tight fit (it had been a while since I'd had some) which meant he was hitting each and every spot.

I loved it.

His hand wrapped around my hair, giving it a not too gentle tug, and forced my head back to look up at him. His face had darkened, the look primal and ravenous, enough to make my pussy convulse around him.

His head lowered, and his mouth crashed down to mine, taking my lips in a hot, wet kiss. His demanding tongue pushed right in, swirling around the inside of my mouth,

tasting me while giving me a taste of myself on his tongue.

He released my hair. Gripping my ass, he pried my bottom off the wall.

He growled into my mouth. His hips picked up steam, pounding harder and faster.

I yelled...and then moaned, when I felt the sting to bottom of my backside, caused by his hand hitting me there just before sliding down to my upper thigh, gripping it hard and lifting me up higher around his waist. Giving him better access to slam into me, and thus, slam my back against the wall in the process.

Oh, GOD.

I loved the rough stuff.

Not kink. No nipple clamps, whips, or shit like that. A hair pull and a good slap on the ass went a long way to getting me there.

Holy shit, he was getting me there.

I squeezed my thighs tighter around him and tilted my pelvis, calling out as he went deeper.

“Harder,” I demanded even though he was already giving it to me pretty hard. But, a man of his size, with that much power emulating from his pores, that wildness that flared in his eyes, was capable of going even harder. Deeper. Faster.

“Not yet,” he growled.

Even if we were no longer consuming each other’s mouths, our lips were still touching. So, I felt his words more than I heard them.

“I’m close.”

“I know. Not yet.”

“Mack,” I whined, because I’d been holding on far too long, and I wanted to finish but I wanted to finish big. With him. Like I said, it was important. I still didn’t know why.

“Hold on for me, baby. Just a bit longer.”

He slowed his moments, and I whimpered. I didn’t want slow. Slow was bad. Very, very bad.

“God, you feel so good, Faith. I don’t want to stop.”

He felt good too. So good that I couldn’t hold on.

“We can do it again. Later. Just hurry up. I can’t take it.”

He stilled, but only for a second. He glided out of me, inch by inch, until only the tip was left. I didn’t protest because somehow I knew, *I knew*, what was coming next. Instead, my arms drifted over his shoulders, I dug my fingernails into the hard, tense muscles in his back and I braced.

He didn’t disappoint.

Tilting his head back, he caught my eyes. His darkened even more until they were practically onyx. A look came over his face that excited me much more than it should have. He held my eyes as a second passed, two seconds, three. Then, he thrust deep into me one good, hard time, but it was all that either of us needed. I threw my head back, he dropped his face into the crook of my neck, as every muscle in my body tightened and then found release.

We stayed there for a few stilled minutes, with Mack holding me against the wall, our heavy breaths mingling with each other to the point I couldn’t tell which was whose.

After a while, he lifted his head and dropped a soft, chaste kiss on my lips. Moving his hands back to my ass and peeling me off the wall, he carried me to the master bathroom.

He set me up on the marbled counter, causing me to shiver when the cool surface touched my warm, naked skin. After wetting one of the pea green wash cloths (that one of the Misfits had to have bought), he squeezed a few drops of my favorite White Tea liquid soap (also provided by the Misfits), and proceeded to clean me up.

Blew my mind.

Ninety minutes later, Mack had just returned from grabbing us dinner from the Chinese restaurant on the corner, and my mind was still very much blown. I was unpacking my limited belongings, trying to process not only what we'd done but the fact that he'd showed so much tenderness when he'd washed me afterwards.

And, I had let him.

What the hell was that?

That had never happened before. I didn't give a guy enough time to put on his underwear after sex before kicking him out. Not only had I let Mack touch me in a non-sexual, very caring way, I didn't buck when he stuck around and hooked up my television in my new bedroom.

And, now we were about to have dinner together.

What. The. Hell?

"Come on, kitten. Dinner's up," he said from the doorway.

Kitten?

That was new.

He'd called me Kitty Kat before, but that was only when I was being frisky, striking out at him. It started around the time he found out my middle name was Katherine. Kitten was something different—something I didn't want to think too much about. Mostly because I liked the sound of his voice when he said it.

I looked at him over my shoulder, taking in his tall, large body leaning against the door frame. God, he was gorgeous. His silky, dark hair hung haphazardly around his shoulders, calling for me to run my hands through it over and over again. His denim eyes, now half-masted and soft, beckoned me closer. His beautifully wide mouth conjured up all the vivid imagery of what that mouth could do, and had done, to me only moments before. Everything about him attracted me.

That made him dangerous. That and the fact that he made me feel safe.

I nodded, and tried to swallow the football-sized lump in my throat. "Be right there," I croaked.

We sat on the sofa, ate delicious Chinese food and watched episodes of *Scandal*. Then we did other things—things that were detrimental to my mental health but felt great to my body. Afterwards, instead of kicking him out, I collapsed in the bed next to him, both of us too spent to do anything other than sleep.

And, when he wrapped me up, hooking his arm around my waist and pulling me close to his warm body, I let him.

Dear God, I let him.

CHAPTER THREE

Sleep Now

The tall, wet grass squished under my heavy, black boots. Heavy rains had fallen on the area in the past few days, making my trek up the foliage-covered mountain an uncomfortable, soggy mess.

Of all the days they could've sent us to the Congo and they had to choose a time when a freaking monsoon was in full force. Bad enough wondering through the jungle with a 50-pound pack on my back and a loaded M-16 in my hands, but having to do so in heavy gear that was soaked through and with cold, wet feet...now that was just inhumane.

I sighed and wiped some of the rainwater out of my eyes. One more year and long missions in less than ideal locales would be a thing of the past.

I was getting out.

Going home to warm feet, 24-hour food deliveries and peaceful sleep on a mattress thicker than a wafer cracker.

I couldn't wait.

"Eyes open," our guide, Kaloko, called out from the front, warning us about the dangers of the jungle, human and nonhuman alike. "You never know what will jump out at you here."

Donald "Ducky" Michaels shivered beside me, giving his weighed-down shoulders an exaggerated shake that was meant to be seen by anyone looking. "Please no snakes or spiders. I'll piss myself if a rattlesnake jumped out at me."

I grinned, with a little shake of my head. Venomous serpents were the least of our worries. Our biggest threats were of the two-legged, gun totting variety.

Two different militia groups were known to frequent this part of the Virunga mountain range—one that hated non-Congolese soldiers on their land and the other that hated everyone. The jury was still out on which was more dangerous.

Therefore, I left Michaels to watch the ground for the creepy crawlies and I looked out for human eyes peeking around trees.

We traveled a few more miles, the cold rain making my fingers numb. Every now and then, I peeked over my shoulder at Dr. Amil Hebbard, the scrawny zoologist that we were charged with escorting up the mountain. His thin arms were loaded with equipment he didn't trust with anyone else, but he was holding his own and not falling as far behind as I thought he would.

Dr. Hebbard had tried on numerous occasions to make it up the mountain to document the progress of a domesticated gorilla he had released into the wild just a

year before. Every single time, he was met with hostile forces, preventing him at every turn. In my opinion, he was lucky to be alive, and he had huge cojonas to keep trying no matter how many times the locals stuck guns in his face.

Nothing could be said against steel determination and sheer dumb luck.

Dr. Hebbard trod along in a hunch—his backpack rivaled my own in weight—with his bulging eyes aimed over our heads at the mountain before us. The look on his face was one of dreamy bewilderment. He cared nothing about the soggy, long grass beneath his feet, the dangerous wildlife or the rebels that would probably succeed in keeping him out of the area once and for all. All of that was blocked out by the daydream of once again seeing his beloved primate.

The chopping blades of a helicopter passed overhead, taking half of my crew with it. The hefty weight of forbearance settled in my gut the moment it dropped me and the seven men with me off on a deserted piece of land a couple of miles away. Watching it fly away brought that feeling back tenfold.

It was supposed to be a simple mission...well, simple compared to some of the other ones I'd been on in the past four years. Escort the doctor up the mountain, set up camp and guard him for a couple of days while he did what he needed to do. The rebel groups were reported to not be in the area during this time—which was why it was imperative to do this now. By all reports, the threats had been minimized.

So, why was my skin tingling with warning?

“Tell me you’re not going to miss this when you go back stateside, Morgan.”

I hiked my pack more comfortably on my back and stepped over a downed branch, looking over my shoulder at Michaels. He'd stopped to allow me to go ahead of him when the path got narrower and congested with taller grass, fallen branches and low-hanging trees.

“Not at all, Ducky.” I threw him a smirk and continued following the guys in front of me up the steep incline. “Not going to miss days without hot, running water. Not going to miss the frequent back aches. But, most of all, I’m not going to miss looking at your ugly mug day in and day out.”

He threw back his head and laughed that snorted laugh of his, and then he jogged to catch back up with me. He slung his beefy arm around my shoulders, weighing me down even more than I already was. “Come on, Morgan, you know I’m the best part of your day.”

I rolled my eyes and dipped my shoulder for his arm to fall away. “I’ll have to be having a pretty shitty day for you to be the best part, Michaels.”

“I think you’re finally wearing her down, Ducky,” said Mark, another one of our team members. “At this rate, you might be able to convince her to marry you in another five years.”

“Too bad she’s going back home to her real man in a year,” the new guy—I could never remember his name—joined in, talking about Eddie. The guys had seen the numerous pictures I had of me and my best friend, and I never corrected them when they assumed we were lovers. It was just easier spending majority of your time with twenty men when they thought you had someone back home waiting for you.

The guys continued ribbing Ducky...or me, I wasn’t entirely sure. I was too busy concentrating on the nagging feeling that we were being watched.

I cut my eyes left then right, through the trees and then behind me. Nothing. No

suspicious movements or shadows lurking in the shady corners. Still, the feeling remained, intensified with each step.

My hand—wet from the rain, perspiration or both—tightened around the barrel of the gun. Something had changed. Nothing I could see, but something that I felt with everything in me. It was in the nature-scented air, in the prickling of my skin.

No matter how much I honed in all of my senses and training, I couldn't pick out the threat. And, the more I didn't see, the more I worried. Invisible enemies existed and were the most dangerous of them all. Physically present but their training—training that outmatched mine—kept them unseen, lurking undetected in plain sight and primed for a secret attack.

I peeked at the guys to see if they also felt the danger in the air, but they acted normal, as if they noticed nothing. These guys were good at what they did, had been doing it a lot longer than me, so their easy strides and playful banter should have put me at ease. Yet, it just made me that much more apprehensive.

Three more steps and I heard it. Over the footsteps sloshing on the wet grass. Over the voices joking behind me. Even over the thunderous pounding of my blood rushing through my ears. I heard it. The distinctive click of a round being put into a chamber.

I stopped dead in my tracks and turned my neck just enough to motion to Ducky. "Shh," I said, my eyes going to the area where the sound had come from. I narrowed my eyes, trying to pick out a figure in the shadows. It wasn't until a darkened cloud passed overhead, letting in just a smidgen of sunlight but it was more than enough to shine a glare on the reflective surface of a gun pointed right at us.

"GET DOWN," I yelled. My first instinct was to get to our principal. But, before I could turn and run in the direction of Dr. Hebbard, the first shot rang out.

And, a body dropped at my feet.



Something roused Mack from peaceful slumber—not that it would be difficult. He wasn't a heavy sleeper. Never had been. Sleeping with one ear open was a necessity in his line of work, but it wasn't work that had woken him.

It was a woman.

A woman in distress, to be more precise.

His eyes snapped open, instantly alert. He heard it again. A slight whimper. But, it wasn't the soft, desperate whimper she'd given him earlier when she was pleading with him to make her cum. No, this whimper was tinged with pain...and fear.

It was the fear that jolted him.

Faith was fearless.

He'd seen the woman barge headfirst into the most dangerous situations, not even batting an eyelash before doing so. They were stupid, bonehead decisions on her part, but they'd been done without fear. He had to admit it, the woman had balls—one of the things he admired most about her.

But now, she was tossing and turning in her sleep, her face screwed up in agony, and she whimpered. It was those whimpers...those damn whimpers that cut right through him.

He shifted up in the bed and flicked on the glass lamp on the nightstand to the side of him. With the room now illuminated, he got a better look at her distressed expression, and that cut through him too.

A face as beautiful as Faith's should never have that look.

He shifted his weight to his right hip, lifted up further and leaned over her. He knew better than to wake her suddenly, but his gut was tight and the whimpers got more desperate, and he couldn't take it any longer.

"Kitten," he called out, gripping her shoulder with his left hand and giving it a little shake.

Her almond-shaped, tight honey eyes snapped open, still clouded over with sleep. Her mouth opened to a scream trapped in her throat, and that's when he realized his mistake.

Still in the grips of her nightmare, opening her eyes to a huge man hovering over her, she reacted. Violently.

Using her left hand to push against his chest, she reached back with her right one, her hand balled up into a tight fist. Before he had time to lock her down, she threw her arm forward and caught him in the chin with a punch that made his teeth clatter.

"Fuck!" he cried out, falling back on his back and clenching his throbbing jaw.

Shit, she had one hell of a right hook. He would've smiled at that thought if his jaw didn't hurt like a son of a bitch.

She sat upright in the bed, breathing hard, and stared at him as if she had no idea where he'd come from.

He clamped his mouth shut, stilled his body, and waited for the confusion to clear in her eyes. "Shit," she breathed out when it finally did.

She planted her feet in the bed, placed her elbows on her bent knees, and dropped her head into her upturned hands. Taking several deep breaths, she trembled so badly Mack felt it from the other side of the bed.

Forgetting about his jaw, he sat up, leaned into her and laid his hand lightly on the center of her back. He regretted doing that when she jumped and her entire body stilled.

"Hey," he said, keeping his voice low and soft. "You okay?"

Her voice was strained when she replied, "I'm fine."

Mack knew Faith. She liked to think that he didn't, and she would swear on a million bibles that she didn't want him to, but he knew her.

He knew that the heart pendant she wore around her neck was her security blanket. He knew that she craved Harold's Chicken when she was missing her friend. He knew that she would rather eat glass than admit that she needed someone. And, he knew when she said she was fine, she was far from it.

Mack also knew that if he pressed her on it she would clam up tighter than a guilty politician brought at a congressional hearing.

So, he didn't press it.

Instead, he knifed out of the bed, walked unabashedly naked to the kitchen and filled a glass with ice cold water.

When he returned to the bedroom, she was just as he'd left her, with her knees bent and her head cradled in her hands.

She'd put on a white tank top and royal blue panties before going to sleep, but he spotted plenty of exposed smooth, caramel skin that glowed under the strip of moonlight

that shined through the windows.

God, she was beautiful.

He watched her from the doorway for a second, taking her all in, unsure of how he should proceed without spooking her more than she already was.

She'd opened up twice for him earlier; once when she cried in his arms and again when he'd been making love to her. They had a connection—a connection he'd felt from the first moment he laid eyes on her, only made stronger when he'd been inside of her. He felt it. He knew that she'd felt it too.

It had spooked her then too. She tried to turn that connection into a meaningless fuck—he saw it in her eyes when those electric sparks shifted from him to her and then back again. He let her have that, gave it to her the way she wanted, but, unlike her, he wasn't in denial. What they had was much more than that.

Therefore, to build what he wanted to build with her, without her bailing out before he was in, so deep underneath her skin she would never get him out again, he needed to proceed with caution.

He strolled over to the bed and reclaimed his previous spot to the left of her. He shifted until his top half was twisted in her direction.

"Here. Drink this." He held out the glass to her. She lifted her head and stared at him over her shoulder with glazed over eyes, but she didn't take the water. He pushed the glass further towards her. "Take it. You'll feel better."

She frowned down at his hand for so long that the cold water warmed in his hands. Just when his arm started to cramp from holding it out so long, her eyes came back to him, clearer than before, and she reached out a shaky hand to take the glass. He waited until she had consumed half of the water in one long gulp before taking the glass away again.

After sitting the glass on the nightstand, he gripped her waist and turned her body towards him. "You wanna talk about it?" he asked carefully.

With her eyes roaming around the room, not staying on any spot too long, she pressed her lips together.

She shifted in the bed, folding her legs underneath her. Her hands rubbed up and down her bare thighs. Nervous movements he wasn't accustomed to seeing from Faith.

"Faith?"

Digging deep to that undeniable strength she had at her core, she dragged her eyes to him. Still, she said nothing, but he noticed the indecision pass through her honey eyes. Her unbreakable will battled with that soft side that showed up on occasion, debating whether she should lean on him or not. It was fucking fascinating to watch, so he watched, waiting to see which side would eventually win out.

When her eyes hardened and her mouth set in a determined line, he knew which side had won and he didn't fucking like it.

"I'm _"

"If you say you're fine one more time," he said through a tight jaw, almost losing it.

He expelled a loud breath out of his mouth and ran his hands through his hair. It would be a challenge breaking through to her; he knew that coming in. But, he knew that Faith was worth the work.

With his head tilted down, he looked up at her through heavily-lashed blue eyes. "You're shaking so hard the bed is moving. You're not fine. You're just too fuckin'

stubborn to admit it.”

Her eyes went wide for a second before they narrowed on him once more. “Let it go, Mack.”

She turned as if to get out of the bed, but his arm snaked around her waist and pulled her scantily-clad body flesh against his, her back against his side, her butt nestled against his naked thigh. She stilled, her body tight and hard. He dropped his head to the crook of her neck, ignoring the pleasant feeling at hearing her tiny intact of breath.

“I’ve been to war, Faith,” he whispered close to her ear.

“I know that, Mack,” she whispered back, a tinge of vulnerability and wariness in her voice.

“So, you know that I’m not a stranger to the nightmares that follow you back.”

She sucked in another breath and struggled against his hold. He tightened his arm to hold her right where she was. He liked her there.

Giving up much quicker than he thought she would, she went soft in his arms.

He didn’t know how to take her going placid. Faith was a fighter. She always fought. She fought while awake. She fought in her sleep. She even fought during sex.

But now, she leaned against him as if all the fight had drained out of her body, and her head hung low on her shoulders, opening up her beautiful neck for him to nestle his face deeper against her skin.

He breathed in her scent, his arm in spasm around her soft body. He loved the feel of her, loved the way her unique scent went straight through him.

“Mackenzie,” she whispered softly, and he stilled. Her voice, saying his name like that, also went through him. “Let it go. Please.”

Mack had heard the word “please” a million times in his thirty-nine years. His mother said it a dozen times a day when she wanted to manipulate him into doing something he didn’t want to do, and his sister said it just as much to get him to buy her something he didn’t think she needed.

But, this was the first time he’d heard it from Faith. And, it was this one time—the first time that word sounded like a genuine plea for mercy—that had his gut tightening.

He released her just long enough to grip her waist and twist her body around to face him once more. With her head still hanging low, her sandy brown hair fell forward, obstructing his view of her face. He placed two fingers underneath her chin, and without putting any pressure, her haunted eyes lifted to his. If the timidly-whispered “please” had torn him apart, the look in her eyes finished him off.

Therefore, no matter how much he wanted to learn of the things that haunted her in her sleep, he let it go.

Just because she asked him to.

“Okay, baby,” he said, his voice going soft. He wrapped her up, as tight as he could without hurting her, and settled both of their bodies back into bed—this time he pressed her against him, silently vowing not to let her go for the rest of the night. If he couldn’t chase away her demons by talking to her about them, maybe he could keep them at bay by using his body as a shield.

“I got you,” he whispered against her ear. “Sleep now.”